PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 345

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
28 February—10 March 2000

Cam Ref

328

10/00

RIDGE LIBRARY

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(Formed by the Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, MP, October 1999)

Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service—The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, MP
Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions—The Rt. Hon. John Prescott, MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer—The Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—The Rt. Hon. Robin Cook, MP
Lord Chancellor—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Irvine of Lairg
Secretary of State for the Home Department—The Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, MP
Secretary of State for Education and Employment—The Rt. Hon. David Blunkett, MP
President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons—The Rt. Hon. Margaret Beckett, MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury—The Rt. Hon. Ann Taylor, MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—The Rt. Hon. Chris Smith, MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—The Rt. Hon. Marjorie Mowlam, MP
Secretary of State for International Development—The Rt. Hon. Clare Short, MP
Secretary of State for Social Security—The Rt. Hon. Alistair Darling, MP
Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—The Rt. Hon. Nicholas Brown, MP
Lord Privy Seal, Leader of the House of Lords and Minister for Women—The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Jay of Paddington
Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—The Rt. Hon. Stephen Byers, MP
Secretary of State for Health—The Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn, MP
Secretary of State for Scotland—The Rt. Hon. Dr. John Reid, MP
Secretary of State for Wales—The Rt. Hon. Paul Murphy, MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—The Rt. Hon. Peter Mandelson, MP
Secretary of State for Defence—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Hoon, MP
Chief Secretary to the Treasury—The Rt. Hon. Andrew Smith, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—
Minister—The Rt. Hon. Nicholas Brown, MP
Ministers of State—
The Rt. Hon. Joyce Quin, MP
The Baroness Hayman
Parliamentary Secretary—
Elliot Morley, Esq, MP

Cabinet Office—
Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—The Rt. Hon. Marjorie Mowlam, MP
Ministers of State—
The Lord Falconer of Thoroton, QC
The Rt. Hon. Ian McCartney, MP
Lord Privy Seal, Leader of the House of Lords and Minister for Women—The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Jay of Paddington
Parliamentary Secretary—Mr. Graham Stringer

Culture, Media and Sport—
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—The Rt. Hon. Chris Smith, MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Kate Hoey, MP (Minister for Sport)
Alan Howarth, Esq, MP (Minister for the Arts)
Janet Anderson, MP (Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting)

Defence—
Secretary of State—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Hoon, MP
Ministers of State—
Minister for Defence Procurement—The Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean
Minister for the Armed Forces—John Spellar, Esq, MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State—Dr. Lewis Moonie, MP

Education and Employment—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. David Blunkett, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities—The Rt. Hon. Tessa Jowell, MP
Minister for School Standards—The Rt. Hon. Estelle Morris, MP
Minister for Education and Employment—The Baroness Blackstone
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Jacqui Smith, MP
Ms Margaret Hodge, MP
Malcolm Wicks, Esq, MP
Michael Wills, Esq, MP

Environment, Transport and the Regions—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. John Prescott, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for Transport—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Macdonald of Tradeston
Minister for the Environment—The Rt. Hon. Michael Meacher, MP
Minister for Local Government and the Regions—The Rt. Hon. Hilary Armstrong, MP
Minister for Housing and Planning—Nick Raynsford, Esq, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Keith Hill, Esq, MP
Chris Mullin, Esq, MP
The Lord Whitty
Ms Beverley Hughes, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Robin Cook, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Peter Hain, Esq, MP
John Battle, Esq, MP
Keith Vaz, Esq, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—The Baroness Scotland of Asthal, QC

Health—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn, Esq, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
John Denham Esq, MP
John Hutton, Esq, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
The Lord Hunt of Kings Heath
Ms Gisela Stuart, MP
Yvette Cooper, MP (Minister for Public Health)

Home Office—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt. Hon. Paul Boateng, MP
Charles Clarke, Esq, MP
Mrs. Barbara Roche, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
The Lord Bassam of Brighton
Mike O'Brien, Esq, MP

International Development—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Clare Short, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—George Foulkes, Esq, MP

Law Officers' Department—
ATTORNEY-GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Williams of Mostyn, QC
SOLICITOR-GENERAL—Ross Cranston, Esq, QC, MP
ADVOCATE-GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Dr. Lynda Clark, QC, MP

Lord Chancellor's Department—
LORD CHANCELLOR—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Irvine of Lairg, QC
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—
Jane Kennedy, MP
David Lock, Esq, MP

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Peter Mandelson, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—

The Rt. Hon. Adam Ingram, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—

George Howarth, Esq, MP

Paymaster General's Office—

PAYMASTER GENERAL—Dawn Primarolo, MP

Privy Council Office—

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt. Hon. Margaret Beckett, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—Paddy Tipping, Esq, MP

Scotland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Dr. John Reid, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Brian Wilson, Esq, MP

Social Security—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Alistair Darling, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Jeff Rooker, Esq, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Hollis of Heigham

Angela Eagle, MP

Hugh Bayley, Esq, MP

Trade and Industry—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Stephen Byers, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe—The Rt. Hon. Helen Liddell, MP

Minister for Trade—The Rt. Hon. Richard Caborn, MP

Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce—Ms Patricia Hewitt, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Dr. Kim Howells, MP (Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs)

Alan Johnson, Esq, MP (Minister for Competitiveness)

The Lord Sainsbury of Turville (Minister for Science)

Treasury—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt. Hon. Andrew Smith, MP

PAYMASTER GENERAL—Dawn Primarolo, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—Stephen Timms, Esq, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—Miss Melanie Johnson, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt. Hon. Ann Taylor, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Robert Ainsworth, Esq, MP

Jim Dowd, Esq, MP

Clive Betts, Esq, MP

David Jamieson, Esq, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—
David Clelland, Esq, MP
Kevin Hughes, Esq, MP
Greg Pope, Esq, MP
Mrs. Anne McGuire, MP
Mike Hall, Esq, MP
Gerry Sutcliffe, Esq, MP
Tony McNulty, Esq, MP
Don Touhig, Esq, MP

Wales Office—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Paul Murphy, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—
David Hanson, Esq, MP

Her Majesty's Household—
LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Camoys, GCVO
LORD STEWARD—The Viscount Ridley, KG, GCVO, TD
MASTER OF THE HORSE—The Lord Somerleyton, KCVO
TREASURER—Keith Bradley, Esq, MP
COMPTROLLER—Thomas McAvoy, Esq, MP
VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Graham Allen, Esq, MP
CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Carter
CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMAN OF THE GUARD—The Lord McIntosh of Haringey
LORDS IN WAITING—The Lord Bach, The Lord Burlison
BARONESSES IN WAITING—The Baroness Farrington of Ribbleton, The Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale, The Baroness Amos

---

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Stuart Bell, Esq, MP

HOUSE OF COMMONS

PRINCIPAL OFFICERS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt. Hon. Betty Boothroyd, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Michael J. Martin, Esq, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Michael Lord, Esq, MP

CHAIRMEN'S PANEL—
Mrs. Irene Adams, MP, Joe Benton, Esq, MP, John Butterfill, Esq, MP, Dr. Michael Clark, MP, Frank Cook, Esq, MP, Jim Cunningham, Esq, MP, Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, MP, Roger Gale, Esq, MP, Mike Hancock, Esq, MP, Jimmy Hood, Esq, MP, Eric Illsley, Esq, MP, Barry Jones, Esq, MP, John McWilliam, Esq, MP, Sir David Madel, Humfrey Malins, Esq, MP, John Maxton, Esq, MP, Mrs. Ray Michie, MP, Bill O'Brien, Esq, MP, Edward O'Hara, Esq, MP, Bill Olner, Esq, MP, Mrs. Marion Roe, MP, Jonathan Sayeed, Esq, MP, George Stevenson, Esq, MP, Bowen Wells, Esq, MP, Andrew Welsh, Esq, MP, Nicholas Winterton, Esq, MP

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—
The Rt. Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Archy Kirkwood, Esq, MP, The Rt. Hon. Eric Forth, MP, Mr. Stuart Bell, Esq, MP, The Rt. Hon. Margaret Beckett, MP, The Rt. Hon. Sir George Young, MP

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—M. R. Jack, PhD

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT—
W. R. McKay, CB, (Chairman) (Clerk of the House of Commons), M. J. A. Cummins, (Serjeant at Arms), Miss P. J. Baines (Librarian), A. J. Walker (Director of Finance and Administration), I. D. Church (Editor of the Official Report), Mrs. S. J. Harrison (Director of Catering Services)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT—B. A. Wilson CBE (Head of the Establishments Office)

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—N. Bevan, CB

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—J. S. Mason, CB, J. E. G. Vaux

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Canon A. R. Wright

MEDICAL ADVISER TO THE SPEAKER—Dr. R. Zeegen, OBE, FRCP, MRCS, DObst, RCOG

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Elizabeth Filkin

28 February 2000

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 345**

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 28 February 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

DEATH OF A MEMBER

Madam Speaker: I regret to have to report to the House the death of Mr. Michael Colvin, Member for Romsey, together with the death of his wife Nichola. I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House will join me in mourning the loss of Michael and Nichola and in extending our deep sympathy to their family and their friends.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Social Exclusion

1. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What recent assessment his Department has made of the contribution that arts and sport can make to tackling social exclusion; and if he will make a statement. [110596]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): My Department's report to the social exclusion unit, the policy action team 10 report "Arts and Sport", which was published in July 1999, set out the contribution of the arts and sport to tackling social exclusion. There have been a number of initiatives since its publication, all designed to enhance the contribution of sport and the arts to this important issue.

Mr. Pike: Does my hon. Friend agree that people living in areas of social exclusion and poverty often cannot participate in sport or afford to watch it? Is it not vital for lottery and Government funds to be used to aid projects such as the community project launched by Burnley football club, and, indeed, to descend to the grass roots in tackling the problem of those suffering social exclusion?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is right. The lottery has a real role in the distribution of funds to sport, especially in getting money to where it is most needed. The announcement of the establishment of 12 sport action zones marked the beginning of the process, and we look forward to such zones being widespread throughout the country.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Sport England revealed today that 89 per cent. of six to-eight-year-olds and 79 per cent. of nine to-11-year-olds spend less than two hours a week in physical education lessons. What kind of social exclusion is that? Does not that shocking analysis confirm the depth of the crisis affecting sport in schools, which involves children from all backgrounds?

When will the Minister publish her sports strategy? How can anyone be confident that the decline can be reversed, when school playing fields are being sold off at a greater rate than ever before, and the Department for Education and Employment is not listening?

Kate Hoey: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post and look forward to a long, productive and constructive relationship with him. I know that we have things in common, which we will not go into at this stage.

We welcome Sport England's young people in sport survey 1999. It contains encouraging material, but it also raises worrying points about what is happening in our

primary schools. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are taking that into account. There have been a number of developments, including the announcement of the establishment of school sport co-ordinators and of sports colleges, which are working with local feeder primary schools.

Together with the Department for Education and Employment—because action must be taken jointly—we are doing what we can to ensure that teacher training is improved for primary schools with physical education expertise, and I think that we shall see real improvement over the next couple of years.

Television Licences

2. **Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North): When he proposes that the free television licence for those aged 75 years and over will start. [110597]

3. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What is the starting date for the television licence concession for those aged 75 years and over; and if he will make a statement. [110598]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): As I announced in my statement to the House on the future funding of the BBC on 21 February, free television licences for people aged 75 or over will come into force from 1 November this year.

Let me take this opportunity to correct a misimpression that I may have inadvertently given the House last Monday. I indicated then that a copy of the Pannell Kerr Forster report on the finances of the BBC was being placed in the Library of the House. In fact, a copy of the summary and conclusions of the report was being so placed, because the body of the report contains commercially confidential information. I apologise for any erroneous impression that I may have given.

Mr. Winnick: Is not the issuing of free television licences for those aged 75 and over a good illustration of what we do in office and what the Tories refused to do—that is, try to help people? Is it not better to be motivated by the wish to help people than to be motivated by simple personal ambition—naming no names for the moment?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has a long and honourable record of campaigning on the issue in the House. According to the figures from the latest census—which, unfortunately, was held nearly 10 years ago—there were 5,930 people aged over 75 in his constituency at that time. The number has almost certainly increased since then, and I am sure that many thousands of his constituents will be very pleased about what the Government are doing.

Mr. Prentice: Meanwhile, 6,500 of my constituents will be celebrating the introduction of this hugely popular policy.

Yesterday, when I was canvassing in a Lancashire county council by-election—*[Interruption.]* I do not need to register anything. When I was canvassing, a number of pensioners said to me, "Is this not just age discrimination?" I replied, "You will be 75 one day." Nevertheless, why should such a hugely popular policy involve a cut-off at 75? Why should it not apply to all pensioner households?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend should address part of his question to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, it should be pointed out that as pensioners reach a more advanced age they tend to become less mobile, to spend more time at home and, indeed, to spend more time watching television. At that point—the point at which they reach the age of 75—television becomes more important in their lives, which is why we thought it appropriate to take this step.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The Secretary of State is trying to pass the blame on to the Chancellor. Is it not the Secretary of State's responsibility that, from April, pensioners who are under the age of 75 will have to pay a television licence tax double the rate of inflation? Is that not totally unfair? Can he explain why he did not disclose the whole of the Pannell Kerr Forster report? Is not the truth that it was politically embarrassing and that is why the Government have not disclosed it? If it is so commercially sensitive, why is it that leaks can be put in *The Sunday Times*, for example, telling us that there are 200 profit centres within the BBC—information that is not available in the summary of the report, but which apparently is suitable for leaking?

Mr. Smith: No, I cannot accept any of that. The measures that we have put in place will, over the next six to seven years, provide the BBC with a modest and regular increase in its funding to enable it to maintain and improve its position as our premier public service broadcaster. That is one of the reasons I am encouraging the BBC to ensure, for example, that it makes more new programmes and broadcasts fewer repeats. That is one of the things that I expect to result from the measures that we have put in place.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): At the risk of intruding on the Secretary of State's love-in with at least one of his Back Benchers, may I ask him to explain why he has done nothing to address the anomaly whereby people aged between 60 and 74 who are in sheltered accommodation receive concessions on what they have to pay for their television licences, and people of those ages who are not in sheltered accommodation do not? Does he not agree that the fact that people are in sheltered accommodation is no guarantee of what their income really is?

Mr. Smith: I hate to point out to the hon. Gentleman that, throughout the 18 years or more that the Conservatives were in government, they did absolutely nothing—not even the admirable measure that we are taking in relation to the over-75s. We looked carefully, as did the Davies committee, at the concession for people in sheltered accommodation. We thought it right to keep it in place because it would not be sensible to remove a concession that was already there, but we did not feel that it was appropriate at this stage to go further.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Will my right hon. Friend answer a query that has been raised by a number of pensioners in my constituency? Has he given any

thought to what will happen to pensioners who have to renew their television licences just before the free licences come in? Will they be entitled to a rebate? If so, will the Government ensure that they are informed about how to apply to get their money refunded?

Mr. Smith: Yes. If the television licence of anyone who will be 75 or over on 1 November falls due after 1 April, they will be able to apply for a part-year licence up to 1 November so they do not have to purchase the entire year's licence. If anyone has already purchased a full year's licence, some of which will be unexpired on 1 November, they will be entitled to a refund. We will ensure that all the details of the scheme are made available directly to everyone who will qualify.

Art Exports

4. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What assessment he has made of the current levels of exports of works of art from Great Britain. [110599]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the annual report of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art for the period 1 July 1998 to 30 June 1999, which was published on 26 November 1999 and laid before Parliament, and provides information about the level of exports of works of art requiring individual export licences for that period.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but is he proud of the fact that the committee's latest report shows that funding for the safeguarding of important national art treasures fell last year by 75 per cent., from £23 million to under £6 million? What plans does he have immediately to address that chronic decline? If the answer is none, will it not be best for him to export himself, if he is able to find a gullible enough buyer?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman makes a charming suggestion. I am pleased to tell him that our plans include more than doubling the funding available to the national heritage memorial fund. I am also pleased to say that the trustees of the heritage lottery fund have indicated that the money that they will allocate for the acquisition of works of art will be doubled. He will also have noted that, in the period shortly after publication of the report, the heritage lottery fund rose magnificently to the occasion, as did the national art collections fund, to enable the purchase by the national gallery of Scotland of Botticelli's "The Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child".

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): May I associate myself with the remarks about Michael Colvin? Among his many other talents, he was a very accomplished artist, and he did a great deal of work on behalf of the arts, both locally and across the country. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will have their own memories of Michael. I came to know him best through his work for the arts. I am quite sure that the entire House will join me in sending our heartfelt sympathy to Michael and Nichola's family on this tragedy.

Notwithstanding the comments that the Minister has just made on export of works of art, does he accept that the verdict of the export reviewing committee was that Britain does face a heritage crisis? What will the Government do about museums' acquisition budgets, which are at an appallingly low ebb? Should not providing the funds and the assistance to help museums to acquire works of art be a key part of the Government's policy of enhancing access?

Mr. Howarth: Before responding to the hon. Gentleman's question, I should like to say that I have the happiest of memories of a visit to York with Michael and Nichola Colvin, and with the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) who is in the Chamber. We went to look at the heritage in York, and it was a very happy day. Michael and Nichola were great lovers of heritage, and the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) was absolutely right to make that important point in the House on this particular day.

As for the hon. Gentleman's question on the alleged crisis in funding for acquisitions, I should remind him that funding levels are very much what they were when the previous, Conservative Government left office. Subsequently, not only have we been able to ensure that the Botticelli was obtained for the national gallery of Scotland, but the United Kingdom national gallery, in London, has acquired Stubbs's "Whistlejacket" and Dürer's "Jerome". Extremely important acquisitions have been made in museums and galleries in Bolton, Leeds, Doncaster, Bury St. Edmunds, Cirencester and Cambridge.

As I said, the national art collections fund and the heritage lottery fund rise to the occasion when required to do so. There is not the crisis that the hon. Gentleman asserts that there is.

Millennium Dome

5. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): If he will make a statement on the Millennium Commission funding for the dome. [110600]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The Millennium Commission is supporting the dome as the centrepiece of its UK-wide spectrum of millennium projects. In 1997, the commission agreed a grant of £449 million gross to the New Millennium Experience Company. In response to an application from NMEC, the commission has further agreed to provide a repayable grant of up to £60 million to assist the company with its cashflow, subject to detailed appraisal and to the company demonstrating clearly the need for those funds. To date, £32 million of the additional grant has been released by the commission after such appraisal.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I thank the Secretary of State for giving us the figures on Millennium Commission money that has gone into the dome. If those funds—which, on his own figures, amount to more than half a billion pounds—had not been spent on the dome, they would have gone into the lottery and to other good causes. Has he met anyone who would have preferred that money to go into the dome, rather than to be spent on a range of other public services—which, with that vast sum, could have been hugely improved?

Mr. Smith: The project has had cross-party support ever since its inception. It is remarkably well appreciated

by those who go: indeed, *The Sunday Times*, hardly a known lover of the dome, published a poll in which 1,000 visitors to the dome were asked whether they enjoyed it and 85 per cent. said yes. Asked whether it was good value for money, 62 per cent. said yes. The most recent attendance figures bear that out. The dome has just had its best week ever. On every single one of the nine days from Friday 18 February, more than 24,500 people visited it. The best day ever was Monday 21 February, with 27,621 visitors. That, of course, was the day when the Tories presciently chose to have a debate in which they roundly attacked the dome.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is my right hon. Friend aware that yesterday, with a guest from overseas, I was one of many thousands of people who had a great time at the dome, not only enjoying the zones and the show but appreciating the excellent and courteous service from all the staff? Is not it about time that the Tory party and the chattering classes abandoned their snobbish sniping at a project that has a great potential for success if given a chance?

Mr. Smith: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, especially about the courteous and expert way in which the staff deal with visitors, which has been widely appreciated. It is not absolutely everyone in the Tory party who takes a negative view, however. The former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), in last Monday's debate, strongly said:

> The dome is a national project . . . We must be seen to support it and give it every chance to be the success that I have always believed, and still believe, it will prove to be.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1320-21.]

He speaks more clearly than anyone on the Opposition Front Bench for the 872,000 people who have visited the dome to date.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): In respect of dome funding, why, almost two years to the week after BSkyB said that it would sponsor the dome, has it yet to sign on the dotted line? What is the hold-up? We have never had an explanation. What conditions does the company want to attach to its sponsorship? Should not those who want to use the dome mark cough up the dome cash?

Mr. Smith: The details of those arrangements are matters for the New Millennium Experience Company, not for me. As far as I am aware, the discussion is simply over minor details and there is still a clear commitment on the part of BSkyB to sign the contract and deliver the money that it has promised.

Mr. Jim Dobbin (Heywood and Middleton): Will my right hon. Friend pass on my deep appreciation to Lord Falconer for his intervention last Thursday in response to specific requests from the children of Alkrington county primary school, who visited the dome and had a tremendous time? I visited it yesterday with my two grandsons and we enjoyed it immensely. It is no wonder that the dome is proving highly popular, despite the Tory party's efforts to undermine it.

Mr. Smith: I will indeed pass on those welcome remarks to my noble Friend. Such admirable assistance would probably be condemned by Opposition Front Benchers as meddling.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): When the £32 million is repaid, what will the Millennium Commission spend it on?

Mr. Smith: The commission's programme of work for capital projects, the millennium festival and the millennium awards is well in place. Clear priorities are set out, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, and the money is destined for valuable projects throughout the country.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Does my right hon. Friend recall that many of us in Birmingham and the west midlands felt cheated when the previous Government changed the rules to get the millennium exhibition on a bend in the river in the furthest reaches of east London? That said, we welcome the success that the dome now promises to be and we are glad that so many people enjoy it. Will he invite the Opposition and most of the national media to admit that they have got this wrong?

Mr. Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his generous approach to the issue. One reason why Greenwich was chosen as the location for the exhibition was the regeneration impact that the dome will have on a deprived part of south-east London, with the creation of many jobs and a specific tourism effect. I very much endorse his comment that it is time that the Conservatives got behind the project and helped to make it the real national success—without political partisanship—that I believe it can and should be.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I do not know how many times I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that the Conservatives want the dome to be a success. As I have told him many times before, not least in the debate last week, we wish P-Y well. However, we do not support the Government's atrocious handling of the project. What guarantee can he give that the dome will not be back for more money before the end of the year? What estimate has he made of the cost to the commission and to taxpayers of his Government's decision to keep the dome in place after the exhibition closes?

Mr. Smith: Adopting the language that the hon. Gentleman has used on occasions over the past two months is a strange way of hoping that the dome will be a success. The legacy competition is in place. We anticipate that funds will be coming back into English Partnerships and the New Millennium Experience Company—and through them to the Millennium Commission—because of our decision to continue the life of the dome beyond the end of this year.

Lottery Grants

6. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): What action he is taking to simplify the application process for lottery grants. [110601]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): My Department is working with distributors to ensure that the lottery application process is as simple and user-friendly as possible, and that forms

are written in plain language. The quality, efficiency and standards team, which I established last year, is looking at how the costs of making a lottery application can be reduced. Lottery distributors already have in place the awards for all scheme, which is a straightforward way for community groups to apply for grants of £500 to £5,000. One simple application form covers charities, arts, sport and heritage groups.

Mr. Cunningham: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Conservatives have pledged to withdraw national lottery money from schools and hospitals, despite overwhelming public support for such projects?

Mr. Smith: We are a little unclear about what the Conservatives would do. They specifically said at their party conference that health and education projects such as those supported by the new opportunities fund were not the sort of things that they believed that lottery money should be spent on. I believe that in that they differ from the vast majority of people in this country.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): When the Secretary of State is considering simplifying the application process for lottery grants, will he bear in mind the fact that some small clubs, particularly sports clubs, struggle with the complexity of existing forms because they do not have the necessary expertise to fill them in? Of course the overall checking of any application has to be rigorous, but perhaps the initial form could be simple and straightforward, particularly for small clubs, and the more rigorous checking could happen later in the process, once the application is being proceeded with.

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman asks a perceptive and constructive question, as he often does. Sport England and the heritage lottery fund already have a two-stage mechanism along the lines that he has outlined. I am also pleased to say that last month all the distributors attended a presentation by the Plain English Campaign and are considering how to make the best use of its services to ensure that the initial application process is easy to understand and that applications can easily be made by community groups, which may not have professional advisers ready to hand.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I am getting slightly tired of the Secretary of State traducing my opinions. I hope that he will answer a straight question. However simple the lottery application forms become, do not the Government's actions mean that sport, the arts and charities stand a lesser chance of benefiting from the lottery than previously, and that the biggest lottery winner is the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Mr. Chris Smith: No. By the end of the current franchise period, the sport, arts, heritage and charities strands of the lottery will have received more than £1.9 billion each. That is more than was originally anticipated, even after the new opportunities fund was established to ensure that additional funds raised from the lottery could be made available to projects related to health, education and the environment.

Millennium Dome

7. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): What proposals he has received from train and bus operating companies in Wales for special ticket and travel arrangements for the millennium dome. [110602]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his first Culture, Media and Sport Question Time. We look forward to debating with him in the future.

The New Millennium Experience Company has been working closely with key travel trade operators to ensure that good-value travel packages—either day trips, or including accommodation—are available for the people of Wales.

Mr. Thomas: I thank the Minister for that reply. However, there is little evidence that people in Wales are availing themselves of the millennium dome. Indeed, the Minister's Department was unable to give me any figures relating to ticket sales in Wales. Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that the loans recently made available for the dome would have met the deficit in NHS spending in Wales. Will the Minister assure the House that, in future, ticket sales alone will determine the dome's success or failure, and that more effort will be made to allow people in Wales to go to the dome without being penalised by distance?

Janet Anderson: I can say only that, during half-term week, no fewer than 178,000 people visited the dome. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned earlier, attendance at the dome so far has totalled 872,367 people. Those figures speak for themselves, but I understand that the hon. Gentleman's constituency has its day at the dome tomorrow—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman had taken more interest in the dome's activities, he might have known that. I urge him to get down to the dome tomorrow and join his constituents.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I assure my hon. Friend the Minister that the people of Monmouthshire will be delighted to participate in cheap package trips to see the wonderful entertainment at the dome. Last Thursday was Monmouthshire day there, and I watched a wonderful performance by young people associated with Gwent theatre from my constituency and the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) and for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth). My only regret about that day was that no bus load of people from the Arts Council of Wales came to see the wonderful work of Gwent theatre. The council recently decided to end the theatre's franchise for next year. That decision has now been overturned, thanks to the wonderful campaign on Gwent theatre's behalf.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend is right, and he gives a much more accurate and knowledgeable account of the interest of the people of Wales in the dome. If I may, I shall quote from the *Daily Post* report published after Gwynedd had its day in the dome in 18 February. It stated:

> The young people of Gwynedd descended on the Millennium Dome yesterday . . . and they admitted they were "gobsmacked" by the building. John Meadows, of Barmouth, said last night, "We came

down here with the criticism it has had in recent weeks in mind, but it is absolutely fantastic. I'm gobsmacked, it absolutely blew me away."

Social Exclusion

8. **Mr. Neil Gerrard** (Walthamstow): What plans he has for community sport activity to help combat social exclusion; and if he will make a statement. [110603]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): The Government are determined to ensure that all sections of society have access to sporting opportunities and that community sport activities help to combat social exclusion.

Mr. Gerrard: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and for what she said earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) about targeting lottery funding. However, does she agree that successful community sports schemes can still have difficulties with day-to-day running costs? Because lottery funding and much other funding is project-oriented, there can still be a problem with core running costs. Will my hon. Friend look at what the Government can do to assist community sports schemes in that situation and at what can be done to encourage local authorities to assist them?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; sport and recreational activity can make a real contribution to all aspects of neighbourhood renewal and can improve the whole area of young people's activities, including their attitude to health, employment, education and the reduction of crime. I know that he has an interest in the Leyton Orient community sports programme. It is a very good project, providing a real opportunity for young people to get involved in the football club, and the football club puts something back into the local community. I hope that my hon. Friend will convey to Leyton Orient our thanks for what the club is doing. Those are precisely the kind of joint initiatives and partnerships that will be necessary, because local authorities cannot do everything on their own.

Gender Balance (Sport)

9. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): If he will make a statement on the gender balance relating to participation in sports and on funding to encourage greater participation by girls. [110606]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): Sport England provides more than £6 million of Exchequer funding to sports governing bodies, and all are required to ensure that they have proposals for the development of women and girls sport as part of the condition of funding. It also funds activities specifically designed to encourage more young women and girls to take up sport.

Charlotte Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. During the excellent Adjournment debate on 14 December 1999, she said that she was studying recent research into what turns young girls off physical education and sport. Does she agree that many young girls are not excited by competitive sport but, because they are image-conscious, they are interested in activities such as dance, aerobics and gym-style workouts? What is she doing to transform our teenage girls from a generation of couch potatoes to young fit women with high self-esteem and confidence? Is she aware that many women look to her, as a woman, to take a lead on this important issue?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend will be aware of two recent reports into the kind of physical education and sporting activities in which young girls are likely to be interested. One, a very important joint initiative by Nike and the Youth Sport Trust, proposed a range of new, innovative ways of encouraging young girls to stay interested in physical education and sport.

A number of things can be done to make the delivery of sport and physical education more attractive to them. Much more could be done about getting young girls involved in the planning and delivery of their lessons, such as introducing different types of sports. My hon. Friend is right that at a certain age, many young women do not want to be involved in competitive team sports. The important thing is that the rest of the school's pupils are not stopped from taking part in those sports. I am keen to find ways of getting more girls and young women involved in sport. The media could do much more to project the role of women in sport rather than using some of the images that they currently employ.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Minister agree that trends of sports participation at schools are in the wrong direction for both girls and boys, and that £6 million is a hopelessly inadequate amount of money from the Sports Council to promote sport in schools?

Kate Hoey: One of the most interesting things to emerge from the young people in sport national survey conducted by Sport England was that more young people are taking part in sport, not necessarily in school, but after school and linked to school. Again, schools cannot do everything. They are the bedrock and the foundation, but the link between what happens in school and after school is important. That is why so much more support is being given to after-school activities that are sport-oriented.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Is my hon. Friend aware that one issue highlighted by the Sport England report is that many schools lack the best facilities for sport on site? As a result, many children have to travel much further off-site to participate in sports, thus reducing the time available. Does she agree that, in this case, joined-up government between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education and Employment really would make things work?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is right. Departments on their own cannot deliver good quality physical education and sport in schools. We need that joined-up thinking. That is why we made the joint appointment of Sue Campbell from the Youth Sport Trust to work across Departments—between my Department and the Department for Education and Employment. That is joined-up thinking. There are many imaginative ways to make resources go further and to do things differently; that needs joined-up thinking and that is what we are determined to do.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Does the Minister agree that when her hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands

(Charlotte Atkins) dismisses a whole generation of girls as couch potatoes, she does not help to advance the provision of facilities for the young? It must primarily be the responsibility of the girls' schools—especially in deprived areas—not only to provide facilities and opportunities for sport, but to give the Government better statistics than they seem to have at present.

Kate Hoey: It is important that the figures for the participation of young girls are right. In many schools, participation is as high as it has ever been. A good, high-quality physical education teacher and programme play an important role and do much to ensure that young girls and young boys receive an introduction to sport that will last them through life.

Art Collections

10. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on progress on the review of national art collections to identify art that may have been looted from victims of Nazi persecution. [110607]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): The national museums directors conference will be holding a news conference tomorrow to make a first report of the results of research into provenance during the period 1933-45. I understand that the findings will be published on the internet.

Mr. Dismore: I welcome my hon. Friend's answer, which shows, with the panel that was announced last week, a clear recognition of the need to make restitution to the victims of the Nazis—a need that was badly neglected by the previous Conservative Government. There is some concern, especially in the Jewish community, as to the need for further consultation over the membership and terms of reference of the panel. Will he tell us what powers the panel will have if there is a dispute between the rightful owner of a looted work of art, who wants it back, and an institution that does not want to give it up?

Mr. Howarth: Of course, I have held consultations and continue to do so. Last year, I offered organisations representing Jewish people, or acting on behalf of Jewish claimants, the opportunity to meet senior officials in my Department. The Holocaust Educational Trust and the European Commission on Looted Art availed themselves of that opportunity; the Board of Deputies of British Jews did not do so. However, I was pleased to meet representatives of all three organisations before publishing our proposals for the terms of reference of the spoliation advisory panel, which are, of course, consultative.

On the second point made by my hon. Friend, our sole desire in establishing the panel is to make it easier for justice to be done. I am holding consultations on the membership of the panel. It will be chaired by a most distinguished, retired, Lord Justice of Appeal, Sir David Hirst. I propose that it should include not only lawyers, but historians, ethicists, experts on the art market, Jews and gentiles. The panel's paramount purpose will be to achieve a fair and just solution both for the claimant and for the institution. It will have a range of remedies; however if, unfortunately, the remedy that it offers does not recommend itself in a particular case, the claimant will still have the right to go to law.

Dance

11. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): What support he has provided to those responsible for the development of dance to ensure that those involved in the training, particularly of children, have appropriate qualifications and expertise. [110608]

The Minister for the Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): Much dance teacher training is provided by private sector bodies, which run training and provide qualifications which are recognised by the Council for Dance Education and Training as of a high quality and as examples of appropriate practice within the sector. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is currently engaged in accrediting qualifications submitted by awarding bodies who wish to have them placed within the national qualifications framework.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that, although the Government have found substantial extra funds for arts and sports bodies, an activity such as dance—which is a hybrid of sport and art—may not receive its proper share of resources? Is he also aware that, as a result, more than half the children and people learning dance are taught by people with absolutely no qualifications to support them? Dance is particularly important for young girls as it motivates them and makes them active. Therefore, will my hon. Friend consider ways in which the dance authorities can offer their expertise to those teachers who are currently operating without qualifications?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend will be mindful that Emma Goldman once said to Lenin, "If I can't dance, I do not want to be part of your revolution." That is something that new Labour should not forget.

Of all human activities, dance is the one that I would most regret seeing heavily regulated by the state. None the less, my hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that teachers of dance have the health, safety and physical well-being of dancers in their hands. It is important that we should be able to be confident that those teachers are properly trained and qualified.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Does the Minister recall making, through his Department, the announcement in the late summer of last year that grants to dance students would be substantially changed, making it possible for the first time for pupils of minimal means to be able to undertake dance studies? Does he realise how high the hopes of young dance students were raised only for those hopes to be dashed when they discovered that the grant system had become far more niggardly? It caused many of them to wonder whether they would be able to continue with their studies. Will he apologise to those dance students who, until that system of niggardly grants was improved and rectified, thought that they would have to give up their dance studies?

Mr. Howarth: No, I will not apologise. I am rather proud of what we have been able to do. It was something

that has needed to be done for many years. We have introduced a far more generous system of support for students of dance and drama. It is not the case that every school that offers to teach dance will qualify to be part of the system. We should concentrate resources—and increasingly so—on the schools that are centres of excellence.

Green Spaces Initiative

12. **Ms Hazel Blears** (Salford): In what ways he expects children to benefit from the green spaces initiative funded by the new opportunities fund. [110609]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The new opportunities fund launched the green spaces and sustainable communities initiative in January, having consulted extensively on the scope of the programme in the autumn of last year. It is envisaged that projects involving opportunities for children's play, organised and informal sport, playing fields, access to the countryside and creating safer routes to school will be eligible, among others. Such projects will greatly benefit the health, happiness, safety and social well-being of children, particularly in areas of multiple deprivation.

Ms Blears: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Many inner-city areas are concrete jungles; there are 32 tower blocks in my constituency. The previous Tory Government sold off 5,000 playing fields, leaving many of our schools with no green space on which children can play. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that money from the green spaces initiative will be targeted specifically at cities, such as mine, where children need green spaces to play?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend rightly identifies the importance—especially, but not exclusively, in inner-city areas—of the creation of green spaces where children can play and where an oasis of greenery in the midst of concrete can be created. The new opportunities fund will seek to apply its funds primarily to areas of deprivation and it will look for good applications. I hope that my hon. Friend will encourage her constituents to come forward with precisely such applications.

Rugby League World Cup

13. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): What support and assistance he *(a)* has given and *(b)* intends to give, to the Rugby Football League with regard to promoting the forthcoming rugby league world cup in the UK. [110610]

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): I am delighted that the rugby league world cup is being hosted in the UK this year, with the final being played at Old Trafford in November. As with all major events being staged in this country, we are ready to offer promotional and diplomatic support to assist the organisers in the delivery of a successful event, and I am pleased that UK Sport has agreed support in principle of £350,000 towards the cost of staging the rugby league world cup.

Mr. Hoyle: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but will she also ensure that discrimination against rugby league will be ended and that it will be included as one of the nine specialist sports to receive special funding from Sport England?

Kate Hoey: As my hon. Friend will know, I am meeting the all-party rugby league group this week to discuss precisely that issue. That decision would be historical, and I should like Sport England to look at the matter again.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Churches (Theft)

29. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What arrangements are in place for insurance of churches in remote locations against theft of their fabric. [110626]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): It is the responsibility of the individual church, that is to say its parochial church council, to arrange and finance its own insurance of the church building and its contents.

Guidance is available to parochial church councils and others from the Council for the Care of Churches of the Church of England and from individual insurers.

Mr. Prentice: That is a very disappointing reply. We could equalise premiums across the country so that parishes would not pay more if their churches were vulnerable to theft and vandalism. People in my constituency are absolutely fed up to the back teeth of historic artefacts being stripped from churches. Not long ago, the entire stone tiling from the mediaeval parish church at Gill was stripped; it disappeared down the M1 and is probably in a garden in Islington as I speak. I want my hon. Friend to speak to the Home Secretary about that and perhaps to designate police officers responsible for stolen stones, as Skipton does.

Mr. Bell: My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) has the next question, and he may be better able to answer questions about the whereabouts of artefacts. I am saddened to tell the House that the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group confirmed that in 1998 it paid more than 4,000 claims as a result of attacks against churches, including theft, vandalism and arson. Ten churches are attacked every day, and one in four can expect to be the victim of crime every year. As insurers, the group views that high level of crime as completely unacceptable—and on that point, I agree entirely with my hon. Friend—and it works with the Church, wherever possible, to help to combat the rising number of attacks on its people and property.

There are seminars on church security and there is a new system of marking church property, which is a sponsored system of alpha dots which marks kits and artefacts in the hope that they may be recovered.

Redundant Churches

30. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What is the policy of the commissioners in respect of the use of redundant churches for socially useful purposes. [110627]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): Significantly more than half the redundant churches have been appropriated to new uses—that is 880 in all—and continue to serve the community by providing facilities for worship, social and educational opportunities or low cost housing.

It is the Church of England's policy that when a church is closed for public worship under the Pastoral Measure 1983 the commissioners will assist and encourage the diocese to seek an alternative use for the building.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the representative of the Church Commissioners join me in expressing the hope that nobody in Islington is furnishing their garden with stolen church property brought down the M1 or along any other motorway, because such behaviour would be outrageous and deplorable?

Will my hon. Friend also consider seriously the long-term use of former church buildings? Many constituencies have former Church of England properties that have been sold off, sometimes for community use or worship by other faiths, which are then miraculously transferred to the private housing market, where they fall into the hands of property developers? Somewhere along the line, somebody has made a vast amount of money out of the conversion of a church building into expensive, exclusive private housing, when it is the policy and wish of the Church Commissioners that any redundant church building should be used for socially useful purposes such as social housing, if possible.

Will my hon. Friend give the House an assurance that any future church property that is sold will have a charge placed on it that will prevent it from being sold for excessive profit in the private market and ensure instead that it is made useful for the community for worship or social or housing purposes?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for helping me define the term "socially useful". It covers use for a wide variety of civic, community and social activities, worship by other Christian bodies, arts, crafts, music and drama centres, workshops, shops, museums and sports halls and the provision of low-cost housing. The point of selling on from those who take over such property is a matter of concern. My hon. Friend has reflected that, and I shall be glad to take it up with the commissioners.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Would it not be better to try to ensure that churches do not become redundant? Will the hon. Gentleman ask the Church Commissioners to talk to the dioceses about providing grants for further community uses of churches, so that they do not become redundant?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. Some 1,500 churches have been made redundant and current guidelines recommend that use for worship by adherents of a non-Christian faith is not to be regarded as eminently suitable. That is to say, we are not in the business of turning over our redundant churches to other faiths. I shall be happy to take up on his behalf the point about whether grants should be made available to keep churches going.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

National Audit Office

31. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the resources available to the National Audit Office. [110628]

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): With permission, I shall reply on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, to whom I am sure the whole House will want to send good wishes for a speedy recovery.

It is a main concern of the Commission to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has the right resources to undertake his work. The Commission last met on 2 December 1999 to consider the supply estimate of the National Audit Office for next year. The Commission took account of the NAO's growing work load and recommended additional funding for 2000–01 as a result. Although the Commission will continue to monitor the situation, I am satisfied that, at present, funding for the work is adequate and that, were the Comptroller and Auditor General to need more staff or other resources in future, he would request extra funding from the House when compiling his annual Supply estimate.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his reply and echo what he has said about the distinguished Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission. The whole House wishes him a full and speedy recovery and looks forward to the display of his talents in the Chamber as soon as possible.

In the light of the recent NAO report, which highlighted the Department's slow progress in securing internet access, is the right hon. Gentleman satisfied that the NAO commands both sufficient resources and adequate specialist expertise to be able to follow up the findings of that report, monitor progress and ensure an improvement in the performance of Departments?

Mr. Williams: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his gracious comments, which I shall obviously pass on to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne.

The NAO constantly makes use of outsider, specialist advice when it thinks that it is needed. It bids for the financial resources that it feels it needs. We have met what has been requested, and I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I associate myself with my right hon. Friend's comments about my

right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Will my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) communicate to the NAO and its officials the appreciation of the membership of the House of Commons of its excellent work in unravelling the costs associated with the buildings of Thames house and Vauxhall cross—the headquarters of MI5 and MI6?

Mr. Williams: My hon. Friend and I have served with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne on the Public Accounts Committee, and I thank him for his kind comments.

I share my hon. Friend's suspicion that the higher the indiscretion, the higher the classification of document obtained. When I read press reports on security buildings, my only reassurance was that my hon. Friend is a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, so I am sure that he will ensure that the services are fully accountable.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I join others in expressing hopes for the rapid return of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I received a letter from him today, in which he said he was feeling very fit and looking forward to being back with us very soon.

On the substantive question, the budget was drawn up while the Gavyn Davies report on the BBC was still extant. Was there money in the budget to allow an investigation into the BBC? Does the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) think that that would have been a good use of money?

Mr. Williams: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I know that he visited my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne the day after he was taken ill and that the visit was much appreciated by my right hon. Friend and his wife.

On the issue of the BBC, I read with some fascination the suggestion that the NAO is not an appropriate body to monitor such matters because it has no understanding of consumer issues. As one of the few Members of Parliament who has been a completely independent consumer Minister, may I allay the fears of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport? To help him, I should like to point out, as his Department has not, that between them the NAO and the PAC have produced reports on the water industry, in relation to quality of services; the telecommunications industry, on anti-competitive behaviour; the gas industry, in relation to giving consumers a choice; and "The Office of Fair Trading: Protecting the Consumer from Unfair Trading Practices", which has only just been completed. I hope that my right hon. Friend will now revise his decision.

Mozambique

3.31 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development to make a statement on the Government's response to the situation in Mozambique following the recent cyclone and flooding.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Over the past two weeks, the worst floods in more than 50 years have hit southern Mozambique. Cyclone Eline also caused substantial damage in the central provinces. Over the weekend, water deposited by Eline in Zimbabwe and South Africa has filtered through to Mozambique, causing further massive flooding of the Limpopo and Save rivers.

The Government of Mozambique estimate that more than 500,000 people have been affected, with more than 100,000 still awaiting rescue following the flood surge over the weekend. The people are becoming frail and they need food and water. The situation is very serious. Regrettably, it might become even worse in the next few days, because of the likelihood of further storms and flooding from the Cahora Bassa dam.

The first phase of the relief operation, involving rescue and evacuation of people stranded by flood water, is still on-going. Co-ordination of rescue activities has been problematic. We are doing all we can to make available extra helicopters and boats. As the flood water subsides, the relief operation will move into a second phase, in which priorities will be urgent repairs to essential infrastructure, shelter, food delivery and medical services.

My Department deployed two humanitarian specialists to the region during the initial stages of the flooding on 11 February. They conducted rapid assessments and liaised with the Mozambique authorities and humanitarian organisations to help to plan the rescue operation. We dispatched a consignment of more than 400 tents from the UK to Maputo for the Red Cross to distribute for emergency shelter to the homeless. We also supported the United Nations disaster assessment and co-ordination team, which is assisting the Mozambique authorities with the targeting and co-ordination of relief efforts. Given the deteriorating situation over the weekend, we are redeploying a humanitarian specialist to Mozambique. We are also strengthening the World Food Programme with the secondment of two logistics experts to assist with the effective tasking of helicopters.

My Department has already contributed some £2.2 million for rescue and immediate relief, including the provision of shelter, water, sanitation and health support. That funding has been channelled through the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, the Red Cross, ActionAid, Oxfam, Save the Children Fund and World Vision. Those activities are being co-ordinated with the Mozambique authorities. We stand ready to provide further assistance.

Dr. Tonge: I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. I also welcome her Department's pledge of £2.2 million in aid and $1 million to continue South Africa's military operation for a further 10 days. South Africa's force is stretched and underfunded and that country is itself suffering from the floods, so its efforts are to be commended.

Many thousands, however, are still stranded in the Save river valley, and more helicopters are needed. Although we cannot always predict natural disasters, which sadly seem to be becoming more frequent, does the Secretary of State accept that the NGOs and the military could work together, and that rapid response and needs assessments should be better co-ordinated? For instance, both Britain and the international community as a whole might be better able to respond if a United Nations rapid reaction task force were set up, ready for a disaster when it happened.

Will the Secretary of State comment on reports that Mozambique still has not received its debt relief, because of International Monetary Fund objections?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The problem is not money. The problem is deploying on the ground, getting the helicopters and boats where they are needed, and getting food and water to people. The hon. Lady is right: the situation will probably get very much worse. There are people who are in bad shape and cannot be rescued because there are not enough helicopters. It is an organisational rather than a financial problem.

We are trying to get better disaster relief preparations across the world. Organisation in-country is needed for the immediate response—it takes time to bring people in from elsewhere, however ready they are.

Mozambique is one of the most desperately poor countries in the world, coming back from a terrible history, with only frail capacity within the country, and a brave, reforming Government. It is extremely difficult for such a country to respond to such a disaster.

On the question of whether more disasters are occurring, our evidence suggests that there are not necessarily more disasters, but they affect more people, because more people are living on unsuitable land and are more dreadfully affected by disasters.

I agree that we must do more to have in place a rapid reaction capability. We have been working to strengthen UNDAC—the United Nations disaster assessment co-ordination team. It is much faster now and moves in quickly to help countries to call for the support that they need.

Mozambique received $1.5 billion in debt relief in July 1999 and will get more in March. It has reserves, and it will need a great deal of money to reconstruct the country, but the problem at present is not money to spend: it is deploying on the ground to save people's lives.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I join the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) in thanking the Secretary of State for coming to the House today to update us on the serious situation in Mozambique. No one can fail to be moved by the pictures that we see on television. Our sympathies go to the victims and their families, and our support to the voluntary workers, especially from Oxfam and Save the Children Fund, and the officials who are trying desperately to save lives.

Will the Secretary of State comment on what her Minister said on the BBC one o'clock news—that by tomorrow, 14 helicopters will be in use rescuing people,

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

and that only six are currently in use? In her assessment, is that sufficient air-lift capability to save all the lives threatened by the rising water? What else can be done to encourage people with helicopters in the area to come to the assistance of victims of the flood? What discussions has the Secretary of State had with our Ministry of Defence about any further assistance that could be provided?

I welcome the £2.2 million in cash that has already been committed to the relief effort over the past few days, but in the light of the appeal from Chief Anyaoku today, what further funds can the Department commit? Is there any way in which the Department can help to satisfy the demand for boats, which are obviously desperately needed?

It was disappointing to hear reports last week that the British Government had been criticised by aid workers and the Mozambique authorities for ignoring local disaster relief efforts. What assessment has the right hon. Lady made of those criticisms? Has she had an opportunity to deal with them?

On debt relief, I note from the Minister's comments earlier today that no repayment of debt relief will be expected by the UK from Mozambique this year. Can the Secretary of State give us an assurance that no repayment will be expected in the subsequent year? Will she comment on the fact that half the $8.3 billion debt owed by Mozambique is to Russia, Italy and France? Can she give the House an undertaking that she will discuss with those countries the opportunities that they will offer Mozambique for debt relief?

I wonder whether we have learned any lessons. In 1997, a resolution was passed in the European Parliament when 73 people died, 400,000 were made homeless and 70,000 hectares were laid waste in Mozambique because of floods. Will the Secretary of State assure us that she will give priority to good emergency planning? Fine words and funds are all very well, but we need good planning and co-ordination in future. If she can assure us that she will move forward on that basis, the Opposition will support her.

Clare Short: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's support for the Department's work. We—and everyone—are currently hunting for helicopters. We can pay for them. Although none were found in Zimbabwe, South Africa is making them available. If we can find them and buy them, we shall send them in. Nine are currently working, but only three have winch capacity, which is needed to pick people up. The situation is therefore desperate.

We are also looking for boats, but the floods are so bad and the tides so difficult that it is dangerous to use them. We have not got the right equipment and we are short of helicopters with winches. As we speak, my officials are hunting around the region for such helicopters. We have talked to the Ministry of Defence—shortly, I might talk to its Ministers a little more—and it has no resources within 3,000 miles—*[Interruption.]* Well, that was my understanding from advice that I received from the Ministry this morning. The Ministry of Defence therefore has no resources nearby.

The reality in the modern world is that equipment is not on hand for every emergency. As I told the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), there is no shortage of funds to deal with the emergency; the problem is deployment and getting things done. We can make more money available.

I examined the criticism of the British Government which appeared in one newspaper. The Government in Mozambique is a brave, reforming Government with frail capacity. One or two of their officials were a bit irritated with my officials, who have a lot of experience, flew straight in and made many suggestions about what should be done. We have a good relationship with the Government of Mozambique.

As I said earlier, debt relief will be important for reconstruction later. It is not currently an issue. The Government of Mozambique have considerable reserves that they will need to deploy. There are no payments due to the United Kingdom Government. We are not a big creditor of Mozambique's. We are discussing with other Governments ways in which to speed up HIPC 2 and how they can match us on 100 per cent. debt relief. We shall do all that we can.

I do not accept the suggestion of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that we have learned no lessons. It is great that we have reached the point that, when a disaster occurs in one poor country, the public throughout the world call on their Governments to do all they can to help. We are a leading force in the international community's ability to react quickly to emergencies.

We are considering the worst disaster that Mozambique has suffered in 50 years. It is a very poor, frail country, and it is dealing with an unprecedented disaster. The United Nations is helping; we are helping. We shall do all we can, but things will get worse before they get better.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): My right hon. Friend knows that some members of the Select Committee on International Development have recently returned from Mozambique. We met my right hon. Friend's officials, who are doing a good job there. I heard no criticism of the British Government while I was there: quite the contrary. However, I want to raise some points with my right hon. Friend.

Last week, we watched some of the rescue operations and some of the delivery of food, medicines and tents—we saw the first consignment of British tents being lifted off the ground and taken by helicopter to the affected area. People were anxious that there were only two helicopters, and that they had insufficient funds to pay for them for a second week. The helicopters were hired from the South African Government. People claimed that they had insufficient money to continue hiring them. I do not claim that the Department did not provide the money; it has been very generous. However, other countries contribute to the United Nations. Some seem to believe that the United Nations can work without the necessary funds. When Mrs. Ogata visited Britain five years ago, she said, "Give me the money, I can do the job."

People in Mozambique were worried that they could not continue to use two helicopters for a second week. That says something about the shoestring budget on which the United Nations works. When 100,000 people are in danger of losing their lives—some are clinging on to roofs and trees with the flood waters still rising—the world has fallen short of what it ought to do in an emergency of this kind. It has been known for weeks that there was a threat of floods in the area, so there is something wrong if we are scrabbling around for helicopters.

I saw the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs working in Mozambique with the assistance of somebody from the Department for International Development, but the truth is that the aid agencies were very concerned that they were not able to do what they thought was necessary because of a lack of money. It is not right that the world has fallen short of being able to assist people in one of the poorest countries in the world who are in difficulty through no fault of their own. We cannot help them in the way that we should because the United Nations does not have the resources.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am aware that the Select Committee has been in Mozambique and grateful to it for being careful not to use any resources that are needed to help deal with the disaster. I appreciate that; it behaved very responsibly.

It is always easy to say that there is not enough money. Truly, the problem is not that, but getting people, organisation and efficiency on the ground now, getting helicopters—we do not have enough and we have even fewer with winches—and getting them flying. The disaster is that Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world and history has been very hard on it. It has a good, reforming Government, but capacity in the country is enormously weak.

It is not true that money is the problem for the UN or non-governmental organisations; it is getting the money and the assistance deployed on the ground. I am proud that our Department and my officials in our conflict and humanitarian affairs department are among the best in the world at moving rapidly. Lots of other countries go on television to pledge money, but it takes months to get it to Mozambique. We can provide money for as many helicopters as we can get into the theatre and are searching for them all around. Believe me: the problem is not money but organisation, helicopters, efficiency and getting food to people before many die.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Can the Secretary of State tell the House a bit more about the effect of the hurricane that hit the central provinces of Mozambique? Most of the BBC reporting has been on the flooding to the north and south of Maputo. Can she also say whether provision is being made and plans are being laid to provide the farmers with seeds and tools to replant their crops after the floods recede? That is necessary before the dry season sets in. They need to plant as soon as the floods recede.

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There was a cyclone and flooding is coming on the whiplash, back in from South Africa and Zimbabwe. Another storm is coming in from the sea and there is a danger of Cahora Bassa flooding. That is a disaster and so hard and unfair for Mozambique, which is being hit from both sides. It looks as though things will get very much worse. I can assure him that we and, I presume, others are preparing for the next phase in terms of seeds and tools. The main road has been damaged and Mozambique has hardly any infrastructure or roads. I have had meetings with my officials. My emergency officials are at work and the officials out in Mozambique are preparing for the next phase now.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): The Secretary of State will be aware that one of the responses of ordinary people up and down Britain to what they have seen on television is a desire to help. Is there anything that they can do? People want to contribute to the solution in some way when they see such horrors.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right—the British people are notoriously generous. Whenever there is a crisis, they want to contribute and do so in large and ever growing amounts. People can give money to the NGOs that I have mentioned, which are working on the ground—Save the Children Fund, ActionAid, World Vision and so on—and I believe that there is to be an appeal from the Disasters Emergency Committee. I am sure that the public will want to contribute as generously as they always do.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I too was in Mozambique last week with the Select Committee on International Development. May I say, unusually, that the Government's response was good? I particularly commend the work of the Secretary of State's officials in Mozambique, and of the two people seconded from the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Gilbert Greenall and Ian Howard-Williams, who did excellent work in co-ordinating the humanitarian relief.

The people of Mozambique had very little, and now many of them have much less. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that she will not reduce the aid that she has already given to Mozambique for purposes other than this catastrophe, especially for the work on HIV and AIDS prevention in that country?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his tribute to my officials. This country has a reputation as one of the fastest to respond to disasters, because officials in my Department work day and night and have good response systems. We are all entitled to be proud of them.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will not reduce our growing aid programme. Mozambique is a very poor country with a frail administrative capacity and a weak infrastructure. At the moment it has reserves, because it is having to strengthen the capacity of its systems to be able to spend money on the ground to reach people all over that desperately poor country. We have a growing programme, and I can increase it as the money can be spent.

We must review the position once Mozambique is over the disaster so that reconstruction can begin. We have committed resources and we can spend more than Mozambique can absorb at the moment. I assure the hon. Gentleman that that will continue to be the case.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that a parliamentary delegation from Mozambique came to this country last year under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and visited Burnley. Members of that delegation underlined the points that she has made about the difficult problems that their country is facing after a civil war that lasted many years.

Mozambique is the newest member of the Commonwealth. Are Commonwealth countries responding positively to deal with the immediate crisis and to help to save lives now, to cope with the immediate aftermath of the crisis to which my right hon. Friend referred, and to aid its

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

economy and help to solve the on-going debt problem? The Commonwealth, in addition to this country and South Africa, should respond positively.

Clare Short: Mozambique is a proud member of the Commonwealth, and, I think, the only member that was not colonised by Britain. The Queen visited Mozambique recently and was given an enormously warm reception. The Commonwealth is not a large donor of emergency assistance. The Commonwealth secretariat is good on human rights work, support for Parliaments and other such matters. I am sure that other Commonwealth countries will respond.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the needs are massive, and I am sure that the world will rally to Mozambique. History has been hard on that country, and the Mozambique Government, in their brave efforts to take their country forward and to institute reform, deserve all the support they can get.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): May I add my good wishes to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff in Maputo? They are a first-rate team who are working in conditions that are difficult and dangerous for them as well as for the people of Mozambique.

Those of us who went to Mozambique at the end of last year to scrutinise the elections came back with mixed feelings of hope and despair: some hope because the elections were, by and large, fair and democracy looked set fair, and some despair that poverty may undermine the democratic process. That was before the floods.

It is clear that the people of Mozambique are facing real threats of dysentery and cholera, and the food crop for this year is likely to be entirely wiped out. One of the biggest problems faced day in, day out are land mines. Those mines will have moved in the floods, and no one will have any idea where they are, so agriculture will be incredibly dangerous. This must be the time for the right hon. Lady to talk immediately to her hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces with a view to getting out there the engineering capacity to cope with this crisis—not just in the next two or three weeks, but in the next two or three months and perhaps the next two or three years.

Clare Short: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about Foreign Office staff in the area. Our high commissioner has given an excellent lead, and is dedicated to the provision of support for Mozambique.

Although Mozambique is a very poor country, it is a very impressive country. A vicious civil war, partly fed by apartheid South Africa, has now turned to democracy. People are no longer killing each other, and there is a Parliament with a Government and an Opposition. That is a remarkable achievement for such a desperately poor country, but its democracy will be under strain as a result of this growing disaster. As I have said, we will do all we can to help with reconstruction of the infrastructure, and the provision of food and seeds.

It is true that land mines are a problem, but at the request of the Mozambique Government, the United Kingdom is leading the effort in Zambesia province, which was one of the centres of the fighting during the civil war. I am pleased to say that when I was there, nearly a year ago, the mines had basically been cleared. We have left a small team in the area, because some mines always remain in bushes and so on, as the hon. Gentleman suggests; but I do not think that it is flooded. When a war ends, it is possible to clear land mines.

I will of course consult the Ministry of Defence further about what more we can do, but if our own forces are not nearby, that is not always the best way in which to help. If they are in the region and in the theatre, it is best for them to help immediately, but it is not generally useful to bring them in from far away during a later phase of a disaster.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): My right hon. Friend said that this was more a question of immediate organisation than of finance. Does she agree, however, that there may well be thousands of small boat owners who are relatively poor and whose boats could be put to use, but who will need recompense for their loss? A few weeks down the line, it will be a question of providing more money for that purpose. Is my right hon. Friend confident that international financial resources will be available?

Clare Short: At present, 100,000 people are stranded, and we have nine helicopters with winches. We need boats to convey food and water, and to get people out. The situation is turbulent, and the conditions are currently dangerous for boats. What we need are bigger boats.

Many people have lost everything—their home and all their property. Those are terrible losses, but we must ensure that people do not lose their lives. Of course there will be further losses and the reconstruction effort will be massive. In the face of emergencies such as this, there is always—understandably—a call for money, but we must provide help on the ground now while people are still alive, to prevent them from dying and make them safe. Such organisation is not a resource problem: the UK can find more money and other countries have committed money. That is not a difficulty at this stage.

Madam Speaker: Order. When the Secretary of State turns her head away from the microphone, the recording is lost.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Secretary of State know the location of the nearest United States navy carrier group? If it could be of any use, has she interceded—or will she intercede—with her United States opposite number?

Clare Short: I do not normally monitor the location of the United States navy, but I will ask someone to find out. USAID is engaged, but I have heard no talk of deployment.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Is the Secretary of State confident that the Ministry of Defence and other armed forces Ministries have heard her plea for more helicopters? They are clearly available to the armed forces in many countries, not just ours, and they should be sent as quickly as possible. Can the Secretary of State ensure that that happens?

Will the Department also look at the reasons for the cyclone and the flooding, and decide whether there is not a case, in the longer term, for giving more serious

consideration to the need for reafforestation of much of the hinterland of both river systems, as well as a better system to give early warning of cyclones hitting the coast of Africa? There is a very good cyclone warning system in the Caribbean and the north Atlantic.

Clare Short: I will certainly talk more to my Ministry of Defence colleagues. We will consider where helicopters can be brought into theatre, but we have already discussed that, and currently they are too far away to get there quickly.

I have asked the question: are we having more cyclones and flooding? Everyone understands that global warming implies more and more such events throughout the world and more such disasters, but the advice that I have had from my officials is that it is not so much that more disasters are taking place, but that more and more people are living on frail, dangerous land, so that the number of people who are hurt by disasters is becoming greater and greater.

I do not think that deforestation is a problem in Mozambique. It is in many other countries. But I agree with my hon. Friend that we need better early warning and emergency response systems, particularly in countries that are prone to disasters. Clearly, there will be lessons for Mozambique after the disaster is over.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I accept my right hon. Friend's argument that organisation is what is required and that money is not an immediate issue, but it is obviously an issue in the long term—some of the points have just been made—and it has been an issue for Mozambique in the past.

In that context, there is growing demand in the House for some consideration of the Tobin tax: a tax on international capital speculation. Is it not time to move forward on that matter to ensure that problems such as Mozambique's can be tackled and handled in future?

Clare Short: A lot of money will be needed for the reconstruction of Mozambique, but Mozambique has frail capacity. It needs—it is doing it—to build the capacity of its administrative system, so that it can deliver reconstruction and spend the resources that are available. We and others have a growing resource to provide and Mozambique has reserves that it will, I hope, be able to spend very quickly, once the disaster has resolved itself.

The Tobin tax is a very interesting proposal, but if we are ever to get there it will take time, as all the countries of the world will have to agree to impose the tax. Although it is an attractive idea, how long will it take to achieve international consensus to introduce it? It is worth looking at, but in the meantime, we need to deploy the £50 billion in the worldwide Overseas Development Administration more effectively, and persuade our publics to put more into backing good reformers such as Mozambique, so that we can help the poorest countries in the world to grow out of poverty, which they could with more support.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Like many hon. Members, I pay tribute to the courage of the Mozambique people in dealing with the problems. In the recent election, one driver who was trying to deliver ballot boxes in Sofala province found that the whole of a road had been swept away by a very short, sharp shower. When we talk about frail infrastructure, we are talking about communities that are often completely cut off from other communities; certainly, every year, Sofala is cut for months at a time.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the longer term, the banked railway system, which was destroyed in the civil war, will be vital to the reconstitution of Mozambique's infrastructure? Will she give the House an assurance that she recognises that and that the Government will do whatever they can to ensure that the infrastructure in Mozambique will be much more proof against such events than it has been in the past?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. Mozambique is a very large country with lots of land and virtually no roads. Many people live in desperate poverty and cannot get their produce to market or their children to school, or reach the health facilities that there are. We are working in Zambesia province to create local capacity to build rural roads. We need more of that throughout Mozambique, so that the economy can be built up. Roads are needed so that people can grow crops and increase their incomes. We are focusing on that.

On the railway, I do not have any detailed expert knowledge, but we are working with the World bank to help Governments to put in place feasibility studies, regulatory systems and so on, so that countries such as Mozambique can attract private sector investment. They need big investment in infrastructure to improve their economic development.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Could we hark back to the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn)? The erosion is not taking place in Mozambique itself. The trouble starts in Zambia, Zimbabwe and, above all, South Africa, with much irresponsible felling. Do not the South Africans have a moral responsibility, as their rather callous use of forests has caused much of the problem in the first place?

Clare Short: I defer to my hon. Friend's expertise, although I do not know whether my natural resource advisers would agree with his analysis. There is no doubt that some of the flood waters are coming from Zimbabwe and South Africa. As we all understand, however, there has been a major change of Government in South Africa. Therefore, if there has been irresponsible felling, the current South African Government are not responsible for it. We have to help all the Governments in the region to gain the capacity to prevent disasters, to restore the environment and to overcome the type of environmental degradation caused by irresponsible felling.

As I said, I did a careful analysis of events in central America. That analysis revealed that events there were less a matter of disasters being more frequent, and more a matter of ever more people living on very frail lands. Those people were therefore terribly vulnerable when there was a disaster. We have to act on both those issues.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Is my right hon. Friend genuinely convinced that—in the light of recent experiences, and certainly in the light of the past five or 10 years—the United Nations is capable of dealing with emergencies? Should it not now reprofile some of its

[Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours]

current budgets and money? What does she think of the idea of emergency task forces, which was pressed by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge)?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the administrative capacity and efficiency of the United Nations is wanting. As he will know, however, Kofi Annan is leading on trying to make the UN's systems more efficient. Those systems—which were built to cope with the cold war and all the divisions in the international system—are ponderous and bureaucratic. However, we are now living in a different world, and the systems need to be much more efficient and speedy. We need major improvements throughout.

We have been working to strengthen the United Nations emergency system—including the UNDAC team—that has been developed to move into countries such as Mozambique and to help those countries to call on international assistance. We think that that work is going well. However, my hon. Friend is generally right to say that the UN system needs lots of help to be much more efficient. It is not as good as it should be.

Business of the House

4.6 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With the leave of the House, I should like to make a short business statement about the business for Wednesday 1 March.

The business will now be, first, a motion to approve the Fifth Report of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges; followed by Second Reading of the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill; followed by Second Reading of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill [HL]. That is to be followed, at 7 o'clock, by an Opposition Day [6th Allotted Day, first part], when there will be a debate entitled "Tax Cuts and Public Services", in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Opposition have no difficulty with that change of business, but I should like to ask two quick questions. First, if for whatever reason the House has inadequate time to debate either or both of the two Government Bills by 7 o'clock, am I right to assume that the Government will not seek to secure a Second Reading of one or both Bills? Am I also right to assume that the Government will not suspend the 10 o'clock rule?

Secondly, will the Leader of the House say who—in the absence, on ill-health grounds, of the Chairman of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges—will be moving the motion on the Committee's report?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks that it will not be possible to deal with any of that business, nor can I give him any undertaking that the business will not be proceeded with after 10 o'clock. He also asked who will deal with the business on the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. I anticipate that, in the circumstances of the Chairman's ill health, the deputy Chairman will deal with it.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Today's Order Paper contains a suggested amendment, tabled by me, to the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill. It deals with a matter of concern to teachers across the country, but has not been debated by the House at any point in the Bill's progress, in either the previous or the current Session. Will the Leader of the House provide, at this late stage—today—for a debate on that important matter?

Madam Speaker: Order. If the Leader of the House wishes to respond to that point, of course she must do so. However, the point deals with a matter that was not included in her business statement, and the hon. Gentleman was rather mischievous in raising it. A business statement is a business statement, and it did not deal with today's business.

ROYAL PARKS (TRADING) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 90 (Second Reading Committees), That the Bill be referred to a Second Reading Committee.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

Defence White Paper

[Relevant documents: First Report, Session 1999–2000, on the OCCAR Convention, HC 69, and the Government's response thereto, HC 224; Second Report, Session 1999–2000, on the Ministry of Defence Annual Reporting Cycle, HC 158; Sixth Report, Session 1998–99, on the Reserves Call-out Order 1999 and Progress of Territorial Army Restructuring, HC 860, and the Government's response thereto, HC 220 of Session 1999–2000; Seventh Report, Session 1998–99, on the Strategic Defence Review: Defence Medical Services, HC 447, and the Government's response thereto, HC 221 of Session 1999–2000; Eighth Report, Session 1998–99, on the Committee's Major Procurement Projects Survey: The Common New Generation Frigate Programme, HC 544, and the Government's response thereto, HC 222 of Session 1999–2000; and Ninth Report, Session 1998–99, on Defence Research, HC 616, and the Government's response thereto, HC 223 of Session 1999–2000.]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [22 February], That this House approves the 1999 Defence White Paper (Cm 4446).—[*Mr. Hoon.*]

4.9 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Doubtless your office will have told you about this. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) is unlikely to be able to be here. What is the technical situation regarding moving the amendment?

Madam Speaker: The mover does not have to have his name attached to the amendment. Any hon. Member can move the amendment, but I note that the hon. Gentleman has already spoken in the debate, so it will have to be someone who is to speak today.

4.10 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I pay tribute to the late hon. Member for Romsey, Michael Colvin. Hon. Members of all parties will, I know, be shocked and saddened by the news of the tragic fire at his home last week. The House will recall that he served with great distinction as the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence from 1995 until the general election in 1997, and continued to play an important role in the Committee after that. Indeed, hon. Members will recall that only last Tuesday, on the first day of this debate, he spoke for 25 minutes and remarked that he had been sorry to leave the Committee. We are all saddened that his contribution is lost not only to the Committee but to the House, and our thoughts are with his family.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): With your indulgence, Madam Speaker, I would like to follow that up and say how shocked and horrified Conservative Members were to see the pictures and to understand, finally, by the weekend, that Michael Colvin and his wife, who were both much liked in the party, had perished in the fire. It is especially poignant for me as I listened with interest to his speech and had a small conversation with him afterwards about some points that he raised and also about his hopes and desires for defence and his involvement in it, notwithstanding the fact that he was no longer to be on the Select Committee.

I agree entirely with the Minister's comments. Michael Colvin was liked and respected throughout the House, and especially by his friends and colleagues. During the past few days I have read in newspapers that he never made it to ministerial office, as though that were some badge of dishonour. I am sure that it was not meant like that, but I want to say for the record that, for us in the House and for the general public, being a Back Bencher who is good at the job is just as important as being a Minister, if not more so. That is a badge of honour that he takes with him.

Mr. Spellar *rose—*

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) *rose—*

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We are in debate, so the Minister must respond to one intervention before taking another. We must carry out our proceedings properly here.

Mr. Spellar: I am sure that the House fully endorses the comments of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith).

Mr. Campbell: On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I associate myself with the tributes that have been paid from both Front Benches. Michael Colvin was a man of great personal charm and distinction. I had the honour to serve with him on the Defence Committee for seven years, during which time I got to know both him and his wife. We will remember him in his prime last Tuesday. His passing is something that the whole House will regret very deeply.

Mr. Spellar: The late hon. Member for Romsey was prominent not only in the Defence Committee but in the Council of Europe, of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Davis) is also a prominent member.

Mr. Terry Davis: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. As he said, Michael Colvin was a member of the delegations to both the Council of Europe and the Western European Union. As leader of the delegation, I offer the sympathy of all its members to the family of Michael and Nichola Colvin.

Michael Colvin was highly respected in the House for his knowledge, expertise, experience and interest in defence matters. In recent years, as a member of our delegation, he had become equally respected at international level. Indeed, very recently he was elected the leader of federated group of Conservatives and Christian Democrats in the Western European Union Assembly. That was evidence of the respect in which he was held by the members of the Conservative and Christian Democrat groups. He was also widely respected by members of other political groups.

I served on the same Committees as Michael Colvin and we got to know each other through travelling together to meetings. He embodied the saying that, although people on the other side of the House may be opponents, they are not enemies. The whole delegation will also miss Nichola Colvin, who often came with Michael to our

[Mr. Terry Davis]

meetings and took a great interest in the work of the delegation. She was a lively person and we shall all miss both of them very much.

Mr. Spellar: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State opened the debate, he outlined how we are moving ahead on the objectives of the strategic defence review. I shall fill in some of the details, describing the problems that we have faced and the considerable efforts that we have made to rectify them, as well as relating how they tie in with the Government's broader objectives and how we are breaking down departmental barriers to achieve real results.

I had hoped—and still hope—to spend some time dealing with personnel issues and highlighting our successes with our policy for people. However, I shall have to divert briefly to deal with some of the nonsense generated by a media facing a dearth of news last week with Parliament in recess.

Let us be clear that there are problems with some programmes. Let us also be clear that the structure that we inherited in 1997 was not satisfactory for dealing with them and did not get the best out of the Ministry or industry. That is why we brought in smart procurement, which is starting to have an impact. It does not resolve all the problems overnight, but let me put them in perspective.

We have had a number of reports identifying weaknesses with the SA80, some of which date back to the Gulf war. There have been a number of modifications, but that is the case with all weapon systems, including the much-vaunted M16. We await a report shortly on further improvements after extensive tests and shall move rapidly on those findings, but the SA80 is still a capable and particularly accurate weapon.

On Tornado upgrades, we all recognise that there is a constant battle between improved systems to detect planes and improvements to avoid detection. That can involve new planes or upgrades to existing planes. The systems work at the edge of electronics and information technology. It is true that the new GR4 needs more work to integrate its system. It is not true that we do not have a capability to use smart bombs. We do, as we demonstrated in Kosovo.

We are also addressing problems with the Army's battlefield communications systems. We have never denied that the existing Clansman radio system was past its sell-by date. There have been a number of reports on that, including from the Defence Committee. It was an excellent system when it was introduced in the 1970s, but it is long overdue for replacement by the Bowman system.

Bowman was 75 months late when we inherited it in 1997 and slipping further by the day. That is the sort of slippage that smart procurement is designed to avoid. We have stopped the culture of delay and slippage and have managed to reverse some of the delay on Bowman, bringing forward the delivery of the personal radio element of the project. We applied a specific, short-term solution for operations in Kosovo by procuring state-of-the-art communications systems for our forces off the shelf. That ensured that our forces had the capability that they needed at the time that they needed it.

We are not just solving existing problems. Our closer partnership with industry, through smart procurement, has enabled us to save money that can be spent on new and increased capability for our armed forces. The Government have embarked on a massive programme of investment in new, world-beating equipment. In the past few months we have announced the construction of the airborne stand-off radar system, early development contracts for future aircraft carriers and destroyers, more Seawolf and Rapier air defence missiles, an upgrade of engines for the RAF Harrier aircraft and the development of the new multi-role armoured vehicle. That amounts to £1.7 billion of investment. It is the clearest possible demonstration of our commitment to make sure that our armed forces are equipped to the highest standards.

That investment in world-class equipment—the envy of many other forces—will revolutionise our front-line capability. The Apache attack helicopter will transform the British Army's battlefield capability. The Challenger 2 tank is already doing so. Eurofighter will provide the RAF with a capability that it has previously only dreamed about when it enters service in 2002. Work has already started on the design of the future aircraft carriers, the first steel has been cut for the new Astute class nuclear-powered submarines and our attack submarines will be equipped with the Tomahawk land attack missile.

That is just the tip of the iceberg. Across the board, the Government are introducing new equipment that will revolutionise the reach, punch and mobility of our armed forces.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: When does the Minister expect to be in a position to announce the choice of missile for the Eurofighter?

Mr. Spellar: Shortly.

Then we had the nonsense about ships being tied up over Christmas. I should certainly hope that ships were tied up then, so that our sailors could spend that period with their families. It was also said that our ships had been told to travel slowly as a cost-saving measure. The Royal Navy has a responsibility to manage its fuel and public money carefully, and ships are instructed to travel at the most economic speed, as needs dictate. Those instructions are laid down in Queen's regulations, which state:

> Except when exercising, or where for other reasons a high speed is obligatory . . . the most economical speed . . . is to be employed when making passage from port to port or between harbour and exercise area.

Those instructions were last updated when the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) was Armed Forces Minister.

I want to make it clear to the House—and in particular to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and to the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton)—that no additional instructions on the speed of Royal Navy ships have been issued by the Government. No changes have been to monthly fuel allowances, nor to the normal travelling speeds of Royal Navy ships. However, I also assure the House that ships on operational tasks will always be allocated enough fuel, and will travel as fast as they need to.

Understandably, there has also been much in the media recently about the current situation in Kosovo. I know that the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) intends to

speak on that subject, Madam Speaker, if he catches your eye. We remain concerned about the continued level of violence and tension in Kosovo, and committed to securing a peaceful and fully integrated society. In consultation with the Foreign Office, we are providing 30 Ministry of Defence police officers to the international police force of the United Nations mission in Kosovo. That will be the first element of a total of 60 extra UK police officers, in addition to the 60 who are already serving with UNMIK.

I must also deal with the wildly alarmist media reporting today about the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. It is nonsense to suggest, as one of the tabloid newspapers did rather hysterically this morning, that it gives soldiers a new right to sue their commanding officers. Like anyone else in the country, members of the armed forces can sue someone—including their commanding officer, or the Ministry of Defence more generally—for false imprisonment. That right is already based in common law, not legislation, and is not newly introduced by the Bill.

We have approached the Armed Forces Discipline Bill in a way that upholds service discipline. The proposals in the Bill have been carefully developed, with the services, specifically for that purpose. We have made it clear that because of the need for operational considerations to remain paramount, the Bill has been designed to work in all circumstances. It also preserves the authority of the commanding officer.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way on the question of discipline. What are the circumstances surrounding the recent court martial involving Leading Radio Operator Mark Johnson, who was found not guilty of sexual harassment? Before the trial, the Ministry of Defence had agreed to pay compensation amounting to tens of thousands of pounds to the Wren involved in the incident. What sort of precedent does that set for armed forces discipline? What does the case say about the future interaction between discipline and the rights of armed forces personnel to take action outside the services?

Mr. Spellar: It would have helped if the hon. Gentleman had given me notice of the details of that question; I might then have been able to give a more considered reply. I shall give him it in writing.

Having been diverted to deal with media hype, I shall now turn to the main theme of my contribution this afternoon—how we are looking after our people.

This Government came into office determined to place people at the centre of British defence policy and planning. We did so because of what we ask of our service personnel—ultimately, we may require them to sacrifice their lives—and because, following the end of the cold war, defence had not been properly adapted to the realities that we face today. So we launched the strategic defence review, which quickly identified that, as a Government, we must get right the way we look after our single most important resource—our people.

The strategic defence review White Paper acknowledged that when it stated:

> The challenges of the future will make it even more critical that we are able to recruit and retain the brightest and best for the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence.

Hence, our policy for people remains our highest priority short of actual operations, because without the right people, we cannot achieve all the other things necessary to modernise Britain's defence. People are the bedrock of that capability. Without them, all the high-tech kit in the world will never fulfil its potential. Because service families are directly affected by what happens in the front line, we are doing more for them too.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): At the end of the previous debate on defence last Tuesday, my hon. Friend was cut off in full flow. He had been about to reply to the points that I had raised, and I hope that by the end of today, he will be able to reply properly, because they involve people, and that is what matters.

Mr. Spellar: It sounds extremely painful. As I was going to say to my hon. Friend at 7 pm last Tuesday, I take on board his points on the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, Fleetlands. I am looking into the matter; we will be in correspondence with him about it and also with the representatives of the workers concerned.

Last year, 25,000 people joined the armed forces, making it the best recruiting year since the beginning of the decade. That achievement was all the more remarkable, given that it took place against the backdrop of a strong and healthy economy and the lowest unemployment figures for 20 years, thanks to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Some 16,000 people joined the Army, some 5,000 joined the Royal Navy and approximately 4,500 joined the Royal Air Force. That is a tribute to all those involved in recruitment.

Recruiting people is good, but retaining them for longer remains a challenge. Last year, because we recognised the impact that the operation in Kosovo had on the home lives of service personnel, we introduced further enhancements to the operational welfare package.

We increased the free telephone allowance for people deployed on operations from 10 minutes to 20 minutes per week, having already raised it from 3 minutes the previous year, and we have dramatically increased e-mail availability. We have also taken significant steps to ensure that the telephones actually work.

We introduced guaranteed periods of leave for those returning from operations. This means that personnel in the Army who have been away on operations for longer than six months will get 20 extra days leave when they get home.

We have been determined, too, to modernise the facilities available for our personnel when they are away from home. However, the key to retention is also keeping commitments at a manageable level. Wherever possible, we are reducing overseas commitments as rapidly as we can. We have already brought back significant numbers of personnel from Kosovo and Bosnia—more than 10,000 in all. In the Gulf, we have more than halved the number of personnel deployed during the past year or so, from a peak of 3,000 to 1,200. In the Falklands, we have reduced the size of the garrison from more than 2,000 to about 1,650.

We have a trial under way to help get satellite television to ships at sea that are fitted with the appropriate receiver equipment. In addition, we are planning to upgrade the communication infrastructures in Portsmouth and Devonport naval bases so that Sky and terrestrial television are available to all ships and submarines alongside.

[Mr. Spellar]

Internet e-mail facilities are now fitted to all capital ships, frigates and destroyers and a growing number of minor war vessels. On average, aircraft carriers receive up to 1,000 messages a week from families and friends of the ships' companies. That has been very well received; it is clearly a significant growth area, to the extent that internet terminals have been installed in all naval community centres and sailors and families advice bureaux, so that relatives without computers at home can exchange e-mails with those serving in ships equipped with the facility.

Another important, and sometimes forgotten, aspect of retention is recognising the impact that service life can have on families. That is why we set up the service families task force, because not all the issues that we would like to address fall within the control of my Department. The service families task force is about working closely with other Departments in a joined-up way to address the particular problems of access to education, health and employment experienced by service families because of their necessarily mobile life style. In particular, I pay tribute to my fellow Ministers in other Departments who have provided valuable impetus to progress.

The task force has already achieved some notable successes. In education, the needs of service children are now recognised in the code of practice on schools admissions. As a result, Service Children's Education, a Ministry of Defence agency, is now in attendance on 16 local admission forums in areas where there are large numbers of service children.

In health, 24 incentive schemes have been established to encourage national health service dentists to take on service families as patients in areas where they had great difficulty in finding places in NHS practices.

In employment, we have made it easier for service spouses to claim jobseeker's allowance where they have to give up their job when their service partner is posted.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Will the Minister report on the number of persons recruited for the defence medical services and the number who have left, or have given notice of premature, voluntary retirement, since the Government proposed, in December 1998, to close the only tri-service hospital at Haslar?

Mr. Spellar: The Under-Secretary of State for Defence will deal with that point in his reply.

We have also streamlined claiming procedures for child benefit for service families moving to and from Northern Ireland, to reduce the delays that some had experienced. I am pleased to announce that the Department for Education and Employment is taking action to ensure that the children of service personnel will now be eligible for student loans, with effect from the academic year beginning in September 2000, irrespective of where their family is, or has been, posted.

We are determined that our forces should be more representative of the society that they exist to defend, and should be able to recruit the best across the board. I am pleased to report to the House that the armed forces continue to make good progress in equal opportunities.

The three services are working hard to convince more young people from ethnic minority communities of the advantages offered by service careers; recruitment figures are rising significantly. More than 70 per cent. of the posts in the Navy and Army, and 96 per cent. of the posts in the RAF are open to women. I am sure that hon. Members were pleased by the positive media coverage of the recent open day of the Household Division at Windsor, at which the Army was able to announce a big rise in recruits from ethnic minority backgrounds.

I now turn to the contribution our reserve forces make to operations. They have consistently provided about 10 per cent. of the manpower for the UK contribution to NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia, since operations commenced in December 1995. At present, more than 800 reserve forces personnel are engaged on operational duties in the former Yugoslavia and at other locations at home and overseas. All have been volunteers, and many have completed more than one tour of duty. I am pleased that they speak highly of the reserve mobilisation facility at Chilwell and of the services that it provides.

When I visited British forces personnel in Bosnia at the end of January, I was able to meet a number of reservists, all of whom are making a valuable contribution, working hand-in-hand with our regular forces. They all told us that they found what they were doing worthwhile; it was also clear that their contribution is highly valued by their regular counterparts.

Only last week, 88 reservists returned from an operational tour of duty in Kosovo with the Royal Green Jackets. Those soldiers came from an enormously wide range of occupations—a chauffeur, a postman and a sawmill worker to name but three—and all had contributed fully to the great success enjoyed by the Royal Green Jackets in doing their difficult job in Kosovo. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in thanking all those involved.

In our debate last week, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green suggested that, because a high proportion of the members of the Territorial Army deployed in the Balkans are infantry, our decision on the future size of the TA infantry was clearly wrong.

In fact, the proportion of infantry required in the Balkans is slightly lower than the proportion of TA infantry in the TA as a whole. The reason why the proportion of infantry actually mobilised is higher is because of the shortage of other, more specialised arms. Thus, rather than showing our decision on the TA to be wrong, the hon. Gentleman demonstrated why we were right to increase the emphasis in the TA on the more specialised arms.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): That is an extraordinary argument to make on infantry, because the Government cut the engineers in the TA by an enormous and equivalent proportion. The engineers are doing operational tours of six months on and six months off because of the demands on them in the Balkans.

Mr. Spellar: We should look at the increase in the other specialised arms—where we need to focus our emphasis and to direct equipment.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister reconsider his figures, in view of the fact that he has stated

that 40 per cent. of the soldiers in the TA and reserves deployed to the Balkans in the first nine months of last year were infantry? As he knows, the infantry form only about a fifth of the whole TA. Will he also tell us why the signals, whom he quoted as an example of expansion, have experienced a substantial cut in the number of their permanent staff?

Mr. Spellar: The emphasis on equipment is moving towards specialities such as the signals. The hon. Gentleman realises the difficulties that we have in the full-time forces and in the reserves because of the expansion of the communications industry. We need to focus on the specialised arms because we need to redress the balance. His point demonstrates the validity of our case rather than the contrary.

Of course, it is not only the Army that relies on the support of its reservists. There are currently some 200 reservists working on full-time reserve service alongside their Royal Navy counterparts, filling gaps and relieving stretch both ashore and afloat. Often they are the face of the Royal Navy in the community.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Spellar: No, because I fear that we shall over-emphasise one point. Certainly, during the November ceremonies, reservists fulfil the role that I have described at innumerable sites all over the country.

Mr. Duncan Smith: It is a bit rich for the Minister to mention something that I said in last week's debate but fail to deal with exactly the same point when it was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier). I said that 40 per cent. of the Territorial Army's deployment had been infantry and the Minister knows that that figure does not lie with the proportion of infantry in the Territorial Army. Will he now answer the point that my hon. Friend and I have made?

Mr. Spellar: The point is that we need a higher percentage of the reserve forces who come from the specialised arms. We very much value the contribution made by the infantry, but we want a greater contribution to come from the specialised arms. That is precisely the point and that is why we shifted the emphasis in the TA more towards the specialist arms rather than to the infantry.

Mr. Tom King: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Spellar: No.

I now come to the Air Force. We have recently concluded trials of reserve aircrew as part of our strategy for introducing reservists to the front line. We have sought to ensure that their training and specialist skills are relevant for the front line. I am pleased to tell the House that the trials have been a considerable success and that 57 of the 72 reservists trialled achieved a level of aircrew competency appropriate for the front line. That is no mean feat. Those aircrew will help to address any shortages of regular crews for peacetime and operational tasks. We have implemented schemes to employ reservists on Hercules and Puma aircraft, and work is in hand to employ reserve aircrew on all other aircraft types.

We do not rely only on the willingness of individual members of the reserve forces and their families to volunteer for service. We also depend upon the support of their employers. We will continue to work to secure and keep their support. To date, more than 6,000 employers have committed themselves to be supportive employers. We recognise that it is not always easy for a business when a key member of staff is away, and we are most grateful to those employers who are able to release their staff.

Of course, employers also get a good deal from employing reservists. Their military training gives them skills and qualities that benefit the companies for whom they work. Both employers and the Territorial Army Voluntary Reserve Auxiliary Committee were fully consulted about the TA mobilisation study.

I have already paid tribute to the excellence of our front-line forces. However, we all recognise that they could not do their job without thoroughly reliable logistic support. Our armed forces must be provided for across their full range of requirements in the field.

The strategic defence review concluded that we need

> a better, more streamlined, and more joined up way of providing support to the front line

and, since the newly created chief of defence logistics took on budgetary and management control of the current single service logistics areas 11 months ago, excellent progress has been made in creating a new unified logistics organisation.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I agree with my hon. Friend that the logistics systems that the British armed forces use are very efficient and effective. Has he considered how effective they can be in providing humanitarian assistance, which is increasingly demanded around the world? In particular, what sort of assistance can the British armed serves give rapidly to Mozambique?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend will recall the considerable assistance that we were able to provide in Belize and Guatemala because we happened to have forces in theatre in that region. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development outlined today, there is a problem about the distance to be travelled and the time scale for providing help to Mozambique. Discussions regularly take place between our two Departments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and international agencies, and co-ordination and communication have improved considerably. However, we should recognise that constraints are imposed by the physical location of equipment.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The Minister speaks of constraints, but are they not largely of the Government's making? If they had fulfilled their intention of acquiring heavy lift cargo aircraft for the Royal Air Force, the helicopters could perfectly well have been put on board and been in theatre in Mozambique within 24 hours.

Mr. Spellar: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, with his experience, knows that even in that context the matter would not be that simple. We are considering heavy air lift. We also have vessels in the Gulf, but I am advised that it would take some six days sailing to get them into

[Mr. Spellar]

the area. In Belize, we were able to take ready rapid action, which was welcome, because we had assets in the area. He would recognise that that is not always the case and rapid reaction is not always feasible.

The new unified logistics organisation will assume full responsibility for logistic support to all three services on 3 April this year. Its goal is to free up resources from the logistic area while still delivering first-class support, to help to pay for increased front-line capability.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Minister confirm that the White Paper establishes that the SDR contained financial flaws that are now coming home to roost? The commitments that the Government have made do not match up with the financial resources available to the MOD to deliver on them.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with that interpretation. I am describing the way in which we are delivering SDR precisely by using our resources and assets more efficiently and effectively to provide investment for our armed forces.

The chief of defence logistics has inherited a dedicated and professional work force. He is now building on that solid foundation to provide logistics worthy of our armed forces in the 21st century. The main opportunities offered by the creation of the defence logistics organisation will come from managing on a defence-wide basis. That will allow a new, defence-based approach to the delivery of outputs. Defence logistics means one inventory, one management system, one business improvement programme and one process, with joined-up systems to support joint forces. Achieving all that must enhance, and not undermine, operational support during the transition process.

I shall highlight some of the considerable progress that has already been made since the creation of the defence logistics organisation. After less than 12 months, the DLO is driving forward a major improvement programme under the umbrella of the lean support chain initiative. That programme not only incorporates the best of the previous single services joint support initiatives but takes forward a number of new ones.

Lean support will introduce a step change in stock holding and in repair and maintenance practices. More than 40 business improvement projects are envisaged, half of which have already been started. Key initiatives include adopting a vendor-managed inventory for vehicle parts, a more systematic review of repairable holdings and development of joint relationships with suppliers to drive down costs.

Stock holdings are also being reviewed with an intention to move towards a demand-led system. That will be based on the assumption that stocks should be held only when they cannot be regenerated within the readiness time of the forces that they support.

Integrating similar systems will be a key part of making cost-effective support possible. Integration will provide for greater commonality of approach across the defence logistics area, enhancing efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the Minister explain why, in the drive for cost-effectiveness, his Department has for nearly 18 months stonewalled Repaircraft plc in my constituency, which has offered a far more effective means for the CVR tank life extension programme, and has refused to offer the company a chance to tender for a contract that has been given almost exclusively to Alvis Vehicles Ltd?

Mr. Spellar: I shall certainly look into that matter.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The Minister might have answered my letters by now.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Hon. Members cannot take a conversational approach to the debate.

Mr. Spellar: I do not recall sending a letter, but one may have been sent by one of my predecessors. I shall consider what progress can be made. We greatly value the contribution made by small and medium-sized enterprises within the defence industrial base. Equally, however, we consider arrangements for through-life support, which often involve prime contractors—although they sometimes employ smaller contractors to fulfil part of the work. We shall need to look at the matter, and I undertake to write to the hon. Gentleman on it.

We are achieving the provision of more effective support through application of sensible processes and common practices across defence logistics. The defence logistics organisation is also a major player in the implementation of smart procurement. Increasing emphasis is being placed on whole-life cost estimates, with the DLO pioneering an approach that will provide better advice to the integrated project team and MOD decision makers.

We need joined-up information and joined-up systems. Those are essential to the delivery of the best possible service to the front line, implementation of lean logistics, success in driving down the level of stocks held, and achievement of delivery of stocks as far forward in the supply chain as possible. That underlies the MOD's determination to drive forward the e-business agenda and to be at the forefront of modernising government.

If we are to support our front-line forces in the way that they deserve, we will need steadily to transform our business, join up the MOD's internal business electronically, replace inefficient paper-based systems and deliver a lean logistics support chain. We need to create a single view of our inventory, track assets to and from the front line and around the repair loop, deliver material exactly where and when it is needed, and create transparency in identifying where in the supply chain value is added.

That is why we place such a strong emphasis on the introduction of the defence electronic commerce service—DECS—which will be provided as a commercially managed service under a public-private partnership. We hope to announce our preferred partner in the next month, and to start to roll out our programme in the summer. DECS will provide us with an electronic gateway to our trading partners—indeed, it will be the very environment in which we shall share business with them—so that the MOD presents a modern e-business face to the world.

Such services will help to fulfil one of the SDR's central themes: to make every pound spent on defence count towards our front-line capability, which in turn contributes to defending Britain's interests worldwide. We should not forget that we can do that within a budget of only 7 per cent. of the public purse. There has been too much waste in the past and we are putting that right, not least through smart procurement and the improvements to logistics that I have mentioned.

Let us not forget what the money buys us. It buys us world-class armed forces which, man for man and woman for woman, are the best in the world. It buys us state-of-the-art equipment—such as Tomahawk, Apache and Eurofighter—which is the envy of most other forces. It buys us the ability to intervene as a force for good throughout the world, such as in the Balkans, the Gulf and East Timor. It gives us confidence that our interests and our people are protected around the globe 24 hours a day, 365 days a year—indeed, 366 days this year. That represents an outstanding achievement and says much about all personnel in the Ministry of Defence—service and civilian alike.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be the Armed Forces Minister and to be part of a ministerial team that is delivering good management of our defence. That is why I have no hesitation in commending the White Paper to the House.

4.48 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Before I say anything else, it is right for me to observe—it will not have escaped the attention of many hon. Members on both sides of the House—that something is profoundly wrong. The Secretary of State for Defence is not here, and has absolutely no excuse for not being so because the Government decide the legislative programme. Moreover, his absence follows a discourtesy on the first day of our debate last week, when the Treasury Bench was left bereft of any Defence Minister for certain periods, which brought forth a well-deserved rebuke from the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell).

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): Get on with it.

Mr. Davies: I will not get on with it; this matter is vital, not merely to defence but to the entire proceedings of our House and, indeed, to our constitution. Not a month—scarcely a week—goes by without a reminder of the contempt with which the new Labour Government treat Parliament. They have become so arrogant, so bloated with their enormous majority, that they no longer care what Parliament thinks or does.

It is clear that the Secretary of State for Defence has no interest in what might be said this afternoon by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, be they Back Bencher or Front Bencher. That is a disgraceful state of affairs. Unless we record our sense of outrage at how the House is being treated, the Labour Government will continue to get away with such behaviour.

Mr. Spellar: I might have expected that sort of approach from the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), whose views on Europe are known, but, given his views, I am sure that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) will be pleased to learn that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has had to attend a meeting today with his fellow European Defence Ministers. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is extremely important that my right hon. Friend is there to represent our interests, or has he already been taken over by his hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green?

Mr. Davies: The Minister has got it completely wrong, and I am amazed that the Labour Government have Ministers who are so unsure of their duties. Ministers' duties to the House of Commons take absolute priority over all other duties.

I have no doubt that the Secretary of State for Defence had considerable notice of the meeting in Portugal, which he apparently prefers to attend this afternoon. He could easily have had a word with his right hon. Friend the Leader of the House of Commons and rearranged today's debate. Perhaps these events are merely the product of new Labour incompetence: if so and if, at the last moment, the Secretary of State found himself caught short, he should at least have apologised to the House.

Mr. Tom King: May I reinforce my hon. Friend's comments? I complained officially about the timing of the debate, because it was most unsatisfactory that the first day should be on Tuesday and the second today. I was told that the timing could not be shifted, because it fitted in conveniently with Minister's other engagements and would enable them to attend.

Mr. Davies: My right hon. Friend underlines the sorry state of affairs to which the House has come after two and three quarter years of Labour government. In addition, I was pretty shocked to notice that the Minister for the Armed Forces would not take an intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), who is an extremely distinguished former Secretary of State for Defence. That, too, makes it absolutely clear that the Government do not want to listen to what Parliament has to say, especially not those Members of Parliament who know a great deal more about the subject than they do.

The right approach to the debate is to look at the strategic defence review itself. The first paragraph of the first chapter states:

> The Strategic Defence Review . . . By modernising and reshaping our Armed Forces to meet the challenges of the 21st century . . . will give our Services the firm foundation that they need to plan for the long term.

This country has a right to expect action that accords with those brave words. The events of the two and three quarter years of Labour government make it clear that those words are the ones by which the Government will be condemned.

Instead of creating a "firm foundation" for our armed forces by "modernising and reshaping" them, the Government are in the process of losing control over the important procurement programme. As the first day of our debate made clear, they are quite incapable of formulating any clear policy on two essential strategic matters: the ballistic missile issue and the future of Trident. In addition, they have committed themselves to a budgetary process, which, if continued, will mean that the armed forces face a diminishing flow of resources in years to come. That can only lead to the fatal emasculation of our defence capability.

[Mr. Davies]

I have said that the Government are in danger of losing control of the procurement programme. In spite of the complacent words uttered by the Minister for the Armed Forces this afternoon, I insist that my statement is strictly accurate. It is not my judgment—I have been in my present role for only three weeks. It is the judgment that emerges from the National Audit Office report into the defence procurement programme, which makes it clear that something nasty happened to the development of the procurement programme between 1997 and 1998. That is shown by a graph. The average delay in the 25 major procurement projects, which was 32 months in 1993 and which fluctuated but never went up or down by more than 10 per cent. from the mean until 1997, has risen since the Government came to office and is now 43 months—a rise of 20 per cent. and much the biggest rise in the series.

In case the Minister is inclined to argue that that is due to the fact that certain new projects have come into the programme and the comparison is therefore unjust, the National Audit Office anticipated that. Paragraph 3.9 on page 28 of the report states:

> For those 10 projects common to the 1993 and 1998 Reports, estimated slippage has risen from an average of 36 months to 57 months.

That represents an even worse state of affairs.

If the Minister is minded to argue that those are all technical issues and that Ministers cannot be expected to go into the workshops and work on the lathes, or go into the labs and sort out complicated technical problems—"Not our fault, guv"—the typical line from the Labour Government, let me quote to him from paragraph 3.11 of the report, which states:

> Since 1993, four factors have dominated delays: technical difficulties, budgetary constraints, project definition and the collaborative process . . . Comparison between years shows that all factors now give rise to more delay than they did in 1993, but that the "technical difficulties" factor has grown by only around 10 per cent., while the other categories show delay increasing by up to 100 per cent.

Those other categories are budgetary constraints, project definition—or rather, failure of project definition—and the failure of the collaborative process, all matters on which there has rightly been a great deal of press comment recently.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that between 1993 and 1997, the Conservative party was in government?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman had better read the document or listen to what I am saying. He will see that there were fluctuations in the delay, sometimes up and sometimes down, until 1997. The fluctuations were never more than 10 per cent. from the mean. After 1997, there was a qualitative jump. The hon. Gentleman cannot get away from that.

Moreover, the National Audit Office comments:

> In other manufacturing industries, "time to market" has generally shortened as new technology has facilitated design and development processes. Figure 17 shows no such trend is evident in defence procurement.

It is clear that there is a serious problem in defence procurement, and the Minister's complacency in his speech this afternoon was thoroughly unwarranted and inappropriate.

I shall deal with some of the matters that the Minister covered—for example, the SA80 rifle. It is true that the SA80 rifle has been around for a long time and was originally procured by a Conservative Government. A Conservative Government recognised that there were problems and, between 1995 and 1997, set out an investigation programme, the results of which were available to the present Government.

What have the Government done about it for the past two and three quarter years? Nothing at all, because apparently they consider the rifle a thoroughly satisfactory weapon. Only last week, when the Secretary of State for Defence graced the House with his presence, he described it as

> a capable and highly accurate weapon—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1393.]

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He might have referred to the Defence Committee report of June 1993—again, while the Conservatives were in government. That report stated:

> This delay could have had disastrous consequences and we look to the Ministry to ensure that it does not happen again.

Can the hon. Gentleman tell us what happened between 1993 and 1997?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. The project was originally conceived under the previous Labour Government. The great question is what this Government have done and whether they acknowledge that there is a problem since they took office in 1997. They appear to believe that there is no problem and that the rifle is a capable and highly accurate weapon. Last week, the Secretary of State said that it may have some problems in extreme conditions, but Kosovo does not constitute extreme conditions. It is not an arctic, super-hot or tropical area.

The Minister should listen to our troops, who have to use the SA80. I hope that the Minister read an article in *The Times* on Saturday, which quoted a 26-year-old lance corporal, who said of the SA80:

> To be honest, it is useless, it falls apart on you.

Another lance corporal, aged 23, agreed:

> There are terrible malfunctions. Everyone knows it is a weapon that you couldn't rely on in a real war.

The article continues:

> The British squaddies were frustrated because yesterday morning they were given an order not to discuss the SA80 with the press after revelations in *The Times* yesterday.

That is sinister. The article goes on:

> At first they refused to talk about the weapon, which was strange because the British soldiers in Kosovo usually have an opinion on everything. But by last night, they were ready to speak out. "It's weird, because in the past they always told us to say to the press what you think is true," a squaddie said. "This is the first time in Kosovo that they have told us not to talk to the press."

Clearly, the Government are extremely worried about the matter and are trying to prevent the views of our troops in Kosovo from being heard.

Does the Minister believe that *The Times* invented those quotations? If he believes that, he should say so. If *The Times* did not invent them, we are considering an extremely serious matter. The Minister should consider

what he will do about it. He should come to the House to explain the action that he will take instead of trying complacently to slither over the matter.

Mr. Spellar: Before the hon. Gentleman suffers a paroxysm of over-excitement and hysteria, I must point out that if the weapons system is so deficient, he should take up his criticisms with the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), who was formerly an Armed Forces Minister for a considerable period of time. The deficiencies, which are apparent in extreme heat and dust, were revealed during the Gulf war. There were questions about whether the deficiencies constituted systemic weaknesses or isolated problems. Perhaps it took too long to decide.

More recently, major work was undertaken between our experts and the manufacturers, Heckler and Koch. They are also working on a remediation programme, about which they will report. We are taking action, but if the hon. Gentleman believes that the weapons system is deficient, and not a capable and highly accurate system—as the Secretary of State rightly describes it—that has some problems, he is criticising the previous Administration.

Mr. Davies: It is a disgraceful abdication of responsibility for the Minister to claim that, although he is Minister for the Armed Forces, the problems lead to the door of previous Governments. As for my becoming excessively excited, does the Minister know what happens in battle to a soldier whose rifle jams? Is not that an appallingly serious consideration? We should take it extremely seriously and the Minister should tackle it. He should be in a position to come to the House to explain the measures that he will take to prevent such a tragic outcome.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman's position is extraordinary. If his accusations are justified, he is claiming that, between 1991 and 1997, his colleagues sent British troops into engagements with defective equipment. If that is what he is saying, he criticises the previous Administration. The system has considerable merits, but also deficiencies. We and the manufacturers are doing something about it.

Mr. Davies: So far, the Minister has completely failed to say what he is doing about that, but the House and the Army are entitled to know. Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State for Defence will tell us a little more when he sums up the debate.

Mr. Hancock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman later. I must continue, because the SA80 is one of the issues that have attracted an exceptional amount of media interest. There are many more. What about the Tornado GR4 upgrade programme? I wrote to the Secretary of State when the BBC broke the story last Wednesday, but of course I have had no response to my letter or to parliamentary questions on other procurement matters that I tabled some weeks ago. I shall set out the perfectly reasonable questions on this matter, to which Parliament is entitled to an answer.

Is there any truth in the BBC's report that £1 billion of taxpayers' money has been spent and that the effect has been not to upgrade but to downgrade the GR4s, because they cannot operate the laser smart bomb mechanism? When did those problems come to light? In the media last week, the Government appeared to say November 1998. Was that the moment when Ministers became aware of them? If so, what action have the Government taken since? After all, that was 18 months ago. Is a business plan in place to address the problem? If so, may we know what it is? Can we also be told the additional cost of remedying whatever deficiencies have emerged? Who will pay that—the taxpayer or the contractor? Those are straightforward questions.

Mr. Spellar *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I shall give way, but we do not want some new Labour gimmick, slogan or brush-off. We want serious, businesslike answers to serious questions.

Mr. Spellar: I hoped that I had done that in my opening remarks, but I shall amplify them. There is a constant battle between those on the ground who are trying to detect aircraft with radar systems and aircraft that are trying to avoid detection. Development is constant as technology advances. Therefore, to improve the aircraft's stealth capabilities, major complicated work is being undertaken to upgrade from GR1 status to GR4.

Mr. Davies: I know that.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman says he knows that, in which case his remarks are even more extraordinary. That work is at the edge of electronic and information technology. It is absolutely right that, towards the end of 1998, there were some difficulties in integrating the new radar systems and the thermal imaging and laser designation technology. As a result, the Ministry of Defence and the manufacturers have been working together on proposals to rectify them, and they believe that they are on the way to achieving that. The programme is still within the time frame and the budget of the original proposals.

Furthermore, we have always retained the GR1 capability for TIALD bombing, as we showed in Kosovo. At that time, had we reached a point at which there was a danger of not having sufficient aircraft as a result of the upgrade programme, we would have slowed down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suspect that the House is beginning to forget who is addressing it. These remarks are very interesting and I know that the question needs answering, but the Minister will remember that he is intervening.

Mr. Spellar: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

For that reason, the programme will be on time and within budget, as far as we can ascertain. It will deliver that capability, once we have the work done. That happens in upgrade programmes regularly.

Mr. Davies: The Minister is entirely to blame for last week's media outcry. Had he volunteered that information to the House, as he should have done, there would have

[Mr. Davies]

been no need for the press to cause such a great stir because we would have known the facts in advance. I hope that he takes that lesson on board.

Mr. Thomas Graham (West Renfrewshire) *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I am being generous, but I shall give way. Then I must press on.

Mr. Graham: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was interested in the point that he made about sending letters to the Ministry of Defence and not receiving a reply. As the Member of Parliament for West Renfrewshire, I represent Bishopton royal ordnance factory. I am sick and tired of writing letters to arrange a meeting to which Ministers do not reply. The Minister told me last week that I would have a meeting. It has been a full week since then, and hundreds of workers in Scotland still face the dole. Enough is enough. It is time that the MOD replied speedily to Members' letters.

Mr. Davies: We could hardly have had a more revealing intervention than that.

I shall move on to other procurement programmes that have not yet been the subject of a press outcry, but perhaps they should be. We may get some clear answers this afternoon—but maybe not. One of them is the TRACER programme. It is said that the United States has withdrawn from that programme. Is that correct? If so, where does that leave the TRACER project? Will we proceed with it ourselves, and if so, what will the incremental cost be? If not, what will we do about a new generation reconnaissance vehicle? What are the Government's plans?

This is an extremely important matter and, once again, Ministers are reluctant to give Parliament the facts and to give an account of themselves as they are required to do in a parliamentary system. We shall draw our own conclusions from the fact that the Minister is not leaping to his feet now to give me an answer.

What about BROACH? Will the Minister confirm that Lockheed Martin have been awarded a contract for the penetrating warhead for the US air force air-to-air cruise missile system, despite a 1998 memorandum of understanding with the Department of Defence that made it clear that British Aerospace was the preferred contractor? Is that true? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) seems to think that this is extremely funny. He seems to think that military procurement, the waste of taxpayers' money and the question whether all these elaborate promises in the document are a lot of eyewash are funny. I suppose that he is one of these new Labour politicians who think that one can survive on a diet of spin doctoring. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is a serious matter. We are discussing the future of our defence forces and the circumstances in which men and women wearing uniform will be exposed and at risk of their lives in combat.

Mr. Hancock: On the question of spin, I am interested in the spin that the hon. Gentleman attempted to put on the SA80. Is he aware that, in 1993, section and platoon commanders considered that, had the enemy put up more resistance in the Gulf, casualties would have been suffered because of weapons stoppages. The Conservative Government's response to the Defence Committee at that time was that:

> the criticisms were carefully investigated. It was concluded that stoppages were largely attributable to incorrect maintenance . . . Some units had not been employing the correct lubrication and cleaning procedures.

The hon. Gentleman and the Conservative Government accepted that cleaning materials were responsible for the gun going wrong. Is he seriously telling us that all the blame is now on the Labour Government's shoulders? That cannot be right.

Mr. Davies: We know perfectly well that, when the Government are really in trouble, their Liberal Democrat allies try to come to their rescue. That was a completely irrelevant intervention. I have already stated that that weapon had a number of problems that the Conservative Government addressed. In any case, even if that were not so, it is irrelevant to the responsibility that the present Government bear for the armed services of the nation and for the equipment procurement programme. If the Government wanted to argue that this was such a hopeless weapon that it should be junked, they could have done so when they came to power. Instead, they not only took over the programme, but they have gone round saying that this is a capable weapon. They believe in it, but the troops in the field clearly do not.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: No, I shall not give way at the moment.

New Labour and its Liberal Democrat allies may not want me to talk about BROACH, but I intend to do so. Is it true that a contract has been awarded to Lockheed Martin in breach of a memorandum of understanding with this country? Is it true that the performance specification was reduced at the last moment by Boeing and the Department of Defence to allow the Lockheed Martin weapon to compete? British Aerospace had, in good faith, been working for years on a more sophisticated double-stage warhead. It that true, or is it not?

Is it true that the Government themselves are so upset and humiliated that they have instructed Sir Robert Walmsley and our ambassador in Washington, Sir Christopher Mayer, to protest? They have not told Parliament about it, but apparently they are instructing our ambassador in Washington to make a great fuss. If it is true that we have been treated in this fashion, where does that leave the much-trumpeted agreement signed in Munich by the Secretary of State for Defence and the Department of Defence? Is it not worth the paper on which it is written, or is it a legally binding obligation on the United States Administration? Has it been ratified by that Administration? Has it been ratified by Congress? Let us have some answers on BROACH.

I could speak about a good many other procurement programmes, but I shall deal with just one: the joint strike fighter programme. I can see that the Minister for the Armed Forces is not enjoying this; he is trying to engage in a completely artificial conversation with his neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State, in the hope of getting out of answering my questions.

The joint strike fighter programme is extremely important. There is a rumour abroad that, although we shall be sharing the full range of our vertical take-off and landing and very short take-off and landing technology with the Americans, they will not be sharing the full range of their stealth technology for the aircraft with us, and the aircraft made available to us will therefore be stealthed to a lesser degree. In other words, our aircraft will be less effective, and our pilots more vulnerable, than their American counterparts. Is that correct, or is it not?

I warn the Minister that, if that is really the line that the Government intend to pursue, such invidious discrimination would be an obnoxious, humiliating and unacceptable solution.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am listening to all the questions that my hon. Friend is asking, to which he is receiving no answers. Is he aware that, like the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham), I wrote to the Ministry more than three months ago about a company in my constituency and its attempts to bid for a tender for a contract. I have still received no more than an acknowledgement from the Minister and his Department. Is that not yet another example of the way in which none of our complaints are treated seriously?

I cannot judge the cost to the Ministry, but I know that the contractor that it has chosen is charging more than £500 for each of the plastic straps, while my constituency company would charge only 54p. That is how lacking in smartness the Ministry's procurement programme is.

Mr. Davies: That was another revealing intervention, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for it.

Providing a firm foundation for national defence, which the Government have promised to do, means being absolutely clear about the key strategic issues of the future. Last Tuesday—and, indeed, in Defence questions—my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) made it plain that the Government do not know where they are going in regard to anti-ballistic missile defence. That is extraordinary, for a host of reasons. One is that this is one of the great issues of the moment; another is that we may be implicated directly in any United States ABM defence programme because of the Fylingdales facility. The third is that, most extraordinarily, the Secretary of State actually said during Defence questions on Monday:

the United States Administration have made it clear that one of the specific considerations that they will take into account—

in relation to ABM defence—

is the reaction and attitude of the allies.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1224.]

President Chirac has made absolutely clear where he stands on the issue, as was pointed out last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. The Government seem incapable of doing the same.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North) *rose*—

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Gentleman is going to tell us what his Government's attitude is to ABM defence, and what they are saying to the US Administration, I will give way to him. I see that he is not going to answer, so I am afraid that I am not giving way to him. However, I will give way to any Minister who cares to set the record straight.

Equally, my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) made it clear on Tuesday, the first day of the debate, that the Government are not playing straight with the country, or else are not clear in their own mind about their attitude to our nuclear deterrent. He asked the extremely pertinent question: are the Government still committed to the Kaufman doctrine, which came in when the Labour party abandoned unilateralism in the 1990s—the doctrine said that we would keep our nuclear weapons so long as anyone else kept theirs—or have they gone to something rather different?

The Ministers of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Members for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) and for Neath (Mr. Hain), used a very different formulation recently; it was also quoted in last week's debate. The hon. Member for Leicester, East said:

When we are satisfied with progress towards our goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons, we will ensure that British nuclear weapons are included in negotiations.—[*Official Report*, 24 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 36W.]

That is extremely different. It may be that the Government are prepared to give up our nuclear weapons while some other countries have nuclear weapons; that is the essence of it.

The Secretary of State for Defence made a slightly different formulation. He added the phrase, "give up our nuclear weapons without endangering our security interests," but that is a subjective, not objective, criterion. It means that, if a Minister determines that our security interests can allow us to give those weapons up, we will do so, so there is complete obscurity. There is complete muddle where there should, above all, be complete clarity. Deterrence depends on clarity and credibility, and it is one of the most primordial aspects of defence policy.

Not only is the Government's defence procurement policy in a mess; not only are they incapable of formulating clear strategic long-term policies, contrary to the promises that they glibly make in their documents, but they are presenting the country with a long-term budget plan for defence that makes it absolutely clear that they will be able to fulfil none of their aspirations.

The figures are graphically set out in the Library document on defence statistics, which shows that, in 1999–2000, the current financial year, defence spending in real terms will fall by 3.4 per cent; that next year it will fall by 0.1 per cent.; and that the year after, 2001–2002, it will fall by 1.8 per cent. There is that cumulative fall in the resources to be made available to defence in real terms.

There is an even bigger fall in the share of gross domestic product that goes on defence. By the end of the Labour Government's term of office, it will be down to 2.3 or 2.2 per cent., which is the European average. That includes countries such as Luxembourg, Denmark and Belgium, which are not famed for their enormous defence effort. That is something that the Government cannot get away from. They are trying to get away from it in the most bogus fashion. First, they say that there will be efficiency gains. That claim was completely exploded by the Defence Committee, which showed that the Government not only do not have a list of the supposed efficiency gains, but are trying to claim as an efficiency

[Mr. Davies]

gain—I think that the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) discovered it when he was on the Committee—the closure of RAF Ash. My hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) discovered during the Select Committee proceedings—which are all in the excellent report—that the Government were trying to claim, as an efficiency gain by them, savings from the closure of RAF Laarbruch by the previous Government under the "Front Line First" proposals. It is obvious that the efficiency gains are bogus.

Anyone with a business background will recognise the inexorable logic of it. The Government cannot go on achieving efficiency gains indefinitely at an arbitrary level—they say 3 per cent. per annum—because there are diminishing returns for efficiency gains. And one certainly cannot make efficiency gains with a declining budget, because declining budgets cause diseconomies of scale. The Minister's point on efficiency gains was, therefore, thoroughly bogus.

Before the Minister says that the previous, Conservative Administration also cut defence spending—I know that he will try to make that point in reply—I remind him that the previous Administration faced a fundamental and structural change in the threat that we face: the collapse of the Warsaw pact and the end of the cold war.

Mr. Brazier: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Davies: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not give way, but I am trying to move matters on.

The Government have faced no such structural change, let alone threat reduction. On the contrary, in the past two or three years, the world seems to have become a more dangerous—not less dangerous—place. We have had Desert Fox, Kosovo, East Timor and other developments that could not possibly have been predicted. Against that background, the course on which the Government have launched themselves is thoroughly irresponsible.

We have a Government who are incapable of managing effectively their procurement programme; who are unwilling—even if they were able, which I doubt—to give clear information to Parliament on essential matters; who find it impossible to define their own strategic views on key issues, such as anti-ballistic missiles and use of nuclear weapons; and who are providing a financial future for the United Kingdom's armed services that will constrict ever further the resources that our forces need for the future. They are not a Government with whom it is safe to leave the future of our armed forces or of our national defence.

5.26 pm

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I was touched by the generous obituaries offered by my colleagues for our good friend Michael Colvin. He served on the Defence Committee since July 1992. In 1995, he became the Committee's Chairman, and, after the 1997 general election, he served as my deputy Chairman. Last month, he left the Defence Committee. The death of Michael and his wife is a tragedy not only for his constituents and his constituency association, but for Parliament and the House of Commons Defence Committee. I should like to express the Committee's commiseration and sadness.

Michael Colvin's contribution in monitoring the Executive was immense. He was obeyed, even in a trench or in a tent. He was so elegant, but also so wonderful—partly because of his military background—in expressing to members of the military how much the Committee empathised with them. He was a splendid Chairman.

I was not able to hear Michael Colvin's final speech, in which he complimented the Defence Committee almost as though he were describing the end of one phase of his life. He said:

> I am sorry to have left the Committee.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1444.]

If only we had realised that not only had he left the Committee, but that he would be leaving Parliament and life. The death of Michael and his wife is a matter of immense sadness to me. I am still stunned by the news. However, his memory will for ever live strongly and positively in my mind.

Michael Colvin always stressed the Committee's importance in providing, and always sustaining, constructive criticism and consensus. A couple of months ago, a friend of mine, who is not of the Government, said to me, "Tell me, George, what's DERA?" I explained that it is the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. He asked, "How will the Government come out in your report on it?" I winced. He asked, "How about the Territorial Army? Your Committee has been pretty hot on it. How does the Government come out on the TA?" I not only winced, but grimaced, and looked even more ugly. He ran through a list of Committee reports, which are either forthcoming or already published, and, on each subject, he asked, "How does the Government come out on it?" Each time I said, "Pretty awful." Finally, he turned to me and said—I shall expunge the expletive—"George, whose blanking side are you on?" That was the ultimate compliment, because it showed that our Committee had put aside political partisanship. We did not say what the Opposition or the Ministry of Defence wanted us to say. We told it like it was.

Many of the reports produced under Michael Colvin's chairmanship were very critical of the Conservative Government, and that tradition, which began 20 years ago, is being maintained. He paid tribute to the staff, the advisers and everyone involved with the Committee, and we are all deeply grateful.

I shall not follow the example of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies). My voice would not allow it and I am not on stimulants. I shall propose a new word for the dictionary: the verb "to Gazza", meaning to attempt to inflict physical damage on an adversary and end up maiming oneself.

I am delighted that many of our reports are tagged. I was in Moscow when the debate took place last week, but I note that there were 54 references to our Committee, almost all of them very favourable. Our report did not include Kosovo, on which we are producing a major report; the European security and defence identity, on which we are producing a substantial report; or any detail on equipment, because we are producing a major report on that. What we did was good, and I am proud of it.

In our report, we discussed defence reporting to Parliament, which has certainly improved in quantity, and we are asking for an improvement in quality. We expressed some reservations about the Secretary of State's

comment that the White Paper might not be produced annually. We went into enormous detail on overstretch. A previous report said:

> In terms of broad policy, there is little new in the . . . White Paper

and expressed the hope that there would be more in the next one. But that enthusiasm and aspiration were not realised. That was a 1985-86 report. Some White Papers have lacked content.

Our report goes into great detail on overstretch, undermanning and the difficulties of recruitment and retention. I look back and see an enormous number of reports in the past 20 years commenting on just that. One said:

> It appears self-evident to us that matching resources to tasks is becoming increasingly fraught, stretching both crews and vessels to unwise levels even during peacetime . . . It is our view that this shortcoming poses a serious, and potentially fatal, threat to the long-term security of this country.

That was not our most recent White Paper report, but one from 1992–93. The criticisms of overstretch have been made many times before.

Mr. Brazier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. George: No, I am so sorry but I have only 15 minutes. I am so very, very sorry.

The 1992–93 report also says that

> our case that chronic overstretch will be the normal state of affairs within the Army unless the Government's restructuring proposals are modified does not rest on the assumption that the additional deployments in Northern Ireland and Bosnia will themselves necessarily be extended.

Those are very critical comments on what happened under the previous Government, so the idea that the crisis began on 2 May 1997 is so absurd as to be laughable.

Our Committee has made critical comments on the defence cuts, but those did not begin on 2 May 1997. If we had continued the downward spiral of defence cuts from 1983 to 1997, there would be nothing in the defence budget to spend. The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford should examine carefully what happened before he became defence spokesman and before the Labour Government came to office.

Our Committee said:

> Our concern that there might be difficulties in managing the Defence Budget into the 1990s has as a result of our inquiry turned into the strongest suspicion that there will indeed be considerable difficulties leading to cancellations, slowing-down of acquisitions and the running-on of equipment beyond its economic life-span. The evidence we have received from the Ministry has not allayed our fears.

That was from a 1984–85 report. Another quotation is:

> We cannot recommend the 1996 Statement on the Defence Estimates to the House unless Ministers make clear in the debate that this year's Statement will not again be undermined by further defence cuts in the 1996 Budget or by any other means.

The Committee chaired by Michael Colvin said the following in a report on defence spending in 1996–97:

> The case for the restoration of some of the cuts made as a result of Options for Change and Front Line First is well made, but we are now promised instead a period of stability at the present level of funding. We insist that the defence spending plans set out in the 1996 budget must at least be maintained in real terms in future years. Any further reduction would jeopardise the defence of the realm.

That was when the Conservatives were in government.

Much has been made of the Government's procurement failures by the press, Opposition spokesmen and service men. Headlines over the weekend included "Ministry of Disasters" and "MOD bungles cost taxpayers £6 billion in 10 years". Looking at the last National Audit Office report published under the Conservative Government, I came to the conclusion that the delays were long and the situation was serious. The argument of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford is on a par with Jack the Ripper blaming the police for not having solved his crimes.

For the hon. Gentleman's benefit, I have devised the A to Z of Tory procurement policy, showing what the Government inherited and have to deal with. It starts with Apache, which is a long programme. The first one will be delivered in 2000. Having visited Pristina airport, I have some questions about how effective they are. The AWACS—the airborne warning and control system—offset agreement also comes under "A". The situation was hopeless. "B" stands for Bowman—a disaster that began under the previous Government.

"C" stands for the common new generation frigate. It was cancelled—thank God—after bad management by the previous Government. The ships automated command system—CACS—was reported on in 1986–87 and it was rubbish. The 1990–91 report refers to HMS Challenger—a sea bed operation vessel that was flogged off. "D" stands for DROPS—the demountable rack off loading and pickup system. That was a scandal that we had no time to investigate.

"E" stands for EH101, which was a story of delay. Eurofighter was expected to be introduced to service in the mid-1980s, but it will be 2005 before the first squadron is introduced. "F" stands for Foxhunter radar. Concrete was stuck into a Tornado's nose to simulate the radar. "F" also stands for Fearless and Intrepid, which were introduced in 1965 and 1967. The Defence Committee said in 1984–85 that it was about time that they were replaced Albion and Bulwark will come into service in 2003.

"G" stands for the GR1 and GR4 Tornado. The Tory response is "not our fault". "H" stands for Hercules replacement, the C130J, which was a bit of a disaster. "I" stands for Istar intelligence, which was criticised. "I" also stands for the improved UK air defence environment, which was the subject of a very critical report in 1989–90. "J" stands for JSTARS—the joint surveillance target attack radar system. We should have bought that for ASTOR—the airborne stand-off radar.

"K" stands for KFOR, which has had many equipment failures. "L" is for LAW80, which is a wonderful weapon, but unfortunately the Russians developed a new tank and the missiles bounced off them. It was the fault of the previous Government. "M" stands for the merchant marine for defence purposes. This Government have remedied the chaos.

"N" stands for Nimrod 2000. If the air frames last their full lifetime, they will be older than me. "O" is for HMS Ocean. It was a compromise that could not continue when it went out on its first voyage. "P" stands for Phoenix, which should mean coming out of the ashes into the sky. The previous Government reversed that classical trend. "Q" is for the married quarters and their sale. I am ashamed. "R" is for Rapier field service C. It was not a

[Mr. George]

success initially. "R" also stands for the reliability and maintainability of defence equipment, which the 1989–90 report said was extremely disturbing.

"S" is for the SA80 rifle. Again the story is "not our fault". I defy anyone to look at the situation and say that it was not the Tories' fault. "S" also stands for Sea Harrier, whose mid-life update criticised it for being very slow. The Sea Wolf and Sea Eagle missiles also received criticism.

"T" stands for Tornado. Its 1968–69 feasibility study found that it was a good aircraft that had taken a long time. That is more than can be said of the Tornado F3 upgrade, done by the private company Airworks, which almost destroyed half the Air Force. "U" stands for the Upholder class submarine, a good vessel flogged off to the Canadians. "W" stands for Westland—enough said. "X" stands for the unknown examples that must exist, but which I could not remember. "Y" stands for Yarrow, which was almost destroyed by the previous Government's policies. "Z" stands for Zircon, the satellite about which information was withheld by the previous Government.

I hope that I have partly convinced the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford that year one, when all chaos began, was not 1997. It is wrong to put the blame in one place; the matter is too complicated. I hope that smart procurement has addressed the issues seriously, and that the imperfections manifest to anyone willing to read about them will be reversed. Only time will tell.

I commend the report of the Defence Committee to the House. It is an extraordinarily good report, bearing in mind the number of staff and advisers that helped in its production. I am excessively proud of it.

Those of us who go to the funeral or memorial service for Michael Colvin will have heavy hearts. We will thank him profoundly for all that he did, and remember him and his beautiful and vivacious wife very fondly.

5.42 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I am pleased to follow the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George). All hon. Members will appreciate his warm and sincere tribute to Michael Colvin, a dearly loved colleague whom the House will miss very much. Friday morning's announcement of the tragic deaths of Michael and his wife will have shocked us all.

It is an extraordinary feeling to begin the second day of a debate without Michael Colvin, whose contribution to the first day's proceedings was exactly what one would expect—well informed, concerned, and passionately interested in the subject. It is a measure of his standing in the House—he became Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence in 1995, and so had to speak for hon. Members of all parties—that he had just recently been made chairman of the European group. That was typical of the respect and admiration in which he was held.

It is one of the sadnesses of this House that awful accidents from time to time happen to people whom one has got to know extremely well. For example, over the door into the Chamber, I can see the coat of arms of another colleague, Airey Neave, whom we lost 20 years ago. We shall remember Michael Colvin as an hon. Member of outstanding quality and integrity.

As a former Secretary of State for Defence, I have tended to observe a certain self-denying ordinance or reticence when it comes to taking part in defence debates. It is eight years since I handed over my responsibilities, and the present Secretary of State is the fourth since I held office. I was intending to welcome him to his post, as this is the first time he has taken part as Secretary of State in a debate on the defence White Paper. It is a pity that he is not here. The report from the Select Committee on Defence is sufficiently important to merit a two-day debate, and I hope that, on reflection, the right hon. Gentleman will realise that he should have been here for this important occasion.

I complained officially about the days chosen for this debate. I was told that these were the only days when Ministers could attend, and that the debate was being arranged to suit their convenience. I do not think that the Secretary of State's absence shows courtesy to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence who, like me, had reasons for not speaking on the first day of the debate.

People such as the hon. Member for Walsall, South and I can occasionally contribute; we have been here before. A lot of the problems are not new—there is a desperate continuity about them—as the hon. Gentleman very fairly said. When I was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I had to grapple with the demands that I made and the problems of overstretch that they caused our forces. If I asked for another battalion for Northern Ireland, the challenges and difficulties that I knew that would pose were clearly put to me by Lord Younger, the then Secretary of State for Defence.

It is important that Ministers take seriously the contribution of right hon. and hon. Members. For example, there were lessons to be learned about the SA80 after the Gulf war. I remember hiring an Antonov aircraft in the Gulf war and the debate that that launched about the need for improvement of heavy lift. One looks around and wonders why it is not possible to make rather faster progress. We have moved all the way from the Gulf war to the Mozambique statement this afternoon, when the access to heavy lift would certainly have made a significant contribution in humanitarian terms. The problem is still unresolved.

My concern is that the Ministry of Defence faces some serious problems. I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence and his colleagues on an excellent and interesting report. They did not mince their words. I think that the Chairman may have decided that he would in his speech recover some ground with his colleagues. The hon. Gentleman talked about the concerns of the Select Committee in a number of areas.

I congratulate the Secretary of State; he has been the recipient of very rapid promotion in the Government. However, I do not think that it has been a promotion for the Ministry of Defence. I do not recall a time when the Secretary of State for Defence was the most junior member of the Cabinet. I happen to believe that that matters, and I think that it will matter in the comprehensive spending review, when the pecking order and the weight that the various Secretaries of State carry will be very important.

I also have some sympathy for the Secretary of State. There is an illusion that Lord Robertson left behind a golden legacy after his time as Secretary of State

for Defence. He has lived up to Lord Callaghan's comment about Chancellors of the Exchequer. There are two kinds—those who leave in disgrace, and those who get out in time. I would certainly put Lord Robertson in the latter category. He may have got out in time, but he has left his successor some difficult problems, which the Select Committee report spelled out.

In the time available to me, I should like to comment briefly on the European situation—the European security and defence identity. The attempt to bring defence within the European Union is not new—it was going on for all the years I was at the Ministry of Defence. I remember the attempts of the Franco-German brigade and the French to seduce us away from the military structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. There is much to be said for closer European co-operation in defence matters. There will certainly be areas, as we know, in which the Americans do not want to get involved. However, the issue must be handled with great sensitivity and care. I have heard enough exchanges across the Chamber—quotes from Strobe Talbott, and so on—trying to justify either side's position, to know that it has been handled rather clumsily, and that there are real risks and worries about it in Washington.

We are talking here about NATO and about the Ministry of Defence. There is another element, not directly part of the MOD, in which our connection and very close relationship with the United States is essential to the security of our country. I will say no more about it, but as Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I know the value of that intelligence link. If there were too casual an approach to the Americans, and the impression were given that everything we wanted that was otherwise available from the United States could be found in Europe, that would be a very dangerous state of affairs.

The Chairman of the Select Committee is right to point out that overstretch is not new. The matter was of great concern to me when I was Secretary of State. When we considered the "Options for Change" White Paper, we tried to establish two-year tour intervals. However, because of a sustained period of unreasonable demand—as the Select Committee pointed out in a telling phrase—the situation is now vastly more critical and damaging than I can ever recall.

We are told that the average nights out of bed are now 31 per cent. for the First Armoured Division, and that the Royal Engineers and the Royal Signals Corps now have tour intervals of six and seven months. We can always get the Army to do something for a short time—its members will always stand to attention—which is one of the great wonders of our services and a tribute to them. However, we cannot expect them to undertake such duties over a sustained period. The overstretch problem must be corrected. It was described by the Select Committee as the most urgent one facing the armed forces.

Various considerations come into play. We all pay tribute to the quality of our armed forces. That is built partly on good organisation, but especially on good training. If we have to cancel training exercises, because of stretch and the budgetary pressures, we shall be living on borrowed time. We shall be sending our armed forces into situations for which they will not be properly trained. That is extremely serious.

There are real problems of recruitment and retention. Recruitment is looking better, but retention is worrying—as the Minister pointed out. However, what hit me between the eyes was the statement made by the Secretary of State that we should reach full complement by 2005—in five years' time. When anyone told the former Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher, that a project would not be profitable or rewarding in years one, two and three, but that it would be viable in years four and five, she used to say, "Years four and five never come". To say that there will be a full complement by 2005 actually means that we shall not be up to full complement in the next three years. That is as far as one can honestly forecast. That statement was extremely worrying.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. King: I am up against time, so I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me for not giving way.

The Select Committee talked about irksome duties. I examined that matter in Northern Ireland. The amount of time that regiments spend on guard duties for themselves takes away from their operational time. That matter is worth further consideration.

In Prime Minister's questions, when people criticise cuts in defence expenditure, I have occasionally bitten my tongue when the Prime Minister makes the extraordinarily silly remark that, in effect, "You made cuts, so why can't we?". That is as relevant as if a tailor cut a suit, made some adjustments and removed some cloth, and then someone else said, "I know exactly how to be a tailor; you cut a bit off everybody's suit," so he cuts a bit more off. There is a right size and a wrong size.

At the end of the cold war, we made reductions under the "Options for Change" White Paper. That was right. We reduced the number of our forces in Germany. That was right because the Germans would not have wanted so many of them to stay there. At that time, the Labour Opposition were calling for far greater cuts. However, we cannot keep on making cuts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) and the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell)—in last Tuesday's debate—made the point that efficiency savings can be made once, perhaps even a couple of times, but they cannot be made year after year. What is an efficiency saving? It is the determination of the Treasury to obtain 3 per cent. more, with no idea of where it is to come from. The Treasury are active enough to spell out exactly where cuts should be made and to challenge different programmes. However, at the end of the day, there is the wonderful catch-all that the figures are agreed—but it still wants 3 per cent. on top.

As the Select Committee pointed out, the proportion of Government expenditure on defence now is as low as it was during the appeasement era of the 1930s; and any further cuts would cause the whole strategy to unravel. The reason I wanted to contribute to this debate what little background and experience I may have accumulated during the years that I held certain responsibilities is that the defence situation is as grave as I have ever known it. That is partly because of an admirable willingness to help in some troubled and tragic parts of the world.

However, the pressure on our armed forces cannot be sustained. They are overstretched and underfunded. The basis on which the forecasts have been made—especially

[Mr. King]

with the built-in efficiency savings—means that the programme will be unsustainable and it will unravel. When that happens, I do not know how easily we will ever redeem it.

5.56 pm

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): For several years, Michael Colvin was president of the Palace of Westminster rifle club. I am captain of that organisation. The Members and staff who belong to the club would not forgive me if I neglected to add their tributes to the sterling service that Michael gave for a long time.

Many tributes have been made—they were stunning; I do not have the eloquence to match them. Michael and Nichola did not need eloquence; they were eloquence and elegance personified. They displayed great humanity, compassion and care for everyone who crossed their path. They will be greatly missed.

I apologise to the House for my absence on the first day of the debate. With other colleagues, I was taking part in four days of consultations at NATO, in Brussels, with the North Atlantic council and the European Parliament, on NATO matters. Most of my comments today will be made from a NATO point of view; I am vice-president of the NATO parliamentary assembly and vice-chairman of its defence and security committee. I am also a member of the joint monitoring group of the permanent joint council.

Before I went to Brussels, I spent 10 days in America visiting the east and west coast with the NATO parliamentary delegation. We were bombarded on two issues: national missile defence, which has already been referred to as anti-ballistic defence; and, of course, the European security and defence identity—ESDI. It is ironic that the Americans criticise us for not consulting them on ESDI and we criticise them for not consulting us on NMD.

I thought that our task with ESDI would be fairly easy, and that I would only have to explain to those fairly myopic Americans that the matter was simple; they had asked us to carry it out over a period of time and we were doing exactly what they had prompted us to do. Certainly, since the first meetings that I attended—in Antalya in 1987—they have said every year that we have to do better in Europe. However, when we did better, they criticised us. I thought that to explain that would be sufficient.

It was not, however. The anxiety was too strong. It was only when we visited the Rand Corporation on the west coast that I found people saying the same things as me. I heard the same views as I had expressed on the Hill, at the White house, at the National Security Council and the State Department. It was only then that I realised that I had not considered the matter closely enough. I had to get inside the minds of the Americans to find out where their anxieties came from.

Any anxieties that the Americans may have had about Europe were made infinitely worse by the comments that Baroness Thatcher made on a visit there. Some of her views were very reasonable. For example:

> As the Kosovo conflict showed, and as the figures for defence spending confirm, European defence capabilities are lagging dangerously far behind those of the United States.

That is eminently sensible and perfectly accurate. She added:

> This is particularly true in the vital area of military technology.

That point is as plain as the nose on one's face and it is absolutely right.

However, Baroness Thatcher said that there would be a problem because

> The impulse towards developing a new European defence and separate European armed forces has little to do with the fact that Europe is cutting its defences while America is increasing hers.
>
> It has even less to do with any serious European response to the global dangers of proliferation, which can only be properly met by ballistic missile defence.

I am afraid that a big question mark must be put against that view. She added:

> No. The real drive towards a separate European defence is the same as that towards a single European currency—namely the utopian venture of creating a single European superstate to rival America on the world stage . . . This has been a long-standing French aspiration.

That is not only lunacy, but it is dangerous lunacy. It is also grotesquely inaccurate, as was her remark that it was superficially splendid that Europe had taken an interest in its own defence.

Such comments are less than helpful if one is seeking to develop a more mature alliance within NATO. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) was also less than helpful when he quickly followed that visit with similar remarks. They do not help relations with America and they certainly do not help them with the French.

America and France have a particular relationship, as we do with France. An American Congressman passed me a note in Brussels last week which said that the French had forgiven the Germans for defeating them twice in the past century and for suppressing them, but they were unable to forgive the Brits and the Yanks for liberating them on each occasion. There is a degree of humour and, I suppose, of accuracy in that comment, but it does not help to come out with nonsense that exacerbates relations.

As the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, there is no doubt that we must treat the ESDI proposals with great sensitivity because the Americans are greatly concerned about, and do not fully understand, them. They are afraid of the role of the European Parliament and the European Union and they would like to know the difference between one and the other. The Commission is also hanging around and the Americans do not understand its role—but why should they be any different? I myself sometimes do not understand the difference between the various bodies. However, the Americans are afraid that that form of democracy will intrude into their defence commitments and responsibilities. What they need are clarity and transparency.

The Americans are not the only ones who want clarity and transparency. When I returned from America, I attended a briefing by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which was held for our delegations to NATO, the Council of Europe and the Western European Union. I found even greater and more specific anxieties among my colleagues of all parties who are members of those bodies. If British delegates to the Council of Europe and to the Western European Union have even stronger anxieties about the ESDI proposals than do the Americans, we can be sure that the delegates to those bodies from other

countries will have similar anxieties. It is therefore most important that we open up the debate to the most transparent and comprehensive exchanges.

We are told that Mr. Solana and Lord Robertson meet twice a month for breakfast. I am pleased about that; I am sure that it does wonders for their well-being. However, I am not sure what it does for compatibility between European nations, non-NATO European nations, non-European NATO nations and our American cousins and the Canadians. There is much that must be made plain and laid out on the table, and we must begin to do that in an open and candid manner.

One of the suggestions that I wish to make is that all NATO nations—whether European or not, and whether members of the European Union or not—should be given a droit de regard. Regardless of their size, all NATO countries—from Iceland to the United States—should have that right, but no NATO nation should have the right of veto. That is important; it might not be a bad starting point.

If Europe is to mean anything as a collective defence entity without north American elements, we shall have to place less emphasis on territorial defence forces. That will immediately cause people to become a bit anxious, so let me be clear about what I am saying. We all seem to have our own national form of Swiss guard to defend our own national form of Vatican. That is the best way I can think of to express my point. What is required is a much heavier emphasis on a combined and balanced joint task force capability. Until we achieve that—with each national Government having sovereignty over its own forces but agreeing to come together to operate in a combined fashion—we shall have much to worry about.

I do not know whether national missile defence was mentioned on the first day of the debate, but its mission statement says that it is a development that will protect the 50 states of the union. However, the concept relies on three early warning stations, with many others feeding off them. One is in Shemya off the Alaskan coast, and it is American. Another is at Thuli air base at the north of Greenland and it is Danish; while the third is at Fylingdales in north Yorkshire—not a million miles from my constituency or that of any other hon. Member.

The Pentagon thinks that there is a credible threat. If there is a credible threat, there must be a credible attack. If any attack is to be credible, what are to be the primary targets? By definition, the early warning stations must be among them. So hon. Members will have to persuade their electorate and their constituents that they may be targets in the defence of the 50 states of the union. There is nothing new in that. People in Fylingdales in north Yorkshire have known that Russia has had them in its sights all along.

However, there is a bit more to it now. National missile defence is not aimed at Russia or China. There is no problem there; we have a stand-off and that is great. It is aimed at rogue states and mad scientists. The system is aimed at Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Il—and who is the fellow in Libya? [HON. MEMBERS: "Gaddafi."] The system is aimed at Mu'ammar Gaddafi and anyone else we can think of who might command some authority in a rogue state.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Ron Brown.

Mr. Cook: I did not realise that he had such potential, although one never knows what might happen in Scotland these days.

We tell our constituents, "We have an agreement with the Russians, and the Chinese are no threat, but the lunatics could well be directing intercontinental ballistic missiles at your warning station." We will have a problem selling that to the electorate.

Furthermore, it does not matter whether or not we have an early warning station because a missile has to take off, travel and re-enter, and somewhere along that path it has to be identified and met "bullet on bullet", as the Americans say. That means that we must be able to detect it very early. If the missiles meet in transit and the strike is effective, there is the potential for serious fall-out, whether the missiles have a nuclear, biological or chemical weapon. We all know of the problems caused by strontium 90—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid the hon. Gentleman has had his time.

6.11 pm

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I shall be brief because I know that other hon. Members want to speak, not least my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who each have extensive military facilities in their constituences.

Before I turn to the White Paper, I want to deal with the situation in Kosovo. As the Minister for the Armed Forces said, I was in Kosovo two weeks ago. On Mitrovica, there is no doubt that the basic soldiering skills that we employed in our sector of Kosovo were not employed in the northern sector. The basics of searching a flat and installing decent roadblocks—activities that, sadly, we have 30 years' experience of in Ulster—were not done by the French in that sector, and there was a large build-up of arms that have been used.

There is a wider problem in Kosovo in that our forces rather ambiguous remit, which the UN mission in Kosovo police will also have when the full complement arrives, means that frequently when criminals are arrested, they are held for one or two nights in detention and then released. I hope that the Government will assess the problem and that the UN will get to grips with the fact that people who have committed serious crimes need to be kept in detention, because that is not happening at the moment.

I turn now to the White Paper, which is a rather limited document. We hoped to have something approaching a progress report on the strategic defence review, but sadly we did not get that. We welcomed the SDR's emphasis on an expeditionary strategy, rapid deployability and mobility. We have seen from the Kosovo crisis that the assumptions made in the SDR were true. However, the expeditionary strategy that underpins the SDR means that our forces must be kept in a high state of readiness so that they can respond quickly to a crisis.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the problems of strategic lift, which has not been addressed with enough urgency. At present, we could not deploy the joint rapid reaction force quickly enough to meet the likely requirements of the new strategic environment. As the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, we cannot even get helicopters to Mozambique.

The MOD urgently needs to pursue new options for the short-term strategic airlift programme, because the progress of the long-term programme is halted by a lack

[Mr. Paul Keetch]

of progress on the short-term programme. The SDR committed the UK to a force projection strategy, so we need the ability to project force, and fast. We do not have it.

Since the publication of the SDR, 4,500 troops have continued to be deployed in Bosnia, and we have undertaken operations in Kosovo, East Timor and Iraq, as well as deploying an extra 2,000 soldiers to Northern Ireland during last summer's marching season. Overstretch is perhaps the most pressing problem facing our troops, and the White Paper has not addressed it satisfactorily.

In the period leading up to the performance report, two major UK exercises were cancelled due to operational over-commitment, and a further eight NATO and UN exercises had to be cancelled because troops scheduled to take part in them were on operational deployment. That is bound to have a negative impact on our forces' training and morale. Cancellation of exercises can quickly reduce capability because forces need to be trained in all aspects of war fighting. Britain's armed forces can maintain their status as among the best in the world only if they continue to be trained to the highest levels.

The MOD has spent millions on its recruitment policy in the past few years, and as the Minister said, the initiative has had some success. In 1996-97, the RAF's intake was just 2,684, and that increased in 1998-99 to more than 4,000. However, there is still a large gap in all services, particularly the Army, between the trained requirement and the trained strength of the force.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and the right hon. Member for Bridgwater mentioned the disparity with reference to the Secretary of State's remarks last week. The trained requirement of our Army is 105,300, but the total strength in 1999 was only 99,700. The Secretary of State said last week that the requirement will be achieved by 2005, but many people believe that it will take far longer—31 years was suggested.

I suspect that the problem is not so much recruitment as retention, and we should consider why people leave the armed forces. There is no point in investing large sums in training personnel if they decide to leave a couple of years later. The recruitment level for fast jet pilots, for example, is now running at over 100 per cent. of the target, but the retention level is well below the target. It would cost the Government much less to offer sensible, practical retention measures than it does to maintain the current situation, which is obviously causing a huge strain on our defence budget.

We have to examine the underlying factors that are causing service men and women to end their careers. As hon. Members have already said, personnel are increasingly expected to spend prolonged periods away from home on operational duties. That problem is not new, but it is increasing and it is not about to change. We therefore need to concentrate on ways of keeping morale high among our troops, improving conditions for service families and maintaining a constant standard of training for our personnel across the board.

Measures must be taken to improve morale and make sure that our investment in our personnel does not go down the drain. Relatively small enhancements in welfare support for service personnel and their families can cause a disproportionate increase in morale. We welcome the extension of free telephone calls for personnel and the introduction of periods of post-operational leave, which compensate personnel who have had to leave their families for extended periods. We welcome the service families task force and the learning forces initiatives, but there is still much more to do. The SFTF meets on an ad hoc basis and is not particularly accessible to service families.

In the continuous attitude survey for service leavers, the most frequently cited reason for people leaving the services was the effect of service on family life. In the 1999-2000 Christmas and new year period, 35 per cent. of the Army's trained strength was serving abroad, which is an increase of 3,500 personnel on the same period the year before.

There are no minimum consistent standards for the provision of welfare for our service families. The families of the 1,400 personnel based at the Warminster garrison can use two playgroups, a creche, a mother and toddler group and a youth group. However, the families of the 7,698 personnel based at Catterick have no such facilities.

First and most importantly, the MOD needs to build welfare into its policies as a key target and set minimum consistent standards that can be applied to all our garrison bases. The SFTF needs to meet much more frequently and should revamp its priorities to include measures such as a national audit of base facilities, to ensure that there is a common standard throughout the country. It should appoint a families officer for every base to ensure that proper advice is given on jobs and local schooling and housing.

It would be all too easy for the Government to cut into those already fragile welfare support networks and educational and recreational facilities in trying to meet the much-talked-about 3 per cent. efficiency savings, which were also mentioned by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater. We all know the problems associated with the Government's 3 per cent. annual efficiency savings. My main concern is that what the MOD might classify as an efficiency saving is, in effect, a cut. Two exercises have been cancelled this year due to constraints. That will affect our training and morale.

As costs are cut in response to budget reductions, the Government have been unable to produce sufficient evidence that they are not simply doing less with less money. The 3 per cent. efficiency savings have been described as challenging. It is time that the scheme was abandoned, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Fife said last week.

The smart procurement initiative was one of the three main themes of the strategic defence review, and was seen as a way of making procurement "cheaper, faster, better", with savings of £2 billion to be guaranteed over 10 years. Although we appreciate that the bulk of those savings will be made towards the end of that period, there seems to be a lack of clear evidence of any significant progress as a result of SPI. The proposed savings have been described as unrealistic by some military leaders.

Major procurement projects are running, on average, 43 months late, and costs overran by £1.3 billion in 1998 alone. Only two projects are expected to meet their original in-service date. As has been mentioned, the National Audit Office report found that 60 per cent.

of equipment accepted by the MOD did not meet the operational requirements, and identified £60 million of costs over a five-year period associated with such equipment.

We have heard much in this debate about Tornado and the SA80. The hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) made some exciting comments about his A to Z. It is true that the problem is not new, but we see more and more examples of military blunders by the MOD. Eurofighter costs have overrun by at least £1.36 billion, but it is due to enter service in 2002, three years behind schedule. Challenger 2 cost £1 billion more than expected.

I have seen both weapons in the past few weeks, and they are impressive, but we must get things right, and there is little evidence that smart procurement is enabling us to do so. I should make it clear that I and my colleagues hope that SPI succeeds, but we need to know the criteria by which to judge its success. The Government need to tell us soon, so that the House and the country can make an informed judgment on whether it is working.

In last week's debate, the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham) spoke with his usual passion about the proposed closure of the Royal Ordnance factory in Bishopton in his constituency. It appeared that he wanted a meeting. Other hon. Members have also claimed that questions and letters have not been answered.

The White Paper calls for the retention of British military capability and intellectual property rights. The site in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is the only one in the country of sufficient capacity to enable significant integration of Royal Ordnance facilities. Some of the documents that have been leaked—I have seen some of them—suggest that if Bishopton closes, we shall have no alternative but to buy our propellants from either Alliant in America, at greater cost, or Somchem in South Africa, with all the security implications that that would entail. I hope that the Minister will make a significant comment on the issue.

Our armed forces risk their lives on our behalf in extreme operational circumstances, but in return we so often give them substandard equipment, cancelled training exercises, poor living conditions, long periods of separation from their families and poor operational welfare support. We expect the best from our service men and women, and in return they should be able to demand from us the best possible equipment, training and support. The White Paper is little more than a public relations exercise. There is a glaring absence of detailed defence analysis and no real interest in the progress of the SDR. It is a sad document. Our armed forces deserve better.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next hon. Member, I remind the House that there is a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

6.24 pm

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill): Inevitably, there have been several references to Michael Colvin's last speech in this House a week ago. In it, he dealt with several points, including the European security and defence identity. The same issue was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Tooting (Mr. Cox) and for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson). I shall concentrate on the ESDI and deal with two aspects of it.

The first aspect was mentioned by several hon. Members. There has been much talk about the risk of damage to our relationship with the United States of America. Often, not enough attention is paid to the risk of damage to our defence relationships with other European countries. There has been reference to the effect of the ESDI on our relationships with Iceland, Norway and Turkey—members of NATO that are not members of the European Union—but we have developing defence relationships with other countries that are members of neither the EU nor NATO.

In the Western European Union, this has been a most interesting aspect of what has happened during the past 10 years. The WEU is not restricted to the 10 member countries, or to 15, 18 or 21 countries. Altogether, it increasingly involves 28 countries. As all members of our delegation to the WEU Assembly know, debates there include representatives from the Parliaments of those 28 countries. Indeed, we understand that, at the meetings of the ambassadors every two weeks, high-level discussions occur between not 10, 15, 18 or 21 but 28 countries. As a result, there is a gradually developing and evolving defence relationship, which should be welcomed.

Many hon. Members recognise that Europe constitutes more than the 15 member countries of the EU or the 15 plus the six applicant countries whose negotiations are a long way down the road. In fact, at least 28 countries are recognised as being in Europe and want to be involved in peacekeeping operations. Many have sent contingents to operations such as those in Bosnia and Kosovo. Indeed, the operation in Albania a few years ago involved contingents from countries that are in neither the EU nor NATO.

In development of the ESDI, there is a great risk of excluding such countries. That is not to say that we should oppose the ESDI; we should ensure that countries that have become gradually involved over the past decade in our defence arrangements, particularly peacekeeping, continue to be involved—and more and more deeply—because we can benefit from their contributions. They include several that only 10 years ago were among those that had signed up to the Warsaw pact, and, indeed, some that were part of the Soviet Union. We can only gain from their increasing involvement in security and defence arrangements in Europe.

When dealing with the issue in his winding-up speech on Tuesday, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces missed the point. It is clear, after reading carefully his remarks in *Hansard*, that he was talking only about non-European Union countries that are members of NATO. There is a wider Europe, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence will describe what the Government propose to do about all 28 countries and not just the 15 member states plus Iceland, Norway and Turkey. Important though those three countries are, the others also need to be considered. That brings me to the second aspect.

The involvement of the countries to which I have referred not only at intergovernmental level but in the Assembly of the WEU is beneficial not only to us but to them. Members of their Parliaments attend meetings,

[Mr. Terry Davis]

take part in committees—as well as the Assembly—and engage in discussions, debate and sometimes arguments with us and our allies. They feel that they are getting to know us; it is a confidence-building measure. Their parliamentarians learn that we are not bad people and we begin to realise that their concerns are genuine, to understand them and to think about what can be done to provide reassurance. There are great benefits to be derived from the involvement of Members of Parliaments on a genuinely pan-European basis.

A further benefit arises from the fact that the WEU Assembly provides the sole form of democratic or parliamentary scrutiny. I emphasise the difference between scrutiny and accountability. Most of us are pleased that the Government have emphasised that, under future arrangements pertaining to the ESDI, accountability as far as the British Government are concerned will be to the House. However, that is not the point. The point is that there should also be parliamentary scrutiny of the joint institutions and the provision of assets for the ESDI. That cannot be done by the House—even its worthy Select Committee on Defence. It should be done jointly, collectively and co-operatively and involve the representatives of the Parliaments of other countries.

I am not arguing that the WEU Assembly should be preserved in its current form. There are many things wrong with it and it could be improved. Members of the delegation could make several useful suggestions to improve the functioning, the membership and even the name of the Assembly. However, that is not the point. The point is to ensure that, with the development of the ESDI, parliamentary scrutiny continues. That means scrutiny by Members of this Parliament and Members of the Parliaments of all the countries involved with the ESDI and those that are associated with its peacekeeping tasks and provisions.

I urge the Government not only to ensure that our colleagues from countries that are not members of NATO or of the EU continue to be involved, but that there is a machinery for co-ordination and liaison and that joint scrutiny of joint institutions is preserved, extended and developed at pan-European level.

There has been severe criticism of the WEU, but, after a few years as a member of the WEU Assembly, I know that, if the WEU has failed, its failure is not a failure of the Assembly, but a failure of the intergovernmental relationships within the WEU—the decisions that have or have not been taken by European Governments. The biggest problem faced in European peacekeeping operations has not been the failure of equipment or of the people who serve in Europe's armed forces, but the failure of Governments' will to use them.

6.33 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I join right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House in expressing my condolences to Michael's family and my deep appreciation of all that he did. The quality of his that stands out most in my mind is not his expertise, but the quiet way in which he expressed his views and the strong resolve that lay behind them.

I hope that it will not bore the pants off the House, but I, like both previous Labour speakers, want to talk about the European security and defence identity. With the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), I have visited large chunks of America as part of the NATO parliamentary assembly and, in Brussels, met members of the EU committee on foreign affairs, common security and defence policy—we have had a real going over.

In last week's debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) expressed, with his customary intellectual vigour, the considerable doubt felt in this country and in the United States about the real meaning and objectives of ESDI. The name itself begs many questions. If I were to refer to the British defence identity, I might be asked whether I was discussing an idea—strong on vision, weak on substance. The change of name from the European security and defence identity to European security and defence policy—that is what we are supposed to call it now—is welcome, because it will help us to measure the extent to which the EU means business.

I confirm what the hon. Member for Stockton, North said about a common thread running through our discussions with representatives of Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon and all the think tanks that we visited: what is ESDI? They asked whether it was concerned solely with directing a new structure, rather than with getting down to the hard core of defence expenditure and genuine collaboration. Underlying those doubts, the question put to us at every meeting was whether we could provide reassurance that Europe's long-term intention was not to detach itself from the United States and so weaken, and ultimately dissolve, the NATO partnership.

In last week's debate, hon. Members quoted European sources that supported the concerns expressed by our American friends. We should not doubt that the feeling of unease is not confined to a small minority of Members of Parliament or of the general public, but is experienced by the people of many other countries, including the United States. The people we met sought reassurance about a European resolve to maintain NATO that went beyond mere words of comfort. In short, Europe's intentions will carry conviction only if Europe addresses its defence deficiencies.

If there is little sign of a resolve to increase defence expenditure—I do not know whether any country intends to do that—the United States expects that, at the very least, current weaknesses will be redressed through better use of existing resources. That is not too much to ask. It means avoiding unnecessary duplication and poses a challenge, not only to Governments, but to defence industries on both sides of the pond. The defence industries in both America and Europe face the same problem of trying to decide who should pay for what and who should supply what.

As our late colleague, Michael Colvin, who served the House with great distinction, said last week, the United States is not alone in expressing such concerns. As the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Davis) pointed out, the new structure will affect the non-EU members of NATO and EU members who are not members of NATO. The decision has been made, but it is only fair to remind our American allies that the end of the cold war gave rise to a demand for a re-evaluation of NATO's role, our role and that of all the other countries; there had to be a change. NATO's adaptation

included recognition of the need for, and greater support for, a more coherent and distinct European defence contribution.

After all, at NATO's 1996 summit, it was intended to build an ESDI within the alliance. Simultaneously, a revitalised WEU became the defence arm of the EU and the European pillar of the alliance. What happened? The WEU was called on to undertake only a few relatively modest operations. As the right hon. Member for Hodge Hill asks, whose fault was that? Was it the fault of Governments? In retrospect, it was a grave mistake. A revitalised WEU might have led to effective co-ordination and strengthened Euro-NATO co-operation, without arousing many of the anxieties and doubts about the EU's long-term intentions.

Since that time, the treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam have provided further evidence of the determination to have a more active and coherent European common security and defence policy. As we know, that led to the appointment of Javier Solana as the EU's high representative, and the incorporation of the Petersberg tasks. Initially, those had been adopted by the WEU; we took them over. That initiative, preceded by the St. Malo declaration between Britain and France, implicitly and effectively bypassed the WEU and made it clear that Europe would develop the capacity for autonomous action, backed by its own credible military capabilities, where NATO was not, as a whole, engaged. I know from my visits to the United States that that came as quite a surprise to those in the US Government. It was mitigated to some extent by British officials, who said that it implied no radical change.

It is little wonder that at Cologne in 1999, the EU took historic steps towards establishing its own military capabilities for the first time, and at Helsinki the EU asserted that, prior to an EU decision to conduct EU-led military operations where NATO as a whole was not engaged, there would be a NATO right of first refusal. Can the Government confirm that they are right behind the concept that NATO should have the right of first refusal—a point raised by the right hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell) last week?

Should we be highly critical of the EU decision to deploy 50,000 to 60,000 troops? It is difficult to be critical, provided that that does not result in a split between the EU objectives and those of NATO. Some US policy analysts have asked whether the prospect of EU missions without NATO participation is an indication that the creation of ESDI within NATO has failed. How else, they argue, can one explain why NATO's EU members would support the creation of a distinct defence capability within the EU? We have embarked on a mission in which, like it or not, the UK can and should play a constructive part. It is not enough to be critical.

Finally, on national missile defence, I agree with the hon. Member for Stockton, North. It is easy to dismiss that as a nationalistic, isolationist reaction of the United States to an undeniable threat. However, I believe that we should proceed cautiously. Such a decision should not be taken hastily. My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was right to put the matter on the agenda for discussion, which should take place calmly, recognising that it has important implications not only for the United States, but for our own security.

6.42 pm

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): There has in the past been a stereotyped view of the defence community as pickled in the values of 40 or 50 years earlier, introspective, and so ignorant of changing circumstances and suspicious of new ideas. Whatever the truth in the past, that stereotype is far from true about our Army, Navy and Air Force today. They are part of the mainstream of life in Britain and probably the most effective military force in the world.

Ministers are to be congratulated on the policies set out in the White Paper, which are family friendly, promote the education and training of individuals and provide for equal opportunities without discrimination. Life in the services is seen as either a long-term career or a constructive and attractive period of personal development for young men and women.

Not only is that policy the right way to treat people, but it is good for service morale and recruitment. Making our armed forces an integral rather than a detached part of British society results in their being better understood and appreciated by the people whom they serve.

There are bound to be differences between service and civilian life, but a determination is expressed in the White Paper to compensate for the adverse differences and to be a good employer for service men and women and their families. We can all endorse with pride what is being done on our behalf as employers of the nation's armed forces.

The strategic defence review, which is the foundation of the White Paper, was far from ignorant of changing circumstances. Major war in north-west Europe, which for 40 years was the primary focus of military planning, training and technology, is the least likely operation, now that the cold war has ended. As the White Paper states,

> in the post-Cold War strategic environment we are increasingly likely to face new and often unexpected operational challenges.

Those changed circumstances are essentially in two categories. The first involves nuclear and, to some extent, biological and chemical weapons. The second requires conventional armed forces to be able to deploy quickly to unfamiliar places, to deal with unpredictable situations, usually acting in concert with allies. I shall discuss these two sets of circumstances in the remainder of my speech.

The White Paper is virtually silent on the large numbers of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons that are still ostensibly part of the defence arrangements of the US and Russia, and to a lesser extent of Britain and France. The progressive reduction of these nuclear armouries, which was foreseen in the START treaties, has stalled, with little disarmament achieved or foreseen. The reduced sense of urgency brought about by the end of the cold war is false security. A new initiative is required.

That impasse has also undermined the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Progress in nuclear arms reduction by the US and Russia was an important inducement to smaller countries to forgo nuclear weapons. Now, as the White Paper makes clear, under the heading "New threats and challenges", dangers from the continuing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their potential delivery systems are a notable cause for concern. The missile launches by India and Pakistan last April are particularly disturbing.

The White Paper goes on to refer to the threat from maverick states using weapons of mass destruction as part of a terrorist arsenal in what are called "asymmetric threats".

[Mr. Nigel Beard]

All that frankness in the White Paper is admirable, but nothing is said about what should be done. The belief is expressed that

> no significant ballistic missile threat to the UK and its interests will exist for some years.

That is comforting, but should not we be using those years to prepare some defence?

Have not we come to a time when we must recognise that the nuclear non-proliferation treaty may fail, and that it would be wise to prepare for that? In the only reference to any counter-measure to a maverick attack, the White Paper states that

> the US are consulting closely with us on their plans to improve their defences against a projected limited inter-continental ballistic missile threat from proliferators.

It is all rather offhand, as though we were trying to humour the USA.

The scheme proposed by the US has been dubbed "son of star wars" after the scheme once proposed by President Reagan in order to keep out a soviet missile attack. That project collapsed because of expense and the likely technical infeasibility of countering a mass attack by the full menagerie of nuclear weapons, and because, if successful, it would have created instability in the east-west strategic balance.

That does not necessarily discredit current US proposals directed at keeping out two or three missiles, not a mass attack. If some such system could be successfully developed, it could underpin rather than undermine the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. States that do not yet possess nuclear weapons might be offered protection under the shield if they renounced them. The system would not be hostile towards Russia. Indeed, Russia and the European Union might share the same protective umbrella.

There is no basis for saying that the current US proposals are the right answer, but the threat exists. It is identified in the White Paper and by the US Government. It should not be ignored. The phrase in the White Paper—

> the USA are consulting closely with us—

hardly sounds like a dynamic search for a solution on our part. It behoves us in Europe, just as much as the US Government, to seek positive means to counteract a threat from maverick states and to underpin nuclear non-proliferation.

I shall move now to my second category of operations, in which conventionally armed forces need to deploy quickly to unfamiliar places, to deal with unpredictable situations in concert with allies.

In this context, the European defence identity agreed at the Helsinki European Council is to be welcomed. It provides for a highly mobile force to be drawn together from each country's NATO forces and enables action to be taken where US interests are not involved. Similarly, the joint rapid reaction force, bringing together army, navy and air force contributions, is a positive response to the new circumstances that must be the focus of defence planning.

However, I am puzzled by the role of the 386 Challenger 2 main battle tanks in any operation that requires rapid deployment by sea and air. Challenger 2 is likely to be precluded from many operational areas simply because available bridges will not take its weight. Are not heavy main battle tanks unsuitable for rapid reaction forces? If they move by sea, they arrive after airborne troops; if they travel by air, the required aircraft are immensely expensive. When they arrive, by whatever means, their range and manoeuvrability is limited.

What is the role of Challenger 2 in the next 10 years? What will rapid reaction forces do for armoured support? That may not be an easy problem to solve, but the White Paper should acknowledge the difficulty and the need to revise Army force structure for the new role.

The essence of the new flexible operational concept is what the White Paper describes as deployability. Without means of deploying fully equipped forces quickly and easily, the new strategy cannot be implemented.

The proposal to provide a six-vessel strategic sealift through a private finance initiative with the industry is imaginative. Given that contracts can be exchanged next year, it makes good sealift capability relatively quickly.

Existing RAF transport aircraft are all old and need replacing. They are unsuitable for a key role in the rapid deployment of forces. The White Paper currently gives no estimate of when the problem will be overcome; it simply promises a decision in the near future. That is a relaxed approach to the pivot of the strategic concept.

Without urgent replacement of the RAF's transport and refuelling aircraft, a strategy of timely flexible response is not an operational reality. Paragraph 40 of the White Paper makes that point, albeit a little less starkly. It states:

> We cannot . . . deploy the JRRF quickly enough to meet the likely requirements of the new strategic environment.

If that profound weakness is to be overcome within current defence spending, it may mean some revision of RAF or perhaps naval force structure. If so, how much RAF strike attack and offensive support capability is to be given up to provide essential improvements in the RAF's strategic lift?

That question cannot be left to various factional interests in the Ministry of Defence to fight about. It requires not a mañana approach, but "action this day" if the new defence strategy is to be fully operational in the near future.

The main Royal Navy contribution to flexible deployment appears to be two of the three amphibious ships, Fearless, Ocean and Intrepid, with some contribution from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Those ships can be moved to the area of operations as an emergency develops and sit over the horizon without political commitment to an operation until the last minute, when their impact can be immediate. The diplomatic and operational advantages are not matched when forces move by air. Any future ability to redeploy forces is likely to need a combination of strategic airlift and amphibious capability. They are complementary, not alternatives.

The White Paper is excellent in setting out policy on defence personnel and is to be applauded for that. Its analysis of the new threats to this country is frank, far-seeing and in keeping with the world as we perceive it. However, it is unsatisfactory in establishing how and when we will be in a position to implement the new strategy.

The White Paper suggests a rigid attachment to existing force structures that precludes reallocation of resources and reorientation of forces to match the new strategic

concept. That is shown by the incompatibility of Challenger 2 with the new strategy and the inability to restructure the RAF to put greater emphasis on modern transport aircraft.

The strategy cannot be implemented by retaining unchanged the equipment and force structures of the cold war and adding demands to fulfil the new strategy. The new strategy demanded radical rethinking. The reconfiguration of the armed forces to match the strategy demands no less.

While the armed forces go through that process of readjustment, it is right for the House to be kept regularly informed of progress. I support the view of the Select Committee on Defence that there are strong arguments for an annual defence White Paper.

6.55 pm

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I start by joining colleagues from both sides of the House in paying tribute to Michael and Nichola Colvin. Michael Colvin chaired the Select Committee on Defence when I was Minister of State for the Armed Forces. His courtesy and consideration, as well as his firmness and profound knowledge, had a deep impact on me. We all mourn the loss in the most tragic circumstances of someone who brought great expertise to his subject. I shall not say anything further; the tribute paid by the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who is the current Chairman of the Select Committee, said it all.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Many tributes have been paid to Michael and Nichola for their work in Parliament. I inherited most of Michael's former constituents, and I want to place on record that the kindness that Michael and Nichola showed me and continued to show other new candidates was exceptional. It can truly be said of them that they were

> lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided.

Mr. Soames: I could not do better than that, and I am sure that my hon. Friend speaks for all of us.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on his prompt flight back from Portugal. It is astonishing that he was not here for the beginning of the debate, which is one of the most important defence debates of the year. His absence was a gratuitous insult not only to the House but to the armed forces. However, it is good of him to spare us a little of his time this evening.

I pay a warm tribute to the armed forces, especially service families, and to the civilian staff of the Ministry of Defence who work alongside service men and women and without whom the show could not go on. We owe them all a great debt.

Having read the extremely inadequate and deplorably produced White Paper, which makes no effort to make defence or its problems interesting, exciting or relevant, and consists of a turgid series of essays, the Secretary of State's first task is to get more money. As he knows, there are unacceptable shortfalls in many of the top-level budgets. It is disastrous that the right hon. Gentleman should have to cancel exercises, and that the fuel allocations for ships are not substantial enough. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, on top of real cuts in the defence budget, 3 per cent. efficiency savings are not sustainable or realistic after the substantial savings that have been made year after year, including during the time when my party was in power.

I am delighted that recruiting is improving, but significant problems remain. They will prove difficult to overcome. Retention remains a serious and unresolved issue. I hope that the Government now understand that what seemed easy in opposition is a relentlessly difficult problem. Related problems include the critical issues of morale, families, married quarters and pay, especially for those on active service, and the perennial problem of busy, overstretched armed forces and the difficulties consequent on that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) that the Select Committee report is damning. I hope that the Ministry of Defence will pay careful attention to it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton) rightly pointed out, the Government's problem is that the strategic defence review was claimed to be an exercise in matching resources to commitments. However, as we warned at the time, resources have been cut and commitments have increased. That was calculated against an unpublished Foreign Office baseline, which, like the so-called ethical foreign policy, becomes less credible by the day.

I hope that the House realises—and that Ministers will come to realise—the ghastly damage that the Treasury has wrought on British defence interests in the past few years, including when we were in power. It has behaved towards the armed forces as though it were determined to undermine them—and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater rightly said, it is not far off doing so. The Secretary of State must fight the battle for them and see off the Treasury.

I want to say a word or two about kit. There are major problems in the procurement budget and the report of the hon. Member for Walsall, South laid out a saga of the most serious problems that have occurred over the years. I make no attempt to explain them—the contracts are immensely complicated and very difficult—but I warmly congratulate him on the way in which he handled some buffoon called Stourton on the "Today" programme the other day. He giggled like a schoolgirl as he tried to persuade the hon. Gentleman that the SA80 and the Tornado were the most difficult problems in the procurement budget when many others are far more serious.

I am not an expert and I do not understand some of the technical and complex difficulties, but the House and the public should be aware that most of our equipment is excellent: soldiers have never had better or more suitable clothing; the Challenger 2 main battle tank is the best of its type in the world; the Warrior is the most superb battle taxi and the vehicle of choice for all infantry on the battlefield; the Apache helicopter is the most formidable piece of equipment; and the AS90 gun is a fantastic and remarkable piece of kit, as is the light gun. It would be ridiculous for the public to run away with the assumption that the forces' kit is in a parlous state, although there are some serious deficiencies.

The SA80 rifle represents an unhappy state of affairs, but that is being rectified. I do not wish to brag, but I am an extremely good shot with a rifle and I have, on many occasions, pumped large numbers of rounds straight into

[Mr. Soames]

the bull with an SA80. It has problems, but they are being fixed and it is a good piece of kit. It is bad news for the House to be under the impression that our soldiers' equipment is wholly inefficient. It is not, but there are glaring omissions and they have to be sorted out.

I understand from the Secretary of State's remarks that he intends to make changes in the way that training is carried out. I make no complaint about them—I do not know what they are—but I want to say a word or two about training and discipline, which are very important. It is true, not an idle boast, that the British Army is, man for man, the best fighting force in the world. In the Falklands, in the Gulf and, most recently, in Bosnia and Kosovo, its enemies and allies have been truly amazed at the fitness, determination, courage and professionalism of British soldiers. Why are they so good? The answer is simple and, I suspect, not well understood outside the armed forces. In no other army in the world can a soldier depend on the men around him in the way that one can in the British Army.

From Waterloo to Alamein and from Goose Green to the Euphrates and Kosovo, British soldiers have proved time and again that they can face tremendous odds and triumph. If one asks a solider what is the key to that confidence, he will immediately answer, "Training and discipline." It is therefore a matter of the first importance that the system that produces young men and women of that calibre must not be altered in such a way that it produces but pale imitations of what is required. Ministers must not drag the Army into being a mirror image of the society that it serves, for the services have a totally different and separate ethos—one of discipline and service. Ministers must realise that, however disagreeable it may be to contemplate, the essence of military training is to prepare soldiers to fight in a bloody, frightening and exhausting war.

Young men and women may need to be called on to use all their reserves of physical and mental stamina. They therefore require intense physical training, drill and strict discipline. That sometimes leads to people wanting to leave the forces. That has always happened and always will, but among those who remain will be those who will be able to cope with the exceptional demands of modern combat. The danger that faces the Army in making changes to training is that if it gets it wrong, those who come through the system will not be up to the task.

On the question of Europe, I want the Government to know that the proposals and the way that they are being handled represent very bad news indeed. Let us start at the beginning. None of us disagrees with sensible, useful, straightforward co-operation on defence matters with our European partners. We all favour that, and Europe should do more—the previous Administration were clear about that—but our activities have to remain very real. Therefore I must ask for assurances, as I have not yet had them from Ministers, that the proposals will not lead to the undermining of the cohesion, unity and credibility of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. We regard the proposals as they stand as dangerous.

I wholly agree that we have hidden behind United States military power for too long. It would welcome Europe doing more, but our efforts must be for real and not what has become standard, windy European rhetoric. I do not believe that our Government want a European army, although clearly Mr. Prodi does, and they need to amend title V of the European Union treaty explicitly to rule out the involvement of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice and thus retain full control of our armed forces, enabling us to make the arrangements that we want with the countries with which we want to make them. It is clear that we need to press ahead with those arrangements in a sensible framework, but it is extremely important that we acknowledge and understand the concerns being expressed by our friends and allies in the United States. One cannot but be conscious of the deep unease of some knowledgeable and experienced Senators and Members of the House of Representatives and it is essential that the Government persuade them of the case.

The plan, I gather, is to create a force of 60,000 men on 60 days' notice, but the Government must define its tasks much more clearly. Crisis management could well mean real fighting, in which case what is the arrangement for reserves? I hope that the Ministry of Defence is thinking carefully about the hazards as the fighting effectiveness of ground forces—which represents a problem because of the nature of multinational operations—must not be undermined. Achieving that effectiveness is much easier for the Navy and the Royal Air Force. How many men will be in training behind the 60,000 for roulement purposes? The point that has to be made is that the new proposals need to be low on rhetoric and high on substance, which is a thoroughly non-European proposition.

This country is incredibly lucky with its armed forces. The Secretary of State has a high responsibility and we all pray that he gets it right.

7.8 pm

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): I add my tribute to the late Michael Colvin and his wife. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) eloquently put into words much of what those of us in the House who knew him have been feeling over the past few days. I have happy memories of visits to the Balkans made with Michael and my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), when we saw all those qualities that have been mentioned. He was well informed, committed and determined, and he communicated those qualities with the greatest charm, which endeared him to people not only in the House but everywhere in life.

We have limited time this evening and I want to deal with two subjects: the defence budget and the European defence policy. After my experiences over the past 18 months and before, I pay tribute to the dedication, loyalty, commitment and professionalism of our armed forces. I have always believed that, too often, they are asked to carry more than their fair share of the burden of this nation's defence and foreign policies and its values and standards. I certainly feel that today. They are trained to be effective, to take orders and to act on behalf of others, and, in my experience, they do so without protestation. However, I believe that we ask too much of them and we must carefully consider whether our policies are the right ones and how we can carry them out.

I have been a little disappointed by some of the debate because party politics have entered into our discussions. These issues are far more important than short-term

political bickering. The defence of our nation is crucial to our population. Politicians of whatever colour have a great responsibility for the defence of our people, and should not allow themselves to be diverted by short-term political bickering.

I realise why the Conservative party argues that the Government are not doing enough, that they are not acting in time and that there are not enough resources. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South said, it is as though history began in May 1997. We should debate the far more serious issues that face us rather than make points across the political divide.

Politicians throughout the world have a great responsibility not to demand more from their armed forces than they are able to deliver, in whatever country they are deployed. Politicians have too often forgotten the well tried military doctrine that when considering whether to make an intervention, we must first decide whether it is a just cause, whether it can be won, what the costs will be in resources and especially in people, and whether they will be proportionate to the other considerations. Those tests are too often ignored by the international community. Decisions have been taken in good faith with the best of intentions—to defend democracy wherever it may be—without taking the time to assess the consequences over a period and how we will be judged against those tests.

The international community has not yet understood that decisions must be taken much more quickly than they were taken during the cold war, which lasted for 30 or 40 years. In those days, before an intervention took place much thought was given to the consequences. The west thought about what the Soviets or the Chinese would say, and whether it would add to or ease international tension. If we were to act without the United Nations, we thought about the response of the other side. If we were to act within the United Nations, we considered what we had to take on board before we went to the Security Council for its approval.

There was time to consider those matters during the cold war, but now we often do not have that luxury. When faced with an aggressor, an oppressor or someone who is acting against the interests of democracy worldwide, we often have to make a much more speedy decision. The international community must give greater thought to these issues in the various forums, whether it be the United Nations or NATO.

A principal consideration is whether we have the resources to prosecute an action for a cause that we feel is just. We often forget that over the past 10 years, £7.7 billion has been taken out of our military budget. Similar figures have been taken out of the budgets of other countries with which we have alliances to defend democracy. I am not sure whether any more can be taken out of those budgets to enable us to defend democracy and to intervene when we believe it is necessary.

That is not an excuse for not making efficiency gains. I think that we can make efficiency gains. There is a learning curve, and there are better ways of doing things—logistics, stock control and other important activities of our military forces can be made more efficient. Improvements can be made, and the incentive should be that the MOD is allowed to keep any gains for investment in whatever it believes to be important in the years ahead, and which Parliament endorses.

There is a much deeper question to consider than the short-term party political bickering. If, over the next 10 years and beyond, we face the same amount of requests for intervention that we have had over the past 10 years, will we be able to fulfil the task that we have set ourselves with present resources, even with the gains that we may obtain from efficiency savings? I have grave doubts about that. We may not be able to make the right decisions on what needs to be done to obtain justice and to defend democracy, because we will know that we do not have the resources to carry through a just war—it must be won and the cost must not be disproportionate. We must think about the safety of the people on the ground taking the military action. Considerations about training and preparing for the future are crucial, as hon. Members on both sides of the House have said.

NATO and European Union countries, and all countries that believe in a democratic world, will face those problems in the period ahead. The House must take more time to consider this issue—it will be one of the items in the Budget in a few weeks time.

My second point is whether there should be a European security identity. I agree with the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) that a European security identity does not convey much, but a European security defence policy does. I am disappointed, but I realise why some members of the Conservative who veer to the right or who want to appease the right try to make everything travelling in a European direction appear to be alien to British democracy. Those who take that view have misjudged the importance of a European policy on defence, which is to cement and reinforce the cross-Atlantic policy on defence.

There are two views of Europe in the United States. One is that Europeans are going down their own track, want to do their own thing, will break away from the alliance and will have their own policy, even furth of Europe, as they say in Scotland. They are worried about that, as strong believers in NATO. Other Americans say that it is high time that Europeans, some of whom have stronger economies than the American economy, pay a bit more to defend democracy worldwide, and make a bigger contribution to NATO. When one visits Washington, the inevitable question one is asked is, "What does the defence of Pristina have to do with the defence of Texas?" That must be explained.

Europe must recognise that in this interrelated world, if Europe makes a larger contribution to the defence of the democratic world that will not weaken or break up the NATO alliance, but will strengthen it. I do not believe that NATO can be strengthened in the long run unless Europe—that crucially includes the United Kingdom—is prepared to make a greater contribution.

Those are the key issues that affect us. We must ask ourselves not whether there should be a European security policy, but how we can make that policy effective. At what pace should change take place? Who will contribute which capability, and will there be specialisms? How will the troops who will serve Europe and NATO be commanded? What will the political management structure be in the longer term, especially as more countries join NATO and the European Union? What are the implications for the procurement of equipment? How will future suppliers of equipment accommodate the need for a greater integration in the use and consistency of that equipment? How can non-NATO European Union

[Mr. Doug Henderson]

countries make a contribution to particular efforts? How can non-EU members of NATO make a greater contribution to Europe's defence?

Those questions are crucial, and hon. Members who are interested in foreign policy and defence matters should concentrate their minds on them rather than have a futile and somewhat anachronistic argument about whether there should be a future close linking of armed forces in Europe. Surely common sense tells us all that, if we have common goals in a democratic Europe and if we are to maintain that political integrity, we shall often have to have a pretty common view of how things should develop in this world.

We understand why the Secretary of State had other commitments today, and we are very pleased that he is able to attend the debate. In the period ahead he will have to deal with many of these crucial issues, and more.

We look forward to the Government's response. The Government have my support for the strategic defence review, which I believe puts us on the right road towards meeting a number of the demands to which I have referred. There will be hiccups, but I think the House continues to believe that the defence of the nation is above party politics, and will give support where it is due to the Government of the country.

7.21 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): As always, I shall be extremely brief.

With the death of Michael Colvin, the House has lost one of the dwindling band of Members who have served in the military and seen active service. That is a loss not just to the House, but to the armed services. It is not the Government's fault that no Minister—indeed, I think, no member of the Government—has served in the military; that is an inevitable effect of the peace dividend and the victory that was won in the cold war, partly through the steadfastness and sacrifices of our men and women in uniform over 50 years. I think, however, that because of the Government's relative inexperience in these matters, it behoves them to connect more closely with the military at all levels—not only with service chiefs, but all the way down—and to listen to what they have to say.

On Saturday morning, I shall address the annual convention of RAF wives in Tidworth, and on Saturday night I shall address a gathering of specialists from the defence medical services. I wish that I could convey to both groups the message that I knew their concerns were being attended to, and that I knew attention was being paid to the problems of overstretch from which both have suffered. I am not sure I can do that, but I know that the world in which I have operated in past years—the world in which I have seen the British military close up at the sharp end, performing magnificently; as I have said before, they are the best little army in the world—is much more dangerous than the more predictable world in which I grew up, when people trained initially not on an SA80 but on a Lee Enfield rifle.

Today's edition of the *Daily Mail* contained a remarkable piece by General Sir Peter de la Billière about discipline, and the possible effect of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill on the armed forces. While I am grateful to the Liberal Democrats for lending me one of their seats on the Standing Committee, I shall speak not for them but for myself, and for what I believe to be the interests of serving soldiers.

These are important issues. We have a duty of care, as service chiefs have a duty of care. It is vital that we exercise that duty, and I trust that we will. Ministers have produced for us, on paper, their smart procurement, their new programmes and their new formations. That is fine, but they must also pay attention to some of what is already in place.

I make no apology for referring again to the deficiencies and unaccountability of the MOD's own police force, which is a problem that must be addressed. Ministers must look at the handling of the Tony Geraghty case, the handling of the Colonel Wylde case and, above all, the handling of the Stankovic case. It is two and a half years since that man was arrested. He was never charged, and the investigation cost, officially, £266,000. In fact, it cost more than £1 million of taxpayers' money in terms of the time of serving officers and the sacrificed alternatives—that is, the work that they would otherwise have done.

At the end of it all, the man is still serving. His career is ruined; he has spent all the money he has, and some of the money he does not have, to try to defend himself; and what has he got back from the armed forces—from the Army legal fund? Not one penny. I should like to hear from the Secretary of State how Major Stankovic will be compensated, and, if he is not to be compensated, what that says to us about the duty of care.

Last Friday I had the honour of addressing cadets at Sandhurst: indeed, the honour not just of addressing them but of listening to them. What fine young men and women they were—a little older than their predecessors of a generation ago, because 80 per cent. are college graduates. They are prepared to serve: they are prepared to make sacrifices and commitments, and to face the dangers. We, the employers, must be worthy of them. We must have a system that is worthy of them—and I am not sure that we have such a system.

7.25 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

declines to approve a defence policy which has been used to make war upon innocent civilians in Iraq and Yugoslavia under NATO command, contrary to the provisions of the United Nations Charter, without any explicit authorisation by the House of Commons elected to exercise democratic control over the Government of the day, which involves the use of cluster bombs, and which is based upon the possession of, and threat to use, nuclear weapons, which have been declared illegal by both the International Court of Justice and a Scottish court.

I apologise on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who cannot take part in the debate because his wife is in hospital and he is with her.

Because of the shortage of time, I intend to speak about only two issues, the proposed national missile defence system and Kosovo. In June this year, President Clinton will make a decision on the requirement of an NMD system, intended to protect the United States from a limited number of ballistic missiles that it believes might be launched by rogue states such as Korea and Iran.

Clearly, if such a deployment went ahead it would have far reaching implications for many countries, including ours. The most immediate implication is that the US would contravene the anti-ballistic missile treaty as it stands, which I think should concern us all.

At a recent meeting of NATO parliamentary members in Brussels, it was clear that opinions in the US about the proposed modification of the treaty differed greatly from those in Europe—and it was not just the French who were alarmed. Russia, of course, has a major interest in the treaty, and its initial reaction to the change is hostile. By contrast, both the Senate and the House of Representatives have approved it by huge votes. The United Nations General Assembly has adopted a resolution supporting the "inviolability and integrity" of the treaty, which I consider fairly encouraging, but it is clear from the votes in the US that the Americans are determined to go ahead with some form of national missile defence system. That means that the rest of the alliance, and, indeed, the wider international community, need to engage in a serious political dialogue with them.

From a NATO point of view, this is not a good time to start tearing up treaties. That would put stress on existing treaties, stop START 2, and almost certainly lead to a new arms race. As most of us would agree, the ABM treaty is the cornerstone of arms control. I also think we are entitled to ask the United States why it wants to proceed in this way. Countries in Europe will be left with no defence, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook)—although I am afraid that his speech was truncated for reasons of time. It is worrying that the United States will be able to deploy nuclear weapons that could be intercepted above our heads, in the stratosphere. Science tells us that we will be perfectly safe, but having observed science during my many years on this earth, I am not terribly convinced. I certainly need more convincing.

We should also consider the perceived threat from North Korea, which can barely feed its own people. Would it not be better to intensify the diplomatic efforts that are already being made to return it to the family of nations? Another rogue state that has been mentioned is Libya, but we have just resumed diplomatic relations with Libya, and the news from Iran has been rather good of late. Iraq is struggling to survive. We should question the threat, and ask whether it is really serious.

What about the long-standing theory of deterrence? Why does it not work for rogue states? I do not think that there is a threat from there, but clearly they would face complete annihilation if they targeted any western democracy. It leads us to ask who is pushing the buttons on that one. It is time we had a debate in the Chamber, because it is not only the Opposition who want to know the Government's attitude to the ABM treaty. I would like to know it as well; I think that other Back Benchers would too.

I turn to Kosovo. I have read the debate last week. I could not be here as I was in Brussels with NATO, but I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who suggested that Kosovo is on the brink of disaster. I am on record as firmly opposing the Government's going to war with NATO against Yugoslavia. I said that it would make things far worse for everyone in Yugoslavia. I personally think that I have been vindicated by the appalling events that have unfolded since NATO conducted its so-called humanitarian war—a war to end ethnic cleansing, which did not start until the bombing started, and a war in which NATO decided to become the air force for a bunch of terrorists.

Mr. Keetch: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Mahon: I am sorry, I have only 15 minutes and I do not intend to give way.

The terrorists were led by Agim Ceku, the ethnic cleanser of the Krajina, and Hashim Thaci, a man with blood on his hands who has successfully organised the cleansing of more than 250,000 Serbs, Montenegrins, Roma, Bosniaks, Jews and others from Kosovo, under the nose of KFOR troops, who are there supposedly to protect them.

In October, I too visited Kosovo. I found that, apart from Bernard Kouchner, everyone on the ground agreed that that ethnic cleansing was organised by the Kosovo Liberation Army under Thaci's command. That view is reinforced by a growing body of evidence from sources such as Amnesty International, whose latest report at the end of December said that

> violence against Serbs and other minorities (including moderate Albanians) was still increasing and pointed to a failure by the UN Mission to protect human rights. Amnesty is concerned that the UN Mission and KFOR appear reluctant to take steps to bring the KLA to justice.

There have been nearly 500 murders since KFOR took over Kosovo and thousands of house burnings, yet not a single KLA leader has been referred to the war crimes tribunal. Why? During that period, there has been no statement to the House about what has been happening to the minorities. No serious Government-initiated debate has taken place.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe report on human rights violations in Kosovo, which was published in December, confirms that, since KFOR entered the province in June, there has been a systematic ethnic cleansing campaign. The report says:

> Kosovo Serbs, Roma, Muslim Slavs and others have been targeted by elements of the Kosovo Albanian population for expulsion, harassment, intimidation, house-burning, abductions and death. It highlights two horrific trends; the targeting of vulnerable elderly Kosovo Serbs and the increasing participation of juveniles in human rights violations, underlining the growing intolerance that has emerged within the Kosovo Albanian community.

The report contains many witness statements concerning KLA involvement in the violence both before and after the demilitarisation deadline of 19 September, including most recently by members of the so-called Kosovo Protection Corps.

The OSCE concludes that, despite denials by the KLA leadership,

> it seems clear that the extent of KLA involvement is of such a nature and scope that the question of explicit or tacit involvement by the leadership require close examination by the International Community.

I could not agree more.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has confirmed that 250,000 people have been driven out of Kosovo since June. The historian Paul Polansky, who lived among the Roma in Kosovo between July and November last year, has documented the discrimination against Romany people by the UN, NATO and major aid

[Mrs. Mahon]

agencies. After calling attention to a lack of medical facilities, food and security, he was threatened with expulsion by the very agency that had invited him there: the UNHCR.

Polansky points out that, prior to NATO's war, the Roma lived in integrated settlements. Now they are being ethnically cleansed because of the colour of their skin. The eminent broadcaster and journalist Jonathan Dimbleby confirmed what is happening to the Roma, under the noses of NATO, in the excellent television documentary "A Kosovo Journey." Those who supported the war should watch it.

The Jewish leader, Cedomir Prlincevic, president of the Jewish community in Pristina, was driven out by the KLA when two dozen armed men broke into his family's apartment. He says:

> My mother who is 80 years old suffered a heart attack because it reminded her of 1943 when Hitler's SS units broke into her apartment in the same way.

It is a bitter irony that while the rest of Yugoslavia remains a genuinely multi-ethnic society, in Kosovo, where NATO presides, attempts to create an ethnically pure state by terror is proceeding apace. We need a debate on what has been happening there while NATO has been in charge.

The House must debate the situation in Mitrovica, where some remaining Serbs appear to be making a last stand. In October, I visited Mitrovica bridge. I talked to our forces and to French forces. I have talked to other people since. Everything I have read and everyone to whom I spoke in Brussels last week supported the view that the latest trouble in Mitrovica was started when the KLA threw a grenade at a UN bus and killed two elderly Serbs. Then the Serbs killed the Albanians. We then got the stand-off and the big push at the bridge.

I disagree with the Secretary of State, who said that the incident was good natured. It did not look like that on television. We should thank our soldiers for their very good efforts at the bridge to stop what could have been a very nasty situation.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I want to make it clear that I was quoting the colonel who appeared on television. He used the expression "good natured". I did not have any independent view of the events. I rely simply on what he saw and described.

Mrs. Mahon: It did not look like that on television. We should stop casting aspersions at French troops, who have had a terrifically difficult job.

What did surprise me—it is worth mentioning—is the fact that Lord Robertson, now Secretary-General of NATO, almost went into war mode when that event occurred. It is wrong that the Albanians have had to leave their homes—let me get that on the record—just as it is wrong for anyone else to be ethnically cleansed, yet we have heard no statement about 250,000 Serbs and other minorities being expelled. There have been no notions of regret there.

Now Kouchner suddenly wants to reintegrate Albanians. I believe that, with that integration, the KLA will go back into northern Mitrovica. The Serbs will again be expelled or killed. There is no doubt about that. Reintegration is wrong at this time. It seems that the Serbs are not allowed to defend themselves at all. All of a sudden, there are big meetings when it happens to the Albanians.

The French, who, as I have said, have had a most difficult job, have been seen as too pro-Serb. We should remember that, the other week, two of their soldiers were injured by Albanian extremists. If that carries on, sooner or later, some of them might be killed, so they deserve our admiration and should not be smeared. As I have said, Kouchner is determined to move Albanians back across the river. I think that that will be a disaster.

Even more dangerous is the situation on the border between Kosovo and Serbia. I recommend that my hon. Friends read Jonathan Steele's article in *The Guardian* today. Of course, he is no friend of the Serbs. He supported the NATO bombing and still does, but he points out:

> The new trouble spot is the south-western corner of Serbia which is largely populated by Albanians. Former members of the KLA have started to operate in the border villages, carrying guns, wearing paramilitary uniforms and attacking Serb police in an apparent bid to provoke a Serb reaction and NATO help.

If that scenario sounds familiar, it is because exactly the same situation prevailed in Kosovo before NATO intervened. What is more, the same—successful—tactics have been used before, after which NATO became the KLA's air force.

I should like to give Stephen Glover the last word on the subject. In an article entitled "How we are aiding the ethnic cleansers", he wrote in Saturday's edition of the *Daily Mail*:

> Despite assurances, the truth is that despite the high-flown rhetoric about a multi-national Kosovo, NATO has disgracefully failed the Serbs—this has been a dreadful betrayal as well as a denial of the Serbs' human rights.

He continued:

> American sources within NATO are up to their old trick of demonising Serbs—accusing those in Mitrovica of receiving guns from Belgrade as though they might be expected to defend themselves with pea-shooters—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Time is up.

7.41 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Perhaps because both my grandfathers were parsons, I feel moved to preface my remarks with a text. It reads:

> I remind the House that the defence of the realm is the paramount responsibility of any Government. Defence policy cannot be determined by Treasury diktat . . . Will he—

the Secretary of State—

> stand up to the Treasury and demonstrate Britain's lead in Europe by reversing the damaging cuts in the defence budget? We owe that to our armed forces, which remain the best in the world.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1448.]

Those wise last words are the ever-relevant and classically fitting parliamentary epitaph of our late hon. and gallant Friend, Michael Colvin. His political wisdom was a measure not of his specialist knowledge alone, but of his profound personal experience, human sympathy and understanding, and willingness to listen as much as to speak out.

Michael bore his military professionalism lightly. His formative years as a cadet at Sandhurst, and later in the Grenadiers overseas—at Suez, in Cyprus and in Berlin—set him apart as someone who spoke only when he knew his subject. Few of us understood the international and industrial dimensions of defence better than he did.

The phrase defence diplomacy is often used today. Michael, and his inseparable Nichola, made friends for Britain wherever they went. Their untimely and tragic death impoverishes all of us.

Just recently, the Royal Auxiliary Air Force proudly celebrated its 75th anniversary. In my own constituency, the reformed 600 (City of London) Squadron held an impressive parade at its home base, at Royal Air Force Northolt. The parade was to mark its reformation from the merger of No. 1 and No. 3 Maritime Headquarters Units of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force.

Only last Thursday, 24 February, Hillingdon borough council awarded the freedom of entry to the borough to Royal Air Force Northolt. The year 2000 is the 60th anniversary of the battle of Britain, in which Royal Air Force Northolt played such a heroic part. The battle of Britain would not have been won without the auxiliaries, who constituted one third of the pilots engaged.

When I hear that the Royal Air Force is 20 per cent. short of fast-jet pilots, I wonder whether the lessons of Air Force history have been learned. I am not being churlish. No. 1 Maritime Headquarters Unit of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force did a marvellous job, and its previous commanding officer, Wing Commander Edna Partridge, was an exceptional commanding officer of it at RAF Northolt. Belatedly, the importance of wider use of reservists to British air power is being recognised—in headquarters manning at home and overseas, ground defence, intelligence, helicopter support, aeromedical evacuation, and, last but not least, flying duties.

I remember making my maiden speech, 30 years ago, on getting the Royal Auxiliary Air Force flying again. Sometimes a political idea has a long germination period. I was therefore pleased to hear the Minister of State make it plain today that auxiliary pilots will now be able to fly again in all aircraft types. I believe that no service specialisation should be precluded to the auxiliaries. They are so cost effective.

I hope, too, that we shall see more Royal Auxiliary Air Force-formed units again. I think that 600 Squadron is a very good example of such a unit. I see the Minister nod. In Scotland, 603 Squadron has recently reformed. There are, therefore, precedents for such units.

I suggest that we start with heavy lift transport aircraft. One of the best legacies of the previous, Conservative Government was the Reserve Forces Act 1996. I suggest that we use that legislation to employ the Ukrainian heavy lift Antonov 124 aircraft of an existing British air carrier, manned by auxiliaries under the sponsored Reserves scheme. The aeroplane has double the payload range of the Boeing C17 and can carry seven Apache helicopters, to the C17's three. I doubt whether the Royal Air Force, with its budget, could find more than two C17s—which is hardly a viable inventory.

As for the A400M, it does not have the volume to take even a single main battle tank. The Antonov can carry two such tanks. The A400M also would not be available until 2007. I believe that the Mozambique floods have shown us the clear necessity for the United Kingdom to possess a heavy lift capability now.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I am very concerned that the hon. Gentleman is willing to throw away 62,000 jobs in the United Kingdom. I agree with him on the Antonov 124, but just wonder whether he has considered the fact that the A400M is being designed to meet the procurement need, and that carrying a battle tank is not one of the requirements.

Mr. Wilkinson: I understand that, and shall try to amplify the argument in the remaining remarks that I have to offer the House.

The transport fleet should be based on two types—the existing C-130J, which has a huge British industrial component, and the Antonov. To do so would leave funds to spare, to maintain the Royal Air Force's fighting capability with the joint strike fighter, which will be crucial to re-equip both the Royal Air Force Harrier fleet and the Royal Navy's Harrier aircraft—which are now operated jointly, under Joint Force 2000. It would also enable funds to be available for more support helicopters, which we need right across the board for all three services, not least for the Royal Marines, to replace their commando Sea King helicopters. Moreover, the Eurofighter Typhoon—if it is to be an effective fighting aircraft well into the next century—will require a beyond visual range air to air missile system.

I regard those capabilities, put together, as more important than providing funding for the A400M. If Airbus Industrie needs to develop new projects, I suggest that the funding should be devoted to the A3XX rival to the Boeing jumbo jet successor.

In short, the Government's rhetoric on the Royal Air Force Reserves needs to be translated into ever more vigorous action. However, the Government are making tentative steps in the right direction. I am pleased about the formed units starting again, and that more personnel are being recruited. More can and should be done. Sometimes, we forget the wealth and diversity of skills and talents in the civil community, waiting to be deployed, especially among the youth who perhaps have insufficient opportunities in the big cities in which they live.

This is the information age—the electronic age. There are skills aplenty in those fields in the civilian community that could be deployed in the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. If we do so, the service as a whole will benefit and the current overstretch of Royal Air Force personnel will diminish.

7.50 pm

Mr. Jamie Cann (Ipswich): Conservative Members have talked about capability. I believe that the strategic defence review and the White Paper have led to a capability that we have not had for many years, and certainly for two decades: the ability to be on the ground in brigades, serviced and covered by air, in two different theatres for six months at a time. The overstretch caused by Northern Ireland has prevented that for a long time.

I welcome the fact that, after about 20 years, we have stopped pretending that we have aircraft carriers and are proposing to replace the Fearless and the Intrepid with

[Mr. Jamie Cann]

craft that will carry up to 40 or 50 aeroplanes. A lot of Conservative Members have talked for a long time about replacing them, but they never got round to doing it. Labour has nothing to apologise for in its defence programme.

Unlike the odd Conservative Member and some Labour Members, I am proud of what we have done in Bosnia and Kosovo. I am proud that we were prepared to step in and stop genocide. I am afraid that I do not worry too much about minor losses—it is a terrible thing to say—among civilians, when we prevented hundreds of thousands of such losses, getting people off the mountainsides and back to their homes in Kosovo. It is only a shame that between ourselves and the United Nations we have not managed to get as many people home in Bosnia as we should have by now; but that concerns not the defence forces but the way in which we organise ourselves in the European Union and the UN.

Neither the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) nor anyone else in the House has ever managed to tell me what else we could have done. We intervened and saved lives, and I am proud of that. Some lives were lost but, unfortunately, since the days of jousting in about 1300, it has been impossible to fight a war without some civilians being killed. Who can tell me that we as a nation and NATO as a whole did not do the absolute maximum, at the risk of our own people's lives, to ensure that as few civilians as possible were killed? I am sorry that some colleagues are not as proud as I am of what we did.

The anti-ballistic missile treaty has been mentioned. I am not sure that it has anything to do with the White Paper but, as the subject was not ruled out of order, my response must also be in order. The Americans are proposing to tackle a distinct threat posed by the fact that nations such as Libya, Iraq and Syria, through technology developed in China and North Korea, will soon be able to put a missile into this country. That missile could contain a nuclear warhead, chemicals, nerve gas or whatever else someone such as Saddam or Gaddafi can come up with.

The Americans want to put a missile site in Alaska with 100 interceptors that can stop that happening to them, and they are prepared, if we pay our share, to put the same facility in northern Europe to stop it happening to us. I believe that £3 billion spent over 10 years among all the EU states is not a bad investment to stop anthrax being spread in Southwark, for example, where I live in London.

The proposal has nothing to do with Russia or China. Russia has 4,500 ballistic missiles of which perhaps 1,500 are operational. The scale of operation that the Americans are proposing cannot stop those, but it can stop the rogue missile: if five interceptors are fired at it, one will probably get it. The proposal is eminently sensible and we should go along with it. I am sure that if the people of Halifax were told about it seriously—if any press were attending this debate, for example—they might even agree to it, too.

People have talked about a nuclear strike. We are not about to launch a nuclear strike against Baghdad—we are a civilised nation, for goodness sake—but we have to take defensive measures against rogue states. Nuclear strikes have not happened for 50 years, with the Mexican stand-off between huge powers—I was a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for one whole year—and, frankly, that has served us well.

I think that we should arm all our 10 submarines with Tomahawk missiles. They should be offshore supporting every task force that we have. They can reach 500 miles inland, and 80 per cent. of the world's population and nearly every capital city other than Moscow are in that range. They are a wonderful back-up for our forces.

I believe that the strategic defence review and the White Paper were right and that the Defence Committee was right to support them. Those who would call the Falkland Islands the Malvinas at the first disagreement are wrong. Both Government and Opposition Members should support the motion.

7.59 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I join others in paying a brief tribute to a remarkable colleague. Michael Colvin was the last member of the Defence Committee to have served in action—coincidentally in an operation in which my father took part. He was a distinguished colleague, a very kind man and a good friend to many of us on both sides of the House. The way in which he and Nichola died is, as many have said, a tragedy that the whole House mourns.

The White Paper states:

the principles and conclusions of the Review—

the strategic defence review—

are proving as robust and well-founded as we expected them to be . . . the success of our forces in Kosovo

shows this. I shall argue that our experience in Kosovo and the equally important operation in Chechnya point to the opposite conclusion.

The original SDR document said:

there is today no direct military threat to the United Kingdom or Western Europe. Nor do we foresee the re-emergence of such a threat.

That contrasts with a document published last year by the United States commission on national security, set up by the President with the support of Congress, which says:

America will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland, and our military superiority will not entirely protect us. . . States, terrorists, and other disaffected groups will acquire weapons of mass destruction and mass disruption, and some will use them. Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers.

What a contrast between the complacency of the SDR and the realism of the American approach.

I wish to argue that, for that fundamental reason, the SDR was wrong to put all our eggs in the basket of an expeditionary approach, and that that approach, such as it is, is much too narrowly focused. At the end of my speech I shall touch briefly on the three horsemen galloping through the armed forces: budgetary cuts; the European security and defence identity and political correctness.

The White Paper makes much of Kosovo. It is too early to judge the success of the operation, although I share many of the concerns that some Labour Members, including the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), have expressed about it. However, two aspects of the Kosovo operation are relevant to the future of our armed forces.

The first is that if Slobodan Milosevic had held out for another two or three weeks and we had had to go in, we would have been in dire straits. We would have had very quickly to persuade at least three of our major allies,

including America, to join us in that operation. Those who are aware of the delicate state of relations between the White House and Capitol Hill at that time will understand the considerable difficulties that that would have entailed. The French and Germans were also showing little enthusiasm.

For Britain, having to send in troops would have meant calling up between 15,000 and 25,000 reservists, many from units threatened with cuts or in the course of downsizing—a dreadful word—as a result of the outcome of the SDR. That hastily slung together force—originally designed for a different purpose as a peacekeeping force—would have been sent in with winter coming on within weeks for a task for which it was ill equipped. We were very lucky that Milosevic collapsed when he did.

That brings me to the second aspect, which is Russia's role. Whatever the balance of factors that led Milosevic to cave in, there is no doubt that Russian pressure was one of them. We miserably failed to acknowledge that. Indeed, had General Jackson obeyed his orders from Wesley Clark, we would have gone out of our way to humiliate the Russians.

I have been privileged to go to Russia twice in the past four years. During my visit last year with the Defence Committee, I was struck by how bitter and marginalised Russians across a range of political views feel. We have moved from Kosovo dominating television news to Chechnya dominating it. There is some truth in Russia's accusation against us of hypocrisy. Of course we are right to criticise some of what has happened in Chechnya, such as the barbaric looting of some civilian areas and villages long after any fighters have passed through and the treatment of some of the Chechen prisoners. However, at no point have I heard loud voices from the west acknowledging that, as the legitimate Government, the Russians were entitled to restore the rule of law in Chechnya, which was the greatest centre of the organised crime that now controls almost half the Russian economy.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Brazier: I cannot because of the time constraint.

We killed 500 innocent civilians, which was a remarkably small number in the circumstances, in our bombing of Kosovo. When we criticise the Russians for the 30,000 civilians whom they have killed in Chechnya, let us remember that, while there have been many deaths that should not have occurred, they did not have the benefit of smart bombs and they had to fight in much more difficult territory—built-up areas that could not be overcome simply with air power.

Faced with blanket condemnation from the west, Russian foreign policy is moving into three grooves, all of which would be familiar to some extent to analysts from the 19th century. The first is a resurgent fear of the west. I supported the reunification of Germany, but the Russians can see NATO creeping towards them and they hear Mr. Prodi say, as he did in Latvia last week, that we should extend article 5 to members of the European Union. He said:

> Any attack or aggression against an EU member would be an attack or aggression against the whole EU.

What message does that send to Russia about the Baltic states joining the EU?

The second strand developing in Russian foreign policy is that it is looking for friends where it can. Even a year ago, analysts were openly talking at cocktail parties in Moscow about the fact that Russia was selling nuclear and other technologies of mass destruction to third world countries, most notably Iran. The third strand is that it has become clear that the one thing that distinguishes Chechnya from Kosovo and the western attitude towards Belgrade from the western attitude towards Moscow is that one country has nuclear weapons and the other does not. That has been noticed in Washington, where it is believed that 28 third-world countries will have a nuclear capability in the next five to 10 years.

I am proud to serve under the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the Chairman of the Defence Committee. In his excellent speech to the Royal United Services Institute after the strategic defence review, he said that we had not yet seen a strategic security review, which would have

> to address the problems of "asymmetric" threats: terrorism, possibly using crude chemical and biological weapons . . . the other weapons which the weak may choose to deploy against the strong.

He went on to point out:

> SDR has not sufficiently addressed the problems of dealing with asymmetric threats

or the critical role that reserves should play.

We should remember the Japanese subway bombing. A similar event could happen in our underground, involving thousands rather than dozens with the effective use of chemical weapons. For nearly 30 years, up to 18 battalion-sized units—we only have 40 infantry battalions in the regular Army and 15 in the Territorial Army—have been stationed in Northern Ireland. That should remind us of the dangers of a serious terrorist threat armed with weapons of mass destruction against this country. Yet the Government, for the first time, have offered the House estimates that specifically rule out defending the home base for the foreseeable future.

In America, 177 units of the National Guard have been formed with a specialist nuclear, biological and chemical monitoring role. Behind their 10 regular Army divisions, there are 13 National Guard divisions. Those divisions can be used for home defence, supplying the vast manpower-intensive effort involved in searching for terrorists. They can also be used—and this brings me to my secondary point about the shape of our expeditionary capability—to back the United States' expeditionary capability. At this very moment, the American sector in Bosnia is under the command of the National Guard's Black Horse Divisional Headquarters, from Texas.

National Guard and US Marine reserve units have also been used to huge effect in the Gulf and in subsequent operations, supplying tanks, artillery, fast jet fighters and engineers. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on his comments on the Royal Auxiliary Air Force; we need some flying units to be formed, and then we will be in business.

Our armed forces are in danger of becoming great at fighting wars elsewhere, but unable to protect the home base. Also, however, our ability to sustain an operation at a distance is extremely weak, as to do so requires reserves of manpower, equipment and formed units. The European defence initiative is supposed to be sustainable for only a year, and that just about epitomises the muddle in the thinking that produced it.

[Mr. Brazier]

Finally, I shall say a few words about the three horsemen that I mentioned at the outset. Much has been said about the figures that show the collapse in funding, but a few examples will show how bad the situation is. The programme of exercises has been greatly cut—inevitably—because of overstretch, but there was too little money left in the budget even to fund the few remaining high-intensity exercises that were planned.

I have spoken about the married quarters problem for 13 years, on and off, and the House has heard me with tolerance. A total of £11 million has been taken off the married quarters repair programme, so what message does that send to our armed forces families?

At a dinner in Chatham last week, I was told of one result of the pursuit of efficiency savings. The authorities there are unable to repair the gymnasium, with the result that only half of it is in operation. What does that say about the fitness of our soldiers?

The second of the horsemen is the European security and defence identity. Several hon. Members have spoken so well on this subject that I shall not repeat their words, but I would remind the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson)—who has left the Chamber—that although many Americans would welcome European countries doing a bit more with regard to defence, they do not mean engaging in separate operations, but that we should spend a bit more. While the ESDI is going on, most of our continental partners are still slashing their defence budgets. Most notable among them is Germany, whose defence spending has been reduced to 1.3 per cent. of gross domestic product.

There is no money, we are getting increasingly tied into a muddled relationship with Europe, and the last of the three horsemen, the ethos of the services, is under attack. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) put the problem so well that I shall not repeat his words, but I have a question for the Government, who want to give the armed forces the values of today's civilian society. Do they think that those civilian values include physical fitness, discipline and self-sacrifice? Yet, without those values, an army is nothing.

8.14 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I want to take up the point about the European security and defence identity. Members of the Select Committee on Defence visited Brussels three weeks ago. From our discussions, and the contributions made by Ministers in evidence sessions, it was clear that there are two versions of the ESDI. The first is the paranoid, hysterical version that we have heard from the Opposition Benches, both Front and Back. The second is the real version, and can be found in the transcripts of the documents dealing with the Petersberg tasks.

The ESDI is about crisis management, and getting better use of resources in Europe. At NATO and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, we were told that it was not a question of extra resources. The problem was that, although 2 million troops are available in Europe, it is not possible to deploy them in such a way that up to 40,000 will be available at any one time. The ESDI will ensure that 50,000 troops will be capable of being deployed, for a period of six months, after which another group of the same size will be available for deployment. That rotation will mean that there will need to be about 150,000 troops available for deployment or for sending to operational theatres in the continent of Europe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) has already referred to the need for some European countries to shift away from the mentality of territorial defence. With existing resources, it should be possible for various countries to achieve a much more effective deployment of military forces. British military experts and their counterparts at SHAPE are trying to work out the mechanics involved in that.

I am pleased that the Government are at the forefront of the initiative, and are telling other countries that we will continue the contributions that we have made to operations over recent years. The French have also contributed to various operations, although to a lesser extent because their conscription system makes involvement more difficult for them. The initiative will require a significant change in the way that the German armed forces work, while other countries will also make a contribution.

That second analysis of the nuts and bolts of the ESDI contrasts sharply with the hysterical words of Tory Members.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gapes: No, I do not have time. I may give way near the end of my remarks, if there is some time left.

There have been interesting contributions from Conservative Front-Bench Members. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) is just about to leave the Chamber. I do not mind if he does leave, but—judging from a remark that he made today and from his speech last week, which I read carefully—he seems to be advocating a breach of the anti-ballistic missile treaty.

That position is not taken by the American Administration, but by the right wing of the Republican party. The division in the United States over national missile defence or theatre missile defence is clear. The Clinton Administration consider that any changes to the treaty must be brought about either in ways that are consistent with the existing ABM treaty, or which are agreed after negotiations with the Russians. Up to now, the Clinton Government have not advocated a unilateral breach of the ABM treaty.

America's Republican-led Congress has passed resolutions that did not make President Clinton completely happy, but the nature of the American political system meant that he was forced to go along with them. I am worried lest statements made in this House or elsewhere in western Europe are seized on by right-wing forces in the United States that are unilateralist and which oppose the coalition and the international agreement. The right wing of the Conservative party therefore fosters the global unilateralism of the right wing in the United States, with the aim of undermining the transatlantic co-operation that those of us who are Atlanticists—whether of the left or the right—wish to foster to build the collective security that will be so important to the European continent in the future.

I am very pleased with the report from the Defence Committee which I have joined only recently. It highlights a number of areas of concern. It raises issues about which

there is more for the Government to do. However, at least we have, for the first time, an itemised breakdown of ethnic recruitment to our armed services. The Select Committee has been pressing for such a breakdown for 15 years. We can see that the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are not doing very well, and need to do better. We can press for a strengthening of recruitment so that our armed forces can reflect more accurately the society that they serve.

I should like to take up the point of the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) by saying that I believe it important that our armed services have more women and a more representative cross-section of people, not just at the level of the ordinary squaddie but right the way through the structures. When we, like the American armed forces, have a Chief of the Defence Staff who is from an ethnic minority, we will be able to say that we have eradicated the problems that have arisen over many years in armed forces recruitment and retention.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. On a lighter note, and by the same token, would he say that the fact that we had a female Prime Minister means that we eradicated the problem of women's representation in Parliament?

Mr. Gapes: I do not wish to go down that road, except to say that I had far more confidence in General Colin Powell and his judgment, both military and political, than I ever had in Baroness Thatcher's.

There are some difficult and worrying developments. Paragraph 47 of the Select Committee report points out that arms control and disarmament have not gone well over recent years. We have seen the failure of the Americans to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty. We have seen the potential difficulty regarding a growing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the tests in India and Pakistan. The non-proliferation review conference that is due to start in April will, as I understand it, be extremely difficult. Pledges made a few years ago about measures for further disarmament are not being fulfilled because of the United States and Russia not ratifying the START 2 negotiation treaty. That means that we have a blockage—an impediment—to any further development of nuclear disarmament negotiations. That is a very serious problem, and if there is a breakdown in the relationship between the United States and Russia over the anti-ballistic missile treaty, that augurs badly for the future not just of the relationship between those two very powerful countries but of European defence and security. The issue needs further consideration in the House, and I am pleased that the Select Committee has said that it will be given that consideration.

Finally, I concur with all the remarks made about Michael Colvin. I did not know him as well as some other people did, but I always found him a most amenable and intelligent man. He is a great loss to the House.

8.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): To continue in the same vein as other right hon. and hon. Members, I associate myself with, and endorse, the tributes that have been paid to Michael Colvin. He and Nichola were good friends to me for 25 years or so. Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I grieve at their death and I shall miss them very greatly indeed.

I shall be selective and brief. When the Secretary of State opened the debate on Tuesday, he eulogised smart procurement. In reply, a number of my hon. Friends expressed the grave doubts and cynicism that exist on these Benches. To any dispassionate, objective observer, many aspects of procurement under this Government remain profoundly unsatisfactory—a sorry and all-too-familiar saga of delayed decisions on programmes that are essential to the effectiveness of our armed forces and, almost invariably, massive cost overruns. Although the Government talk of modernised systems of procurement, the supporting evidence is very patchy. With chapter 5 of the White Paper in mind, particularly the recognition of

the interdependence between nations and companies

mentioned on page 44, I shall focus on just two procurement programmes. I acknowledge that what I say will be coloured by constituency interests.

The Eurofighter Typhoon enters front-line service in 2005. It will be armed with Raytheon advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles—AMRAAM. These are to be superseded from 2008 by the new beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile—BVRAAM. Bids for the BVRAAM were submitted to the Ministry of Defence as long ago as May 1998, and the overdue decision has yet to be announced. Given the £16 billion investment in the Eurofighter, few people would deny that it is essential that the aircraft is equipped with the best possible missile to ensure that it can provide future air supremacy and superiority for our forces. Obviously, the possession of the best possible missile will considerably boost the aircraft's export potential.

It was precisely to meet that end—to provide the best possible missile—that Raytheon Systems Ltd., Shorts Missile Systems and the Basingstoke-based Thomson Thorn Missile Electronics, teamed up with a wide range of other British and European companies. They offer the extended-range air-to-air missile—ERAAMplus. I wonder whether it has been sufficiently appreciated that ERAAMplus can be provided for about half the Ministry of Defence BVRAAM budget of £900 million by merging the BVRAAM requirement with the ongoing United States AMRAAM development programme. That would be a good start for a Government seeking to make £2 billion in savings over 10 years through smart procurement. It would bring the United Kingdom full access to United States air-to-air technology, as well as ensuring interoperability in future coalition operations, for the simple reason that the United States uses ERAAMplus.

What interests me from a constituency point of view—many other right hon. and hon. Members share this interest—is that about two thirds of the work for the ERAAMplus programme will be undertaken in the United Kingdom. If we throw on top of that the 50 per cent. of work that will be done in the United Kingdom for the American missiles and the export potential, it can be understood why the ERAAMplus programme will create and sustain some 3,000 jobs in United Kingdom companies.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Does my hon. Friend understand the risk of fitting a foreign missile to

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

a domestic aeroplane? The United States might withhold supply of the missile if we wanted to sell the Eurofighter Typhoon to other countries.

Mr. Hunter: I am well aware of that argument; as my hon. Friend knows, it has been well rehearsed. I hope that he will forgive me if I do not pursue it again, because of the shortage of time. I acknowledge that it is often made.

There is a second programme in which it will be interesting to see whether the Government put into practice the policies and principles on procurement set out in the White Paper. I refer to the procurement of a successor identification friend or foe system. It is widely acknowledged that Raytheon Systems in Harlow—not in Basingstoke—has been at the forefront of that technology for more than 50 years. The company has put together a bid that offers immense advantages to the UK defence industry as a whole. About 85 per cent. of all identification work would be done in the UK; there would be 45 UK subcontractors, five of whom would—hopefully—be in Basingstoke.

Those two programmes—the extended-range air-to-air missile and the Raytheon SIFF solution—would bring substantial advantages to the UK defence industry as a whole. It will be interesting to see whether the Government can live up to and deliver the expectations that they have raised.

I make my concluding comments in the light of chapter 4 of the White Paper, "People in Defence". In relation to Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State said that

> the Government cannot and will not contemplate anything that suggests any equivalence between the security forces and terrorists . . . there is no way in which such equivalence would be acceptable.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1397.]

Those are reassuring words. I hope that they carry weight. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence realises that the Government have created a credibility problem in relation to those matters. The present, interminable inquiry into the shootings in Londonderry on Bloody Sunday is offensive to the Army and unnecessary. Initially, it was to have been held under conditions that would have endangered the lives of soldiers on duty that day. It is a public relations gimmick designed to appease Irish republican terrorism and is thus a disgrace.

The Government have already shown that, to appease terrorism, they are prepared to play politics with the honour of a regiment and to sacrifice the magnificent RUC. My accusation is that, as they have already shown such disdain and disregard for some of those in the forefront of the fight against terrorism, they have only themselves to blame if some people fear that they are capable one day of doing the same again, even if it is not their declared intention at present.

8.32 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate. I cannot possibly make my speech without saying a word or two about Michael Colvin, whom I considered to be my hon. Friend. He was a delightful Member. I speak on behalf of women Members, because my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) and I were the first two women ever to serve on the Select Committee on Defence. After more than three decades, the Committee was a boy zone—to say the least—so it was a tricky one for us to join. Michael Colvin was delightful. He complimented us on our contribution to the Committee not only in the Chamber, but privately. I shall never forget that, because he made our service to the Committee much more special—he made us feel valued. I shall remember him always. I cannot imagine the pain that his family is going through.

When one joins the Defence Committee, one comes with no baggage; one has no preconceptions—unfortunately, one has no experience either. However, through that Committee I have learned much about the work of the defence industry and of our forces. It has been the most rewarding part of my work at the House of Commons and has given me an enormous grounding. I have learned how much the world of defence is changing. When I hear hon. Members talking as though defence and our armed forces should be kept in aspic—they should never change, develop and modernise—that seems a great shame. I find it fairly astonishing that a Government such as this, who are prepared to meet the challenges of a modern world, are greeted with derision.

Although I do not have enormous experience of the subject, I am aware that the view that everything terrible with defence procurement has happened since 1 May 1997 is complete and utter nonsense. Those who give evidence to the Defence Committee put that argument to bed very quickly. We have faced difficulties with defence procurement over the past two decades and we now have to reap a terrible reward.

If our armed forces are our most precious commodity, they need to be valued. There is no question about that—we must ensure that they are valued. From the visits that the Select Committee has made, we know that they like to be busy, but that they do not want to be overstretched. They like to be rewarded for what they do, and they do not want us to undervalue them. Therefore, it is important that we understand their needs. That is the challenge.

I have listened to speeches in the House that have suggested that it could undermine our armed forces if we were ever truly to embrace equal opportunities in relation to race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, social background and—this is the most difficult for hon. Members, particularly Conservative Members, to accept—sexual orientation. I do not know how many Members have heard of, or are fans of, the comic Ali G. He is truly wonderful and I advise them to obtain his video "Ali G Innit". Major General Kenneth Perkins MBE, DFC appears in it and Ali G asks him, "What about gays in the armed forces?" One of the most decorated members of the armed forces says, "There have always been gays in the armed forces. If you want to make a problem of it, there's going to be a problem. If you don't, it'll be fine." That is the best way forward. Given the advice that officers in the armed forces have been given, the challenge can be met and we can have armed forces of which we can be proud and which are still able to carry out their duties.

Recruitment is on the increase and my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces has told us how well we are doing on that. Retention remains a difficulty, although the problem is not as bad as it was. We have seen all sorts of ways in which retention can be improved. They include helping families—an issue in which I am especially interested—improving education for people in the armed

forces and extending leave after they have been away. All those measures will help with job satisfaction and will make being in the armed forces more worthwhile.

On a recent visit to Kosovo, I was amazed to see the awful conditions in which some of our men and women lived. I was there for only a couple of days, but if I had to live in those conditions, I would have given up long ago and come home. Our armed forces were living under canvas and using chemical loos. The Committee Clerk, Carol Oxborough, and I were so cold one night that we could not sleep, but we did not dare complain because of the awful conditions in which our service personnel were living. Did they once complain about what they were doing? They did not, because they felt valued and were working in the community.

We heard much in the press about the dreadful delays in the provision of temporary field accommodation. However, we spoke to members of the armed forces about that accommodation and they told us that they did not want to stay in it. They said that they liked being where they were in the heart of the community. They could protect and assist people and do the job for which they were trained. It is important that we make our armed forces feel that they are doing the job that they want to do.

Like most Members, I am interested in people in the armed forces, but I came to the subject of defence through having to deal with procurement issues in my constituency. I have listened to the debate and it seems that the procurement industry is changing enormously. Some say that, in the next decade, we will have only three major defence companies in the whole western world. If that is true, it makes complete nonsense of the old allegiances, and we can no longer sustain arguments about whether everything that the Americans do is wonderful or whether all our actions are wonderful and we should ignore the Americans.

I sound a word of caution about the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency: the MOD should ensure that DERA follows its advice on procurement, and no action should put that at risk.

I turn now to defence medical services, on which I have most empathy and feel most pain. As a nurse, my visit to Royal hospital, Haslar, which was under threat of closure, and my understanding of how those people were feeling will remain with me, although I completely support the view of the MOD and defence medical services. The situation reflects what is happening in the NHS throughout the country. More than 70 trusts are having to make decisions to ensure that all their people work on one site and that they get the right expertise and mix of cases. All those issues were affecting Royal hospital, Haslar, as they affect Crawley hospital in my constituency, so I can empathise with the staff at Haslar and their sense that everything would fall to pieces if the hospital closed.

There can be a bright future for the defence medical services, and that future must be with the new centre for defence medicine. However, I urge the MOD not to delay in setting up that centre, otherwise there will be no confidence that the defence medical services will have the expertise and training that they need to care for members of the armed forces. Their difficulty will be getting the right case mix, making sure that secondary care is working and ensuring that personnel get the specialist care that they need to operate in the field.

I very much hope that, if ESDI goes ahead, it will apply to medical services. I should like there to be much more co-operation in peacekeeping and in conflict resolution, so that there are centralised hospitals with staff working together, rather than each nation having its own hospital. Medicine is a universal language and translates easily into joint working. If ESDI means anything, it means an improvement in our medical services, not only in secondary care for people here but in the care of those in the theatre of conflict.

8.43 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): This has been an extremely interesting debate, and like everyone else I should like to start by paying my tribute to Michael Colvin. As many hon. Members have said, he was an outstanding and unfailingly courteous man. Unfortunately, I could not attend last week's debate because I was dining with a senior RAF officer, but I read Michael Colvin's contribution and it was, as ever, extremely well informed. He had immense knowledge and a deep love of the subject, as well as a deep love of his country and the countryside.

I had the great pleasure of staying a night with Michael Colvin and Mrs. C—as he always used to refer to his wife—at Tangley house, which they adored. It was not only a lovely house but a lovely home, where two wonderful people lived. It is a great loss for the country, the constituency and the House.

As several hon. Members have suggested, the White Paper is rather short, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) said, it is not very well put together at that. By contrast, the Select Committee report is extremely informative. It is packed full of information that is notably absent from the White Paper and which is normally set out by the MOD when it produces the defence estimates. It is a shame that that was not forthcoming in the White Paper.

The deficiencies in the White Paper are more than amply made up for by the report of the Select Committee, under the leadership of the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George). The report is a damning indictment of the Government's handling of our defences. Above all else, it is clear that there has been a relentless decline in the Treasury's commitment to funding the services to the extent necessary to match the Government's aspirations of playing their part on the world stage. There is no doubt about the commitment of our troops, but there is doubt about the Treasury's commitment to sustain the required investment in order to ensure that we are able to deploy our troops when the Government wish to do so. It is apparent that that is what the Prime Minister, who wishes to project power, wants.

It is a matter of great concern when the Select Committee concludes that the finances of the Ministry of Defence are inadequate and continually declining. By contrast, the United States defence budget is increasing, although levels among our continental partners are mostly on the decline, too.

It is important that we are able to raise investment so that there is the necessary training, because we cannot predict our obligations. The one thing that we know in matching resources to commitments is that we do not know what our commitments might be. If we want to ensure that we are ready to meet unexpected commitments, we must will the means by which our assets can be made available and our resources suitably deployed.

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

I shall make one brief comment on Europe. I do not think that there is a great deal of disagreement across the Floor of the House about the need for European countries to get together to ensure at least some co-operation, so that if European countries, including ourselves, wish to become involved in some situation, but the United States does not, we have the means to do so.

There is nothing revolutionary in such a suggestion. Indeed, in her famous Bruges speech in 1988, my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Thatcher, with whom I had the privilege of working, said:

> It is to NATO that we owe the peace that has been maintained for over 40 years.

She went on to say that it was important that European nations commit themselves to strong defence. At the time, of course, we still faced the Soviet threat. She continued:

> We should develop the WEU, not as an alternative to NATO, but as a means of strengthening Europe's contribution to the common defence of the west.

That point has been echoed by several of my hon. Friends. To go further, allowing the European Union to drive a wedge between ourselves and the United States would be damaging and must be resisted. Therefore, I do not support Mr. Prodi's desire for a European army. There is a world of difference between the comments of my right hon. and noble Friend and what Mr. Prodi is saying.

I want to raise several other issues, and I shall be brief on each. It would be inappropriate not to mention the question of morale. Representing a military constituency, I am aware of the strains on families as a result of our troops continuing commitments. The Government ought to reflect on the issue. It is no good just saying that the recruitment figures are good news. They are welcome, but the Minister should be much more worried about the serious problem of retention. It is one thing to recruit new people, who have cost nothing at the point of arrival in the services, but a haemorrhage of people in whom a substantial amount of public money has been invested, who have undergone the training and are voting with their feet by leaving, is wholly different.

The fact that the Royal Air Force is short of 95 fast-jet pilots is indicative of the problems facing only one service. That the Army is about 5,000 troops below strength, with no likelihood of that deficiency being made up until 2005, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) explained, is also a serious matter.

The Government should reflect on the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) about the ethos of the armed services. I shall not rehearse all the arguments that I have made previously on the question of homosexuals in the armed forces and related issues. The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) said that she thought that the services should reflect society. The job of the services is not to reflect society, but to defend this country, and they have been singularly successful in so doing. The armed forces are one of the few institutions in this country that command universal respect. There is a good old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't mend it."

There is grave danger attendant on undermining the ethos of the services. Service men and women are special people—they are the only people who write their contracts in blood, the only people who put their lives at risk day in, day out, doing their job for their country. It is appropriate that we should understand the values, ethos and traditions that form part of the services. All those members of the Defence Committee who have visited various military installations throughout the country know well the important role those values play in the services way of life.

I attended a boxing match in the Maida gymnasium in Aldershot last Thursday. Watching two regiments slugging it out was a remarkable experience. Theirs was a truly gutsy performance, and they displayed tremendous sportsmanship. Those qualities, which we have seen deployed on the streets of Kosovo, were demonstrated in that gymnasium.

I am concerned about the issue of rapid deployability. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) raised the question of heavy lift. The Government have a problem with the joint rapid reaction force, in particular the need for that force to be able to react rapidly. I am not sure that they have addressed the issue, other than by the commissioning of ships. It is absolutely essential that we achieve the heavy lift requirement needed to make good our commitment to deploy such forces rapidly.

If the Apache attack helicopter is to be a key part of that rapidly deployable force, and if, as the Defence Committee pointed out in a previous report, a regiment of 16 Apache attack helicopters brings with it no fewer than 220 support vehicles, I am not sure whether we have the rapid reaction force we ought to have. The Government must address that matter with greater speed. Two C-17s alone are not the answer to the problem.

The hon. Member for Crawley spoke about DERA, whose headquarters are in my constituency. It is not fair to DERA to leave it in a state of limbo. I and my party are opposed to the proposed public-private partnership. I am extremely concerned that DERA's research budget is being cut each year with no alternative being put in its place. The hon. Lady is right to say that DERA's job must be to provide independent expertise to the MOD, to ensure that the MOD is not ripped off by its suppliers.

However, it is also extremely important that DERA retains the confidence of the United States of America, with which it collaborates. As DERA's chief executive, Sir John Chisholm, has made clear to me, unless we put investment in research, we shall have nothing to offer the United States. DERA is in a state of limbo and we have to do something to resolve it. My preferred solution would be to scrap the proposed PPP and to restore investment in research to previous levels.

I have three final points. The first concerns Meteor—the beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile. As I pointed out to my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter), it is a local matter for me, as BAe Systems has its headquarters in Farnborough. I have seen what happened in the past when we have been at the mercy of the United States—for example, when a missile is supplied by the US on an air frame or platform made by us. We must make sure that we are not in the same position again, where the US Congress can veto defence sales from this country.

That brings me neatly to my second point—defence sales, which have not been mentioned so far in the debate. They form an extremely important part of our defence posture. Our domestic requirements do not provide

sufficient economies of scale to enable us to get the production runs, save at prohibitive cost. The only way that we can get the best equipment from our factories for our own use is by promoting defence sales. That gives us not only the production runs, but the advantage of being able to help our friends. If our friends suddenly turn out to be enemies or become unacceptable, perhaps we should withhold sales of spare parts, as we should be doing with Zimbabwe. We should not sell that country a single further spare part.

Finally, I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke said about the Bloody Sunday inquiry. I have friends and constituents who are former members of the Parachute Regiment and who were involved in that tragedy 30 years ago. It is grotesque that the Prime Minister has set up the inquiry entirely to appease republican sentiment in Ireland, and that the Ministry of Defence is spending vast sums of public money to cover the legal costs of the men seeking representation before the inquiry. What the Prime Minister has done is unfortunate and deeply damaging to everyone concerned. It has reopened old wounds and has no prospect of doing anything other than prolonging the trauma for many of those involved in the tragedy.

8.57 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I know that others want to speak in the debate so, in view of the time, I shall limit my remarks to just one subject—cluster bombs and Kosovo.

I do not believe, however, that the subject of nuclear weapons has been properly aired during the debate. The United Kingdom, Russia and the United States are developing policies that make it easier to use nuclear weapons, or to use them earlier in a dispute. Whatever the contorted logic that has led to that policy position in those countries, I do not believe that the majority of people in the UK or the other countries favour a policy to facilitate the use of nuclear weapons. I hope that we shall return to that debate in due course.

On cluster bombs and Kosovo, the situation in the former Yugoslavia had got to the stage where military action was justified, but the methods whereby some of the military strikes were carried out were questionable. The decision to drop weapons only from above 15,000 ft meant that the risk of casualties among allied pilots was reduced, but made the number of casualties on the ground far greater. Many of those casualties were civilians.

The objection is a matter not just of policy, but of physics. From 15,000 ft there is an appreciable delay—30 or 40 seconds—before a dropped bomb hits the ground. That means that a bomb may move from its target because of unexpected wind conditions, or there may be a change of circumstances on the ground, such as movement of civilian trucks or trains.

That is not the only limitation caused by the physics. From 15,000 ft it was impossible for pilots to confirm absolutely that their targets were not civilian vehicles. That led to many casualties.

The use of cluster bombs added a further level of indiscriminate use of military force. It is clear that the RAF was not ready to use these weapons under the operational conditions of Operation Allied Force. That is apparent from the trials that had to be held at Luce bay on 6 and 7 April 1999. If the RAF had been ready, the trials would not have been needed. The greatest difference between using those weapons in Kosovo and during training is the height from which they are dropped. British cluster bombs—BL755s—were designed to be dropped from a much lower height than 15,000 ft.

The use of the weapons that we are considering had several consequences. The bomblets were scattered over a wider area than if they had been dropped from a lower height. It has also been alleged that deployment from a greater height meant that more bomblets did not explode when they hit the ground. That created an even bigger long-term hazard.

I have asked a series of parliamentary questions on the subject. The Ministry of Defence claimed that the height at which cluster bombs were dropped made no difference to their failure rate, which remained at 5 per cent. The RAF is not the only user of the BL755. Those weapons were sold to the former Yugoslavia and used by the Serbs against Croatia. The Croatian Government claimed that the failure rate for sub-munitions on the weapons used against them was nearer 7 per cent.

The difference between 5 per cent. and 7 per cent. may not seem great, but the RAF used more than 500 BL755s in the Kosovo operation. Each BL755 carries nearly 150 sub-munitions. The extra 2 per cent. would mean another 1,500 unexploded bombs in Kosovo.

It is important to make some form of independent assessment of the way in which the weapons behave in practice. No matter how good the case for military action, we have a moral duty to ensure that it does not have an appalling legacy.

The lessons of Kosovo must be learned. The use of cluster bombs should be properly and frankly assessed, and not whitewashed to justify the operation. I accept that the cost of reducing the risk to civilians may entail taking greater risks with the lives of armed forces personnel from this country and those of our allies. However, it is not right unnecessarily to slaughter many thousands of civilians because the risk to an individual pilot is slightly greater.

Doing the right thing is sometimes neither cheap nor without risk. However, that is the price for doing the right thing unless we are prepared to put more civilians, including those for whom we are supposed to be acting, at greater risk of losing their lives.

9.2 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I join others in expressing my deep regret at the deaths of Michael Colvin and his wife Nichola. I knew Michael Colvin for nearly 30 years, from when he was first elected to Hampshire county council. During my time as leader of that council, he and the late former Member of Parliament for Eastleigh, Stephen Milligan, were usually the only Members of Parliament who readily supported the council when necessary. Michael Colvin supported many ventures in the county of Hampshire. He will be missed here, in his constituency, and in Europe, and I stress that Hampshire has lost a staunch supporter. I am sure that the county will at some stage want to record its regret at his death and its deepest appreciation of the part that he played in its life.

Michael Colvin made many interesting interventions during the time that I served with him on the Select Committee on Defence, not least in the battle to save

[Mr. Mike Hancock]

Haslar hospital. He, the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt)—who did not serve on the Committee—and I were instrumental in pushing through several of the final recommendations, which have left the door open for the Ministry of Defence to be able to save Haslar hospital. The Save Haslar campaign is very much alive, and it would be good to hear the Minister say something positive about the future of the hospital.

It is regrettable that I am speaking in a defence debate on the same day as I received a letter from the Minister for the Armed Forces that states that constituents' jobs are again on the line. In the letter, the Minister states that a review has identified efficiencies that can be made at the defence munitions depot as Gosport, and that up to 30 per cent. in manpower savings will have to be made in the next four months. That represents several hundred jobs in the Greater Portsmouth area—once again, jobs that we can ill afford to lose. Over the past century, they have been filled by men and women who have given loyal service in defence of the realm, and neither they nor their futures should be forgotten in the debate. The strategic defence review and the White Paper have come together, but they are littered beyond belief with financial inadequacies.

The Kosovo situation has been referred to today and last week. Like many Members, I have visited Kosovo more than once, and for a long time it has appeared to me that many people in that province see KFOR as the enemy. Sadly, as many Members predicted, the Kosovo Liberation Army will grasp any opportunity to push its political view. It wants a fully autonomous Kosovo, but if it cannot achieve that, its second-best option—which is probably the worst—is a Greater Albania. That may take longer to achieve, but it is the KLA's long-term aim. Any Member who has talked to representatives of those who hold the guns in Kosovo over the past few years knows that that is what they were fighting for and I believe that, before long, we shall be confronted with open hostility to our forces and others.

Lord Robertson recently made it clear to a meeting of the Western European Union at which all NATO Ministers were represented that 10 years was an optimistic appraisal of the time it would take to achieve any sort of solution in Kosovo. Once again, no real end-plan was in sight and no political solution offered, at either last week's NATO meeting or the WEU meeting the week before. That must be extremely worrying to everyone who cares about peace in Europe and in the world.

The lessons of Bosnia are there for us to learn, and those who have visited it recently will know that people have not put sectarianism behind them. There are still several different communities, investment goes into businesses on an ethnic basis—Muslims do not invest in non-Muslim businesses—and Bosnia consists of the old and the very young. All the well educated young people, who might have brought the country together, are long gone and many have no intention of ever going back. The same will be the case in Kosovo if we are not careful. Not enough effort has been put into thinking through the end result or learning the lessons of Bosnia. Sadly, a heavy price is still being paid.

I spent part of this morning with the Croatian ambassador and a constituent from a neighbouring constituency. We were talking to the Croatian authorities about the death of his son—a young British soldier serving in Bosnia who was killed when he was attacked by Serbs while on leave in Croatia. We were trying to get justice so that the British Army would represent the father at the trial, but sadly no help has been forthcoming except to transport him there. He needs advice about what is going on in the court. Why has he been unable to get greater assistance from the Prime Minister and successive Defence Ministers? For goodness sake, I ask the Ministry of Defence to give the family some peace of mind and the legal representation in the court proceedings that they desire.

The White Paper exposes a number of flaws in a range of topics. They are not discussed, but the Defence Committee report has exposed the deficiencies and, as Members have said, the evidence given to us provided a clear example of that. In one way or another, £20 billion of taxpayers' money has been thrown away and two thirds of the 65 major weapons systems valued at more than £10 million went over budget and were significantly delayed. The Bowman communication system was an absolute disaster—money haemorrhaged and we still have not achieved a satisfactory solution.

I was interested when the Minister of State talked about the success of the Tornado upgrade. At the beginning of his speech he said that upgraded Tornados had flown bombing missions to Kosovo and to Serbia and had dropped smart bombs.

Mr. Spellar *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Hancock: The Minister shakes his head, but hon. Members should read *Hansard* tomorrow. That is not borne out by the evidence of people who spoke to aircrews who went to Kosovo. They did not fly modified Tornados with smart weapons on them in missions in Kosovo. If the Minister wants to intervene, I shall willingly give way.

Legions of times, disinformation has been the order of the day. The arguments over the rifle were ludicrous. The Conservatives cannot opt out of their responsibility for that. The issues surrounding the Eurofighter must still be causing great alarm in the MOD, given the overruns and delays on that project. Whether the plane will achieve what we expected as a military weapon is debatable.

Many hon. Members referred to individual procurement projects in which the MOD has been involved. I should like to raise the issue of the Charm project: a weapon that the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham), who spoke about Bishopton, would be keenly interested in, as are my constituents who work at Portsmouth Aviation, given the shabby way in which they have been treated. I still await with interest the response to questions that I have tabled.

The Minister failed to answer questions about training and exercises, either when he was challenged at the Dispatch Box or during his presentation. In the past 12 months, eight naval exercises, 20 army exercises and 12 RAF exercises have been cancelled. The Royal Marines deployment of 800 men to Norway to get much needed training has once again been abandoned.

No one has mentioned the two new aircraft carriers. We are led to believe that the JSF multi-role fighter will not be produced in the form first suggested. That will considerably change the design of the two carriers.

Some hon. Members may be more concerned about the names of those carriers and where they are to be based—I make a plea for Portsmouth—but I believe that the important thing is to discover whether the MOD still intend to deliver on those two carriers for the Royal Navy. What type of planes will fly from them? If we are to believe the Americans, planes will have to have a range of at least 500 miles if they are to defend a carrier properly. What type of carrier are we going to produce, and what will that do to the budget?

The problem of morale will not be satisfactorily resolved. I accept entirely that much is being done in the MOD, but the real issue is how all this will be paid for. I was delighted that more is being done for family welfare, and I share the Minister's conviction in that regard. However, there is more to be done. Married quarters need to be upgraded, despite the fact that tens of millions of pounds are to be spent. The Government have been told that they need to spend hundreds of millions to bring that stock up to the required standard.

People will have to be paid well to remain in our armed services. The shabbiness of the White Paper and the SDR is that financing and commitments will not be matched. That will mean further overstretch, badly procured defence or a severe weakening of our personnel's ability to do the job that we want them to do. None of that can be right. We need a properly financed and planned defence strategy, with commitments that we can live up to and a personnel provided with the right equipment for the right job.

9.14 pm

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I echo the tributes paid to Michael Colvin, who was truly a gallant and honourable gentleman. I also express my deep sympathy to his family, and that of his wife.

Let me begin with people, and echo the tributes that have been paid to our armed forces. As the first line of the White Paper says,

> Britain's Armed Forces are among the best in the world.

They do us proud. I also want to mention the service families who, time and again, have demonstrated their commitment and support through thick and thin, especially during the past 12 months.

As the White Paper rightly says, the quality of our people is the single most important component of Britain's defence capability. Those people give us the critical edge that leads to success. I welcome the measures included in the policy for people: they must remain a priority, as the White Paper recognises. That is certainly the view of the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, who recently gave a presentation to the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. It is published in this month's edition of the institute's journal. The general said:

> expectations have been raised and if we do not deliver on people issues we will never again enjoy the credibility of the average Serviceman and woman. This is my number one priority, as without our people we are nothing.

That says it all.

I also want to comment on defence support. I welcome the efforts that have been made to make smart procurement just that: smart, efficient and rapid. I am well aware that things were hardly efficient under the last Government, but I would not say that everything is perfect now. In my constituency, Rosyth dockyard has not been pleased by the delay in the decision on the Sonar 2087. Hon. Members will not be surprised that I will not allow a defence debate to end without paying tribute to the dockyard, to HMS Caledonia, to DERA Rosyth and to all the personnel involved, who are trying to give service to their country.

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Squire: I am sorry, but I must decline, because I know that at least one other hon. Member wishes to speak.

The White Paper also deals with NATO and European defence. In the same presentation and article, entitled "Bringing the Armed Forces into a New Millennium", the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, said:

> There is an argument that a strong, more assertive Europe will undermine NATO. I think that is wrong. A Europe that remains allied to the US simply because of its own weaknesses is of limited value. Europe's weakness to provide for its own security interests is more damaging to the transatlantic relationship than an strong Europe with the greater influence in decision making that would go with a greater military contribution to the Alliance.

That puts the case brilliantly, as we would expect from our Chief of the Defence Staff.

Finally, I want to refer to the chapter of the White Paper that refers to a safer world. It focuses on some of the issues raised by Kosovo in relation to our strategy for the future. I look forward to a full debate on Kosovo, and the issues and lessons that it raises, when the report of the Select Committee on Defence is published, so I shall touch on only one or two points now.

The White Paper says that we should consider how we deal with the "asymmetric warfare" engaged in by adversaries who cannot compete in conventional warfare, and makes it clear that Slobodan Milosevic is a perpetrator of that form of defence. I give my full support to the whole area of defence diplomacy, particularly the outreach programme with Russia. Without going into detailed comments on some of our concerns about human rights abuses in Chechnya, all of us would agree that the Russian armed forces have been poorly trained and poorly treated for many years. It is in all our interests to try to improve that.

Again, I hope that we can have a fuller and specific debate on the whole area of international peacekeeping: the importance of humanitarian efforts, what should be done by the military and what should be done by civilian personnel. The problems in Mitrovica highlight and underline that well. I quote General Sir Michael Jackson, who in a recent journal highlighted the different roles that our soldiers are expected to play. He said:

> We have soldiers living in Serb apartments where they are isolated. We have permanent guards in all Orthodox churches and monasteries without which they would be burnt and bombed. We even escort little old ladies to the bread shop to buy their bread, but on the way a Kosovar Albanian teenager will give the sign of throat-slitting to her face. In terms of what outside intervention in the sense of soldiers, and policemen and civil administrators can achieve, what this tells me is that there is a limit: we're talking about people's attitudes, people's perceptions.

He sums up clearly some of the conflicts in peacekeeping efforts, but also how right we are to be proud of our armed forces. I again pay tribute to them. It gives pleasure to us

[Ms Squire]

all to see them putting their lives at risk to try to give life, safety and hope to civilian communities throughout the world.

9.22 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The previous time I spoke in a defence debate, the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) accused me of having been got at by the Fleet Air Arm, and I happily admit that I had been, as Yeovilton is in my constituency. Since then, I have been got at by the entire Navy. I have been a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and have spent a year being got at, from the First Sea Lord to the newest recruit. Therefore, I will unashamedly speak about the Royal Navy today, although briefly, I hope.

The Defence White Paper carries us very little forward from the strategic defence review, but it has reinforced the primacy of the navy's role in carrying forward the expeditionary policy, the platform for power projection, which the navy essentially provides for our armed forces. I was happy to have the opportunity to go to the eastern Mediterranean to watch and to join in amphibious operations during the summer on HMS Ocean and HMS Fearless. Indeed, it almost felt like home from home. I think that I met more of my constituents on HMS Ocean, on which 40 Commando was embarked, than I would normally in a surgery. That was in marked contrast to the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), who accompanied me. He did not manage to find one constituent on the whole thing and thought that it was a set-up.

That reinforced the essential element of projection, which HMS Ocean as a ship and the amphibious task group could provide. It also reinforced the great danger that the MOD faces of being scuppered by the Treasury. The MOD's capital plans, which are encapsulated in the White Paper, may not come to pass. It is essential to have HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion, which we will have, I believe, but it is equally essential to have the two new aircraft carriers. Undoubtedly, the Treasury is the greatest threat to those carriers.

I believe that, soon, the Ministry of Defence will be considering commissioning a second HMS Ocean, because the indispensability of that very important asset will very quickly be recognised. While I was on HMS Ocean, a standard joke was that there was no prospect of it coming back to Britain for Christmas, because it would never be more than a day's sailing from Podgorica. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) would have been disappointed if I had not mentioned Montenegro at least once the debate.

Nevertheless, we shall have to come to terms with the aspirations and ambitions of politicians, in the form of the Prime Minister and Ministers at the Ministry of Defence and at the Foreign Office, and with the capital that is available to us. Subsequently—if we are to do effectively the jobs that we want to do—some pretty important decisions will have to be taken, for example, on carrier-borne aircraft, which was mentioned earlier in the debate, and on the marinisation of an attack helicopter.

I should like also to deal briefly with the armed services' humanitarian role—which was dealt with earlier today, in the statement on Mozambique. I believe that we will increasingly be asking our armed forces to perform such a role, which is not a replacement for their primary role—to fight. A warship should not be put in jeopardy because it is carrying humanitarian supplies. Nevertheless, could we not do more to equip the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, including the RFA Fort George and the RFA Fort Victoria, with a better range of humanitarian supplies, to be included in their standard inventory and used in an emergency?

I also had the opportunity to visit Northern Ireland, to see the work that the Navy is doing there. I have only one question on that work, as I do not want to get involved in a discussion on the appropriate level of military strength in Northern Ireland. I know that serious consideration is being given to the future of the Northern Ireland patrol. If those ships—such as HMS Dulverton, which I had the pleasure of visiting—were not there, patrolling the area between the Carlingford Lough and Belfast and giving their assistance to the civil authorities in the Celtic sea, with what would they be replaced? Would they be replaced by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, by Customs and Excise, or by some other body? I do not think that it is possible to replace them.

I should like to take one very brief moment to mention a parochial issue, on which the Minister will not be able to give me a reply. Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton is very important to my constituency. I have failed to argue successfully for Joint Force 2000 to be based there, and failed to argue successfully for the Joint Helicopter Command to be based there. There has been investment in buildings there, but that is always worrying in the context of the Ministry of Defence, as we do not know what will happen next.

Could the Minister give me some indication of the future of RNAS Yeovilton, and tell me about the satellite station at Ilton, which causes almost more problems with aircraft noise than Yeovilton itself? Will the station be necessary after the Harriers move away?

As I know that the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) wishes to speak, and think that he has a couple of minutes to do so, I shall sit down.

9.28 pm

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I should like quickly to deal with contracts and the need for jobs. The short-term heavy lift project is extremely important in that context.

The Antonov 124-100 would allow a £300 million saving, which could be used to fund the important contract for the BVRAAM system. We hope that a part of that contract will include the Meteor, which is important to constituents across the United Kingdom. The jobs that would be involved in the Meteor programme are crucial. If the programme does not proceed on an indigenous, European basis, we shall not only lose the expertise of those constituents, but be beholden to the Americans for ever. It is therefore important that the Meteor programme is favoured by the Government. I hope that Ministers will take on board that point.

The A400M is another very important contract. We are seven years away from delivery of that aircraft, which involves 62,000 jobs across the United Kingdom. The expertise necessary for the project has been used successfully within Airbus Industrie, and it could be transferred to a military use. The crucial factor is not the 62,000 jobs created by the A400M project, but

the project's technology spin-offs, including wing technology, which could be used for the next generation of Airbus. The technology is crucial if we are to compete with the Americans and the giant size of the competing American company. If we do not back good old British procurement now, we shall really be beholden, once and for ever, to the Americans. There is nothing wrong in using the Americans, but there is a danger of losing our expertise.

I look forward to our two aircraft carriers being big enough to use Eurofighter, as otherwise we will be struggling, especially if all the other projects go out of the window. It is crucial to ensure that the carriers can take all our serving aircraft.

I hope that our thanks will go to armed forces personnel serving throughout the world. A big thank you goes to the Gurkhas and the Royal Marines who were sent to East Timor, and to the rest of our armed forces—the Army, the Navy and the Air Force—who are engaged in operations throughout the world. We must congratulate them.

9.30 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Many tributes have been paid to my honourable and gallant neighbour, Michael Colvin, and his wife. Because he was my constituency neighbour, I would like to add mine. Almost everything has been said that could be said, but I want to add one thing. We grieve, but there is something else: Michael and Nichola were just such fun. We should not forget that. With his unfailing courtesy, generosity, chivalry and cheerfulness in adversity, he was beholden to no man and to one woman: Nichola.

In all my nearly 17 years in the House, I have never known such concern and bewilderment about what is going on in defence. We have even managed to attract the attention of the tabloid press. That is unheard of for defence, in which matters normally swim along. This is not the short-term political bickering that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) said it was.

I thank the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) who, with his usual courtesy in following the conventions of the House, sent me a telephone message to say that he is not here because his wife is in hospital. We wish her well.

I accept that there has been huge progress in embracing changes and challenges. There have been challenges and changes in the ministerial team, too. The new Under-Secretary is very welcome to our debates, as is the Secretary of State. Will they measure up to their predecessors in the affection of Her Majesty's forces? Indeed, will they measure up to the warm affection and respect in which the Minister for the Armed Forces is held throughout the armed forces?

The Defence Committee, of which I was a member for some years, has produced a devastating report—one of the most hard-hitting of a hard-hitting series—overseen by the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George). It was so extraordinary that we will vote against the motion. We will do so in support of our armed forces, of their families, who follow the flag, and of thousands of scientific, industrial and administrative civil servants. We will do it as a warning to the Government that, in the strategic defence review, they raised great expectations—as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) said—that they are failing to deliver.

This is not party political bickering—there remains strong cross-party consensus on the importance of defence in the nation's affairs—but it would be a dereliction of our duty if the Opposition failed to say that enough is enough. We are not alone, as we have seen in the Select Committee report.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) set the tone by speaking of the gravity of the defence situation and the fact that the position is unsustainable. As the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) said in his excellent speech, we face an extraordinary situation in that there has been no progress report on the strategic defence review. I hope that he will have the courage of his convictions and vote with us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex used all his experience and passion in his excellent speech, expressing the doubts that a growing number of people have.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) spoke about his concerns. I am delighted that he will be serving on the Standing Committee considering the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. I shall be there too and I look forward to hearing his contribution. I look forward to seeing him at Tidworth on Saturday at the RAF wives conference—the airwaves conference. We shall have to work hard because, once again, there will be no Minister present in support of the RAF wives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) has come to a judgment on a number of procurement issues. He has that luxury on the Back Benches. It is impossible for an Opposition Front-Bench team to come to a judgment on a procurement issue, because we know neither the financial details nor the security implications. However, we are fully briefed. We are delighted that we are kept on our toes by the remarkable British, north American and other defence procurement interests.

My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) saved me a great deal of time with his comments, particularly about asymmetric threats and chemical and biological weapons. I should like to echo his comments and amplify them slightly. The strategic defence review had just two paragraphs—numbers 101 and 102—on the subject. The joint nuclear, biological and chemical regiment has its headquarters at Winterbourne Gunner but is stationed at Honnington. We hoped that the document, on "Defending against the threat from biological and chemical weapons", would say something exciting, but it did not. It was another relaunch, taking the art of spin to new levels. It had 49 new words. It said that spending would be increased from £70 million to £80 million a year, but other than that there was nothing new in the glossy brochure.

I shall not embarrass Ministers by listing the detailed deficiencies in the system, but it is not joined-up government. There is no tasking between the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. There are no secure communications between Honnington and Winterbourne Gunner. There is very little logistic support. Then, of course, there was the letter from Land Command to all commanding officers saying that chemical and biological weapons training at Porton Down was too expensive, so they should go elsewhere and fudge it on the cheap. The Government are neglecting our home defence and we have rumbled them. They should not be proud of that.

[Mr. Robert Key]

My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) spoke with clarity and passion about the situation in Northern Ireland. I agree strongly with him. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) spoke about the declining defence budget and particularly about the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, the headquarters of which is in his constituency. It is crucial to the success and safety of our armed forces. The longer that the Government dither, the greater the number of questions that will arise and the fewer answers there will be.

The argument is moving backwards. DERA was a privatisation too far for the Conservative Government, largely on security grounds. We now have Lord Robertson's legacy—a £250 million promise to the Treasury that is putting at risk all that DERA stands for. Will we have a research DERA with a core function and 3,000 or 4,000 people plus a privatised DERA with 8,000 or 9,000 people? It is not that simple, as Ministers must realise. Just one example of that is at Boscombe Down. DERA's testing organisation is not a research body. Its purpose is to establish the fitness and airworthiness of military aircraft and systems, but it is facing three showstoppers. First, it cannot privatise without resolving the status of its military airfield. A public-private partnership implies new income, presumably from civil aircraft, but Boscombe Down is exempt from the air navigation orders. The second showstopper is that, whether the future of the organisation is public or private, there will be a need for a minimum investment of £150 million for new aircraft and systems, without which it cannot do its duty.

The third and by far the most important showstopper is that the testing organisation is currently working on the C130J, the Chinook and the Apache. Once again, the issue raises our relations with the United States. The 1,100 people at Boscombe Down include 180 uniformed personnel, who are at the cutting edge of flying operations. They are tightly integrated into trials teams. That raises two points. First, this is a military airfield, with military aviators and engineers. Secondly, it is imperative that there continues to be unfettered access to sensitive United States military and industrial bases. It is hard to see how that can be achieved under private ownership.

My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury also raised the question of families. I have never known forces families to be so angry. Normally, they follow the flag, they are quiet and they dislike disturbing the chain of command. They are loyal and they look after their own folk. So why, despite policy for people, has so much upset been caused to loyal groups such as the Army Families Federation, which is now becoming known as "Army Families Furious"?

A recent report from the federation stated:

> There appears to be considerable ignorance at the level of the top decision makers of the strength of feeling that any further cuts in the Defence Housing Executive future funding would create among service personnel and their families. Every possible effort must be made to minimise the irreparable damage that this ignorance is doing to the morale of service personnel and their families wishing to live accompanied.

If Ministers are sore about that, they should remember that I am merely the messenger. It is the Government who have the problem. However, we shall vote against this White Paper for other reasons too. A new doctrine is creeping into the Ministry of Defence. When the Secretary of State was considering the compulsory mobilisation of the Territorial Army to sustain peace support operations in the Balkans, he received advice from civil servants that included advice on funding. He was told:

> The additional cost of the mobilisation of the engineering and logistics squadron would be of the order of £3.5 million, for which no provision exists at present. This is, however, one of the elements in the package of proposals aimed at alleviating the effect of overstretch on the armed forces currently being discussed with the Treasury. Any decision to mobilise would have to be dependent on agreement by the Treasury to meet the additional costs involved.

I have asked around and discovered that this is the first time that a Government considering putting troops into action have said, "First we must ask the Treasury." That is a dangerous new doctrine.

Then there is the question of the substantial improvement in the number of recruits. Last week, the Secretary of State told the House that the Government

> anticipate that full complement in the Army would be achieved by 2005.—[Official Report, 22 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1397.]

That appeared to be good news, but unfortunately, in another paper, the Army's head of personnel advised that it was more likely that full complement for the Army would be achieved only in 31 years. Whom do we believe?

As if that were not enough, we find the following chilling and terrible indictment in the report by the Select Committee on Defence on the Ministry of Defence's annual reporting cycle:

> The cumulative evidence of cancelled exercises, delayed equipment programmes and of resources apparently insufficient to reverse the problems of overstretch and undermanning suggest that if the wheels have not yet come of the SDR they are certainly beginning to wobble alarmingly. The Department's finances should be rebalanced in the current Spending Review. Commitments and resources have to be brought back into line or we risk finding ourselves stumbling from one crisis to the next.

That is why the Opposition will not support the White Paper tonight, and why we accuse the Government of a dereliction of duty. The Government might score a majority among Labour Members, but they will find that a lot of people are asking questions about their competence to run the Ministry of Defence and to conduct the future defence of this country.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): May I offer my own sincere but, I am sure, inadequate tribute to Michael Colvin, a man whom I held in the greatest respect? I read his last speech with great interest on my return last week from a visit abroad, where I was supporting the Defence Export Services Organisation.

We have, with a few notable exceptions—rather than have interventions, perhaps people could just assume that they are among the notable exceptions—faced the usual barrage of whingeing from the Tory Benches. I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) has left his flotation tank to join us again. He has perfected the whinge fortissimo. I have no military experience, but I felt for a moment this afternoon as if I were under fire—until I realised that, of course, the hon. Gentleman was firing blanks.

What have we not had this afternoon? We have had no recognition, even grudging, of the many advances that we have made in less than three years. We have had no apology for the Conservatives' collective guilt for the mess that we inherited in 1997. We have had no understanding that the world has changed and that we must follow suit. We have had no constructive thinking at all. The Conservatives are bereft of imagination and ideas; they can only carp and criticise from the sidelines, with their usual distasteful combination of crocodile tears and synthetic rage.

I should like, in the short time available to me, to try to answer as many as possible of the points that have been raised in the debate. First, I wish to speak about two issues that are my direct responsibility—medical services and housing. I cannot give the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) the exact answer that he would like on medical services, but I shall be willing to provide it in as accurate a form as possible in writing, if he so wishes. However, I can assure the House that, given my background in public health, I have every intention of devoting as large a percentage of my time as possible to getting the medical services back on track. Having looked at the evidence before me, I am quite convinced that that process has already begun.

Despite serious manpower shortages, the defence medical services are meeting all their operational commitments. Some reservists are being used in operational posts on a voluntary basis. As has been recognised by many speakers, the main problem is the retention of experienced personnel. Recruitment into training is generally satisfactory, but the direct recruitment of fully trained medical officers is difficult, and few have so far been recruited. We are, however, seeking new ways of meeting the regular and reserve medical manpower requirements. We are undertaking that work in close consultation with the Department of Health and the national health service.

Enhancing the operational capability of the defence medical services was an important theme of the strategic defence review. An additional £140 million has been made available for additional personnel and equipment over the four years from 1998–99 to 2001–02, with further funding continuing in subsequent years. As I have said, recruitment problems are a cause of continuing concern, but we are tackling them energetically and innovatively. When the centre for defence medicine opens next year, I am sure that it will provide a beacon with which to attract more and high-quality candidates into the service.

On service accommodation, there are problems. I hate to carp again at the Conservatives, but those problems are largely due to them and the fire sale that they held under the auspices, I believe, of the current hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo). We have been trying to remedy that state of affairs ever since, and have conducted several reviews of the situation. We have been requested to assess the feasibility of adopting a co-ordinated approach to the improvement of single living accommodation, which is already producing benefits. We have set up steering groups and surveyed the estate. Generally speaking, we have set out a platform from which to move forward.

The latest initiatives in Government procurement must be adopted in managing the improvement of the estate. Public-private partnership and prime contracting are considered to be the most appropriate procurement options for consideration. We are using private finance initiative arrangements to provide new builds for housing outside the Annington Homes-owned estate. Contracts placed to date are at Lossiemouth for 279 properties, Yeovilton for 88 properties—*[Interruption.]* I thought that that would get some attention. I shall write to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) about his other points, because I do not have time to deal with them now. As I was saying, there are contracts for 145 properties at Cosford and Shawbury and for 164 properties in central Scotland.

Two further projects are under way. The first will provide accommodation for Bristol, Bath, Portsmouth and Shrivenham, and the second will be for Wattisham. The quality of housing provided through the PFI has so far proved to be very good.

On NATO and Europe, the United Kingdom has played a leading role in shaping a policy that will ensure that Europe pulls its weight, both in NATO and by allowing the EU to act when NATO, as a whole, is not engaged. We have ensured that the focus of the debate is on strengthening capability. Europe's armed forces need to be modernised.

On the basis of UK proposals, EU member states signed up to concrete defence performance targets at Helsinki. We secured agreement to an approach whereby a small capability to support defence decision making will be developed in the EU, while the bulk of capability for planning and conducting European-led operations will be drawn from the resources available to NATO.

The initiative will not undermine NATO, nor will it establish a competitor to NATO. Strengthening European military capability will strengthen NATO overall. The Americans support our initiative and have signed up, in NATO, to developing practical means of assistance, including the presumption that the EU would have access to NATO assets and capabilities. In Helsinki, it was explicitly stated that that does not mean a European army—we support that. Improving the quality of existing armed forces will allow us to put together the right mix for specific EU or NATO-led operations.

The hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard) and others mentioned the problems posed by asymmetric warfare. We have had to address that matter, which causes great concern. The pace of the advance of technology is such that potential adversaries may conclude that they can hope to achieve their goals only through unconventional methods—that is what is meant by asymmetric warfare. We are alive to those threats. Forward-looking threat assessments inform our planning processes to ensure that we are adequately prepared to deal with asymmetric threats.

We are fully committed to nuclear non-proliferation and the goal of nuclear disarmament, as set out in the strategic defence review. We are working for a constructive non-proliferation treaty review conference. Nuclear proliferation remains a concern; maintaining the NPT is obviously essential to preventing proliferation. The next step is to begin negotiations on a treaty to ban production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons.

Much hot air and some good sense has been expressed on the US national missile defence system. The Government continue to value the anti-ballistic missile treaty and want it to be preserved. Amendments to the treaty are a matter for the United States and Russia. We

[Dr. Lewis Moonie]

hope that the discussions that are now in progress between those countries will reach a successful conclusion. We must remember that the treaty has already been amended twice. President Clinton will not decide on deployment before next summer. His decision will be based on the US analysis of the threat, technological feasibility, cost and international security considerations.

We monitor closely both the threat and the technologies available to guard against ballistic missiles. Our work will enable us to take an informed decision on whether to acquire such capability, should it become necessary to do so in the future.

Overstretch and undermanning have been a problem, especially when we were engaged in major operations in Kosovo—that is no secret. Several measures have been taken to mitigate the impact on service personnel of the present overstretch, including improvements to the operational welfare package. For example, there is now a guaranteed period of post-operational tour leave for those returning from operations. Recent enhancements to the families concessionary travel scheme give the families of personnel deployed on operations from an overseas base a wider range of choice when planning their return to the UK. Other improvements to the operational welfare package have been covered in detail during the debate, so I shall not return to them.

The subject of reduced commitment was raised. Where we can make reductions, we do so as soon as possible. We bring people home as soon as we can. The proof of that is that, between the spring of 1999 and the spring of this year, our numbers in the Balkans will be down by 10,000. We have also seen reductions in deployments in the Gulf and the Falkland islands. The percentage of Army personnel preparing for, committed to, or in recovery from operations was, at one stage, at 47 per cent., but it is now down to 28 per cent., which is lower than the figure that we inherited.

Recruitment is now buoyant. It is at its best level for 10 years in all three services. I am confident that we are taking steps to address the admittedly serious problems of the loss of trained personnel.

On the savings and benefits of smart procurement, we are continuing on track to deliver the savings target of £2 billion of equipment costs over 10 years. I can give the House examples of specific targets that are included in that. The integrated project team—IPT—for the sensors avionics and navigation system has identified 7 per cent. savings through life as well as time and performance improvements. The Brimstone IPT's gain-sharing, on a running contract, with both sides saving from the flexible approach by the end user, has achieved a modest cost saving to date, with a potential for far more significant cost benefits through further application of the gain-share approach. The attack helicopter IPT has identified 30 per cent. savings in in-service logistics up to about £100 million a year. I could go on, but I think that I have given a flavour of the fact that smart procurement is working.

We believe that some form of private-public partnership for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency will improve value for money while retaining access to world-class science and research and encouraging greater agility and innovation. We must recognise that, in the modern age as knowledge expands, it becomes impossible for any single organisation to continue to cover every aspect of technological development. Choices have to be made and it is important that we get the best value for money and the best results from the investment that we are making, and will continue to make, in military research. DERA is a key to the provision of the United Kingdom's defence capability, and it is important that we get the right solution. For these reasons, we recognise the importance of allowing sufficient time to work issues through to provide confidence in the final decision.

Many other points have been raised in the debate. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) made a plea for compensation for Major Stankovic. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but that is not in our minds. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) praised auxiliary pilots and referred to recruitment in the auxiliary and voluntary sector. We certainly seek to improve that. I have a great deal of sympathy for what he said about the redevelopment of those squadrons.

Many other points were covered. The hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) is in his place, and I must thank him for offering me the use of his fatigues. They are probably the only set in the House that would fit me. I even enjoyed some of his speech from what I can remember—that is a first.

Many comments were made about procurement. Given the delicate situation that many of our procurement projects are in, it would not be proper to comment on them other than to stress that we shall take decisions as soon as is practicable. I know that, given the effort that is going into the matter, the correct decisions will be made at the appropriate time.

During our debates today and last week, the Government have set out to the House what we are doing to modernise defence and to make sure that our world-class armed forces are able to meet the challenges that they will face in the future, so that they continue to act as a force for good around the world. Recent events in Kosovo have shown once again how accomplished our service people are in going about their difficult work firmly and fairly. We owe them a great debt.

We are at the forefront of an ambitious programme of change. We are not doing that for the sake of it, but because reform delivers results. The strategic defence review is on track. It is already more than 40 per cent. complete and it is delivering results that will allow our armed forces to meet the challenges not of the past, but of the future.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 12, Noes 340.

Division No. 88] **[10 pm**

AYES

Dalyell, Tam	Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret	Skinner, Dennis
Hopkins, Kelvin	Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Llwyd, Elfyn	Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Mahon, Mrs Alice	
Marshall–Andrews, Robert	**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*	**Mr. John McDonnell and**
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*	**Mr. Jeremy Corbyn.**

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry

Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:

The House divided: Ayes 348, Noes 149.

Division No. 89] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura

Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. Peter Luff.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the 1999 Defence White Paper (Cm 4446).

Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill

Order for Third Reading read.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The 22nd of the remaining orders and notices on the Order Paper is a motion standing in my name that makes a suggestion to the other place concerning an issue that affects teachers throughout the country who might be accused of offences under the Bill. Given the concern that has been expressed to me by teaching unions on this important matter—which has not been debated at any stage during the consideration of the Bill in either this or the previous Session—would you advise me whether it can be considered before a vote on Third Reading?

Madam Speaker: I have of course noted that the hon. Gentleman has tabled what is known as a suggested amendment under the Parliament Acts. It appears among the remaining orders and notices, but he must understand that I am bound by the Order of the House of 7 February under which the House must proceed directly to the Third Reading of the Bill.

Mr. St. Aubyn *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I have not finished. Under that Order, I am required to put the Question forthwith, so the hon. Gentleman cannot make his proposal to the House. He can, of course, divide the House if he wishes.

Motion made, and Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 117.

Division No. 90] **[10.29 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bercow, John
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Duncan, Alan
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian

Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prior, David
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cann, Jamie
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tynan, Bill
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Edward Leigh and Dr. Julian Lewis.

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read the Third time, and passed.

Parking (Disabled People)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

10.40 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I bring to the attention of the House a subject that is scarcely controversial. It is not my intention either to berate or to tease the Government beyond a very small degree, because it is not a subject on which party feelings run high. I wish to probe a little further what the Government intend to do to assist disabled people to enjoy the right that they have acquired to park in places that are barred to the rest of the public.

For many disabled people, this is a precious right. Disability, particularly severe disability, often means that the disabled person cannot walk far. Local authorities throughout the country have provided disabled parking spaces with the intention of making it much easier for disabled people to go about their business. There is a strong sense among disabled people that many of those spaces are wrongly used. They are taken by people who have no disability and unscrupulously park in their place, thus causing them to travel long distances, which they cannot easily do.

To some extent, that is more perception than reality. My local authority, for example, carried out a survey with the assistance of the police and found that, on the whole, the misuse of disabled parking spaces was not as bad as disabled people perceived it to be. That was encouraging. However, a significant number of the people who were found using those spaces had an orange badge, but were using them improperly because they were carrying out functions for a disabled person, not themselves. The rules have changed. They should not do that any more. It is clear—I hope that the Government will remember it—that the message that carrying out a function on behalf of a disabled person does not allow people to use a disabled parking space is not well understood.

My next point, which is where the Government need to show their colours, is that my local authority has discovered that the law does not allow either the police or, in our case, parking attendants—wrong parking there has been decriminalised, so the supervision of parking spaces is carried out by parking attendants—to insist on being shown details of the orange badge. That is absurd. We provide disabled people with a special privilege, but anyone who abuses it can refuse to show the badge. That is clearly a failure of the law.

The Government know this. In May, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) secured a debate on a different aspect of disabled people's parking. The Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), said:

> The badge design already has a photograph of the holder, but we have not yet been able to introduce the legislative changes to provide the enforcement authorities with the powers to inspect badges.

I should very much like the Minister, in his reply, to tell us whether the Government have found time in the legislative timetable to give that necessary power. Without it, the orange badge scheme is really deeply flawed.

The Minister went on to say:

> we have made it clear that we shall introduce the necessary legislation to allow inspection of badges as soon as parliamentary time allows.—[*Official Report*, 5 May 1999; Vol. 330, c. 919.]

One of the principal purposes of this debate is to discover whether the Government will now—please—introduce that particular legislation. We desperately need it.

On 1 January 2000, a blue badge was introduced. The badge is a tribute to the European Union, in that it will entitle disabled people who are eligible to privileged parking right across the European Union. It is another thoroughly good example of the value of the European Union.

My disabled friends in Maidstone and elsewhere are entirely right to complain that, now that they have been given the privilege, it is not open to anyone to challenge someone who is abusing it. Nevertheless, in the legislation—this is rather curious—there is a provision that, if someone commits an offence, he or she can be fined £1,000. However, to be fined £1,000, it has to be proved that that person has committed an offence three times. As one is not allowed to inspect an orange badge, it is quite difficult to see how one could prove that someone has broken the law. I believe that it would be very much better—I should be interested to hear what the Minister has to say—if we had a much smaller penalty that could be enforced on the first offence.

I have just suffered from the fact that I committed a parking offence in my local authority, in London. Subsequently, I was away on parliamentary business, and suddenly realised that, rather than being able to pay half the fine within 10 days, I now have to pay double the fine. Although the figure is not colossal, it is sufficiently large to make me wish that I had not incurred it. Nevertheless, I think that it would be very much better, instead of having a notional £1,000 fine for those who have committed three offences, to have a £100 fine that could be levied on the spot. I think that it would discourage people from abusing these privileges.

This is a very simple debate. We are only asking for the Government, if they have not already found time in the legislative timetable, to commit themselves to providing powers for both the police and anyone else empowered by the local authority to police parking arrangements to inspect the badges. The Government should also make it possible for the local authority or police to levy on the spot a small fine if people are found to be breaking the rules.

I should like the Minister also to say that the Government will encourage an education campaign among those who care for disabled people, so that they realise that they cannot use the orange badge to go collecting prescriptions or whatever. Although that is a perfectly benign reason for breaking the law, if we allow such a loophole, it will be too easy to cheat. Moreover, ultimately, it would be disabled people who suffered.

I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

10.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I begin, as is usual, by congratulating the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) on

securing this debate. I should also like to express my gratitude, and that of the House, to him for giving us an opportunity to debate this important subject.

Parking for disabled people, particularly the orange badge scheme, is certainly one of the most controversial matters that I have to deal with as Minister with responsibility for mobility issues. It seems that everyone has a view on how the scheme should work, on who should have a badge, and, indeed, on who should not have one. Too often, in arguing about the detail, we tend to forget the enormously important purpose of the scheme: to enable severely disabled people to be independently mobile.

For many severely disabled people, the private car is the only viable transport option, but its value would be greatly reduced, if not lost entirely, if disabled motorists were unable to park as close to their destination as possible. Research demonstrates very clearly that the mobility range of severely disabled people can be as little as 50 m, so even having to park 100 m or so away from a workplace or shops may make the journey extremely difficult, and in some cases impossible.

The orange badge scheme is vital to people with severe disabilities, enabling them to participate in the day-to-day activities that non-disabled people take for granted. My concern is to ensure that the scheme operates efficiently and effectively to deliver real benefit to those disabled people to whom mobility it is essential.

Before I turn to the specific concern raised by the hon. Gentleman, it may be useful to remind the House of the background and scope of the orange badge scheme. The scheme was first introduced in 1971 and it has been reviewed twice since then, most recently in 1992. Eligibility for an orange badge is governed by regulations that have been subject to wide public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny.

To qualify for a badge, a person must be in receipt of the higher rate mobility component of disability living allowance or a war pensioner's mobility supplement; use a motor vehicle supplied by a United Kingdom Health Department; be registered blind; have a severe disability in both upper limbs, driving regularly but being unable to turn a steering wheel by hand, even if that wheel is fitted with a steering knob; or have a permanent and substantial disability that means being unable to walk or having considerable difficulty in walking. That last category is known as the discretionary criterion.

From that list, it will be evident that eligibility is, in principle, fairly tightly controlled. Despite that, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of badges on issue over the past decade, from 929,000 to 1.7 million: an increase of more than 80 per cent. That total bears no relation at all to the proportion of the population who are disabled—about 10 to 12 per cent.—nor is the growth supported by a corresponding increase in the number of cars over the same period, although I recognise, of course, that not all badge holders will be drivers.

It is also worth noting that two thirds of the badges issued fall under the discretionary criterion. Generally, that means that a general practitioner or other medical adviser will have supported an application.

With such an increase in the number of badges, it is important that eligibility continues to be tightly controlled to ensure that the scheme does not become so oversubscribed as to minimise or even negate the parking benefits to badge holders. At present, orange badge holders may park free of charge and without time limit at parking meters and pay-and-display on-street parking; may be exempt from limits on parking times imposed on other users; and may park on single or double yellow lines for up to three hours in England and Wales and without time limit in Scotland.

The increase in the number of orange badges in circulation has prompted much concern, not least from our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—DPTAC—the majority of whose members are disabled people. It submitted a report to me, recommending that we review the scope of the scheme with a view to tightening eligibility and revising administration.

I recognise that DPTAC's recommendations have arisen from genuine concern about the effectiveness of the scheme. After careful consideration of the recommendations and the results of a survey of local authorities administering the scheme, I announced on 18 November 1999 that a full review will take place this year. I agreed that a review was necessary to ensure that the scheme continues to serve its fundamental purpose: to enable severely disabled people to park close to their destinations.

Mr. Rowe: I understand the Minister's concern about the number of badges, but my more limited concern is that, even with the new badges with photographs, there is no obligation to show whose photograph it is. I hope that the review will take that point into account.

Mr. Hill: As I shall explain, the review will certainly deal with enforcement. I shall address some specific remarks to the right of inspection of photographic evidence, but I think that it will be for the convenience of the hon. Gentleman and the House for me to put the enforcement considerations into the wider context of the imminent important review.

The review process will be wide ranging. We shall look at the eligibility criteria as well as the administration and enforcement of the scheme. I have already mentioned the high proportion of badges issued under the discretionary criterion, often with the support of GPs. This is a particularly difficult area and there is no doubt that practice varies widely on who will be given a badge and who will not. One area that the review will consider is whether the use of the discretionary criterion is a fair and appropriate process.

At the other end of the spectrum, I get a great deal of correspondence on behalf of people who have been refused a badge, for example because their disability is not permanent or because they fall just short of the eligibility criteria. It is right for the review to look at the whole issue of eligibility. We need to see whether we have got the balance right between ensuring that the scheme is available to those who need it most and stopping it becoming totally oversubscribed with people for whom it is an undoubted convenience but perhaps not a necessity.

The administration of the scheme also varies widely across the country. The majority of local authorities operate the scheme through their social services departments, while others use their highways department. The number of badges issued in different authorities also varies much more widely than demographic or geographical factors could

[Mr. Hill]

explain. It is important to examine how local authorities run the scheme and whether there are any alternative ways in which it might be administered.

The third major element of the review will be to look at enforcement. As the hon. Gentleman recognised, it is a controversial and difficult issue. Resources will always be an issue, but we must aim to give the enforcement authorities the best possible tools at their disposal to enable them to do an effective job. Without good enforcement, the temptation to abuse the scheme is great and the reputation of the scheme as a whole suffers. Most importantly, the consequence of abuse may be that the parking spaces that severely disabled people need will not be available to them. The review will be carried out in close consultation with all the parties concerned in the scheme and, crucially, with disabled people.

The abuse of the scheme and the powers available to deal with it are the hon. Gentleman's specific concerns. Abuse of the system continues to be a concern for local authorities. Under the existing system, enforcement officers can issue penalty charge notices to non-disabled people who park in disabled spaces designated by a local authority order or give a fixed penalty notice to offenders at on-street parking places. The police or local authority may even decide to prosecute. Those powers apply only to on-street parking. In private car parks, it is for individual operators to safeguard the use of orange badge spaces.

I appreciate that there is no guarantee that there will always be someone available to deal with each instance of abuse, but it is open to members of the public to report vehicles not displaying an orange badge when parked in an orange badge bay to the police, local traffic wardens or parking attendants. The hon. Gentleman is right to observe that there is no specific power for enforcement officers to require badge holders to produce their badges for inspection so that the photograph can be checked. However, some police officers and traffic wardens ask to see badges to check the photograph or verify that the details have not been tampered with. We are aware of a series of roadside checks that were carried out by the local police in Rochdale to establish the validity of orange badges being used. We have also been notified more recently about an exercise being undertaken by the local police in Weston-super-Mare to clamp down on the misuse of orange badges.

Disabled people have made it very clear to us that they welcome being asked to verify that they are the legitimate user of a badge. The vast majority of badge holders will willingly allow their badge to be inspected. However, we recognise that there is a case for all enforcement officers to have the power under the law to demand this, particularly in cases where it is suspected that the badge is being misused. We are therefore seeking a suitable legislative opportunity to make this change. I confess to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent that we are still seeking that opportunity, but the effect of the review has rendered the search for that opportunity more compelling.

Mr. Rowe: Would not the Transport Bill, which is a huge portmanteau measure, provide just such an opportunity?

Mr. Hill: I still bear the wounds of the castigations that I suffered—rightly or wrongly—in connection with the Greater London Authority Act 1999. I understand that that is the largest piece of legislation passed by the House since the Government of India Act 1935. There was great discontent at the level of amendment to that measure, and I think that there would be a certain hesitation—to put it no more strongly—to add significantly to measures that are already large. However, I shall bear the suggestion in mind.

In the meantime, if the police, traffic wardens or local authority parking attendants suspect that an offence is being committed, they can take down the details on the front of the badge, such as the serial number, and contact the issuing authority concerned. The maximum fine on conviction for misuse of the orange badge by a non-disabled person is £1,000. That is in addition to whatever penalty may be imposed for the parking offence.

I have noted with interest the suggestion from the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent of a graduated system of penalties. I shall study that very seriously.

The orange badge scheme is, without doubt, a key element in the independent mobility of many severely disabled people. Without the badge, many people would be unable to go about their day-to-day business. It is therefore vital that the eligibility criteria, administration and enforcement of the orange badge scheme are tightly controlled so that adequate parking is available to those disabled people for whom it is an essential part of daily living.

I am therefore most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to explain the Government's position.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Many of the disabled people to whom I speak are responsible users of the orange badge system, and they want the problem resolved as quickly as possible. I am sure that the experience of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) is the same. The problem gives them a bad name because it brings the system into disrepute. Does the Minister therefore agree that speed is of the essence?

Mr. Hill: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman, and all hon. Members will know, from constituency experience, the strength of feeling on this issue. It is interesting to note that the driving force behind the review, which offers an opportunity to examine the arrangements relating to orange badges globally but in a timely fashion, is DPTAC, the statutory disabled body. There is no doubt about the commitment of people with disabilities to get the system right, in terms of eligibility, administration and enforcement.

I shall conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent for this opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to ensuring that the needs of severely disabled people for appropriate and convenient parking are properly safeguarded.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 29 February 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading Read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 7 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Team Midwifery

1. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): What progress has been made since May 1997 in extending team midwifery. [110853]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The last Department of Health survey of the extent of team midwifery was published in 1993. At present, there is no accurate information on the extent of team midwifery nationwide. That is why we have recently commissioned a comprehensive review of midwifery organisation locally. It will also examine the impact of different models of midwife care and report by the end of the year.

Mr. Russell: Does the Minister accept that the changing child birth project resulted from a Select Committee on Health report and was introduced under the previous Government, but instead of extending women's choice and providing the best possible service for expectant mothers, are not the Government reducing child care, particularly by the midwifery service? I draw her attention in particular to the Iceni midwifery team in Colchester, which is threatened with disbandment.

Yvette Cooper: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. The Government are strongly committed to the values behind the changing child birth project, focusing on the women involved and keeping them at the centre of maternity services.

I am aware of the situation with regard to the Iceni team and that various options are being examined locally. Obviously, it would be wrong of a Minister to pre-empt any local consultation that needs to take place, but I have benefited from team midwifery in Pontefract and so am well aware of the benefits that team midwifery can provide as one model of midwife care.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): Is my hon. Friend aware that in St. George's hospital, which is in my constituency, there is an excellent midwifery unit? On a recent visit there I saw the work that was being done, but it was pointed out to me that, sadly, local general practitioners are not always fully aware of the services that are on offer. Will she look at that matter?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Tooting service is a great model of best practice from which people throughout the country can learn. The Government are strongly committed to having GPs, primary care groups and acute trusts working closely together to ensure that the best quality maternity care is provided for all women, wherever they should want it.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Does the Minister accept that there is serious concern among pregnant women, particularly those who will become first-time mothers, that there is a possibility that they will be left alone during labour because of a shortage of midwives? Will she outline the Government's strategy for recruiting more midwives, thus ensuring that maternity services are good, reliable and give confidence to those who are about to face motherhood?

Yvette Cooper: I can certainly reassure all first-time mothers and all mothers to be that the Department expects any woman who is in established labour who needs or who wants support to have it. We expect maternity care to be organised accordingly. However, the hon. Lady is right that decisions by the previous Government left us with a shortage of midwives, as well as a shortage of nurses and doctors. Given how long it takes to train midwives, nurses and doctors, we would be in a better situation if the previous Government had got their act together and increased recruitment several years ago.

Since taking office, our national recruitment campaign has been extremely successful. I am glad to say that 2,790 nurses and midwives have already returned to employment in the NHS as a result of the campaign. A further 2,000 are preparing to join. Applications for midwifery courses in particular have risen significantly this year. We are training more pre-registration students. The figure has increased year on year, and we are now training 70 per cent. more than in 1993–94.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my hon. Friend aware that, in most normal births, any midwife is worth a dozen doctors? If she is genuinely concerned, will she not just recruit new midwives, but look at the terms and conditions of existing midwives and ensure that those excellent and essential ladies are still knocking around, irrespective of what the doctors want?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that midwives' terms and conditions are such that we sustain their recruitment—we do not simply recruit them, but keep them in the profession. That is why, for example, the NHS is increasing family friendly

employment policies to promote things such as part-time working and to encourage midwives to stay in the profession.

Ancillary Staff Pay

2. **Mr. Archy Kirkwood** (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): What plans he has to review the level of ancillary staff pay in the national health service; and if he will make a statement. [110854]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): For the first time, we have offered a guarantee of real-terms pay increases for national health service staff who are outside the pay review bodies, not only for one year, but for a three-year period.

Mr. Kirkwood: That longer period is certainly welcome. However, is the Minister aware that, this Monday, I met a support staff worker who is a married man, works a 39-hour week, but has only £139 in take-home pay—which is clearly below benefit levels? Is the Minister also aware that it is not only a matter of pay? Full-time support staff in the NHS are systematically being replaced by part-timers and by temporary workers, with the consequence that support staff consider themselves to be doing ever more work for ever less pay.

Would the Minister be prepared to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) to discuss the issue? Will he also try, in the upcoming pay review and in the Government's comprehensive spending review, to find the best way possible of providing better pay and conditions for people who now rightly believe that they are the forgotten people of the national health service?

Mr. Denham: Of course I would be prepared to meet the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) to discuss those matters. It is worth bearing in mind that when we were elected, the starting point for an adult ancillary worker was £3.60 per hour, but from the coming year, because of the offer that we have made, the minimum will be £4. Furthermore, the structure of the deal that is on offer has been weighted towards those who are on the lowest income—with a flat-rate increase for the lowest paid, from which 75,000 workers benefited last year and 85,000 will benefit in the coming year.

Ancillary workers are a key part of the health team. The way in which they do their jobs, and the flexibility with which they approach those jobs, are an important part of delivering modern health services. It is an issue that we want to address in the "Agenda for Change" negotiations that are being conducted with the trade unions.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a shame that during 18 years of Tory Government the ancillary workers were often ignored? Is it not to be commended that, under the current Government—with their working families tax credit, child care tax credit, reduction in national insurance and the 10p starting rate—we are really able to help to make work pay for those who are at the poorest end of the scale?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Last week, I was very pleased to meet a health worker in a south London trust who, as a result of the working families tax credit and the child care tax credit, was fully £80 per week better off than she had been before the introduction of those changes.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): May I draw to the Minister's attention the plight of medical laboratory scientific officers? On Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and I went to see the MLSOs at Frimley Park hospital. MLSO-1 grade staff are on a maximum of £17,200 annually, which is only about £2,000 per year more than the starting pay for nurses. Does the Minister agree that MLSOs are extremely important people, who do all the blood tests and other tests performed in hospitals, but that the Government have neglected them?

Mr. Denham: Has the hon. Gentleman ever wondered how on earth that state was reached? I am very pleased to say that the offer that we have made, which I mentioned earlier, puts on the table quite significant increases for some of the lowest-paid MLSOs. More than 1,000 staff have on offer more than the basic 3 per cent. increase, and, for some staff, the offer proposes an increase as high as 26 per cent. Only yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that, in time, the recruitment campaign that is being directed at nurses would be rolled out to encompass other members of the health team.

The particular needs of that staff group are ones that I hope we shall be able to deal with in the "Agenda for Change" negotiations with the trade unions, which are seeking a new pay system for the national health service.

Intermediate Care Services

3. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): If he will make a statement on the development of intermediate care services. [110855]

6. **Mr. John Austin** (Erith and Thamesmead): If he will make a statement on the development of intermediate care services. [110858]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The national beds inquiry, which I published earlier this month, outlines the case for development of new services, especially for older people. Intermediate care services can prevent unnecessary hospital admissions and enable people to regain independence in their own homes after a period of active rehabilitation. That is why the Government will develop those services.

Mr. Cunningham: How does my right hon. Friend intend to expand the number of intermediate care beds, not only to take patients out of hospital acute beds, but, more importantly, to ensure that elderly people receive the proper treatment that they deserve?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right. The results of the national beds inquiry show that there are a lot of older people in hospital beds who need not be there. They have gone into hospital for an operation and then found themselves trapped in a hospital bed because there is nowhere else for them to go. They face a bizarre choice between staying in a hospital bed or going home without adequate support. That is why it is important to build a

bridge between the hospital and the home by developing new care services. That means that we have to invest in more active rehabilitation and recovery services than we have in the past. We can do that partly in NHS hospitals, partly by giving new life to cottage hospitals, and partly, when necessary, by entering into new arrangements with the private sector to develop intermediate care services.

Mr. Austin: I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the excellent work being done at the Bevan intermediate care unit in Thamesmead, which provides high-intensity nurse and therapist-led treatment, care, recuperation and rehabilitation, with medical input from general practitioners, thereby providing greater job satisfaction for the staff involved and giving a more appropriate form of care at approximately a third of the cost of an acute bed in a district general hospital. Will he make a special allocation of money or ring-fence money following the beds survey for the development of intermediate care?

Mr. Milburn: As I understand it, the Bevan centre in my hon. Friend's constituency has ring-fenced some of the funding available to it. Such active rehabilitation and recovery services are popular among staff and could give a new role to nursing and physiotherapist staff, getting them working at a level appropriate to their skills. The services are also very popular with patients. That, and how effective they are, counts more than cost. I am slightly more doubtful about ring-fenced funding. It is important to try to overcome some of the fragmentation in funding that there has been in the past. That certainly characterised the old internal market. We must recognise that hospitals, community services, intermediate care services, primary care services and social services are part of one system, rather than being separate systems. The funding structures must support that rather than inhibiting such developments.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I welcome the announcement of new intermediate beds, but I should like more detail on what they will comprise. Will the Secretary of State reassure us that there will not be a return to geriatric wards, which tended to be dumping grounds for the elderly? Is there an opportunity for a reprieve for some of the community hospitals under threat of closure? Some of them have been closed even while the inquiry was going on. Will there be a rehabilitative role for the new beds? Will there be an expansion in occupational therapy and physiotherapy to ensure that there is genuine progress and that we do not just move along the bed blocking problem?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman is right on two counts. The new intermediate care services have the potential to give a new lease of life to cottage hospitals, but it is pointless retaining cottage hospitals unless they perform a useful function in the care system. Some do and some do not. We want to move away from passive systems of care that assume that older people in particular are going to deteriorate. We should assume that the care system can rehabilitate them and literally get them back on their feet so that they can have what we all want—an independent life in our own home. Intermediate care services can do that. We shall put in investment to make that happen.

Part of the solution is to ensure that we have the appropriate numbers of staff doing the right things. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of physiotherapists, occupational therapists and other nursing staff. As I was able to say yesterday, there is good news in that area. We are making progress and beginning to turn the corner on nursing shortages. Of course, there is still some way to go, but if we continue our policies of giving nurses and other staff decent pay rises and changing the way in which they are employed to use their skills to best effect, we shall continue to make progress.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I welcome the Secretary of State's ideas for the development of intermediate care. They follow on from work that was going on before the general election, including the development of some community hospitals in Devon, to which he might have drawn attention. I hope that he will not lose sight of the opposite pressures in the health service—for example, overcentralisation in acute services such as maternity care and sometimes accident and emergency care. In developing his welcome ideas for intermediate care, will he explain some of the disciplines that he intends to introduce to ensure that we have some check against the natural tendency to overcentralise care in large acute hospitals?

Mr. Milburn: I suppose that it was predictable that the right hon. Gentleman would claim credit for the development of intermediate care services. However, in too many parts of the country such services are absent altogether. Indeed, this morning, when I visited St. Thomas's hospital with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, staff from the accident and emergency department to the acute sector were telling us that, in addition to real pressures in the system—

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Was it a media opportunity?

Mr. Milburn: It was not a media opportunity; it was an opportunity to speak to the staff. If Liberal Democrat Members took that opportunity more often, they would have a rather more sensible health policy.

The staff told us, quite rightly, that throughout the health care system, at all levels, there is a lot of pressure, and that in addition patients are placed inappropriately within the system. That needs to be freed up and to do that we have to build a new level of care. That is precisely what we are doing. As for the overcentralisation of services, of course that has to be resisted. We have to ensure that when we design services in the NHS the patients' point of view must be paramount. The service exists to serve patients, not any other interests—including, sometimes, professional interests.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The Secretary of State referred to the national beds inquiry report. The numbers of beds have continued to fall under the present Government. Will he demonstrate the commitment of which he has spoken by giving an

undertaking today that he will not approve any further proposals by health authorities that result in a net loss of beds in that health authority area?

Mr. Milburn: No, I will not do that. Sometimes there are good reasons for changes in the beds system. Let me give the hon. Gentleman an example. At the moment in Norwich, there is a hospital that dates back to the 18th century. It operates on two sites. It is inappropriate in the 21st century, so we are going to replace it with a brand new hospital. We are doing that for a simple reason: it is not possible to deliver 21st century health care in some hospitals that were built in the 20th century or, indeed, the 18th century.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend has had the opportunity to look at reviews in the press today of a book called "A Tourist Guide to the British", which was published yesterday and includes the following disgraceful slur:

> A rare smile on the face of a Yorkshireman will be a sign only of impending breaking wind.

As you know, Madam Speaker, there are many other things that bring a smile to the face of a Yorkshireman, such as receiving free rather than means-tested care. In developing the concept of intermediate care, are the Government any nearer ending the nonsensical distinction between means-tested social care and free nursing care, which would bring smiles to the faces of Yorkshiremen?

Mr. Milburn: I am glad that my hon. Friend went off in that direction rather than the one that I anticipated. As he knows, I announced to the House last December that we were looking seriously at a proposal by the royal commission on long-term care on free nursing care. We are looking at that proposal in the round because it is important that we consider it in the context of what we should do about elderly care services generally. Of course, we have to sort out some of the funding anomalies, but it is equally important that we make sure that the quality of care that elderly people receive, whether it is in the social care sector or the health care sector, is always provided at the highest possible standard. That is precisely what we shall do. As I said to the House last year, following the spending review announced in the summer we shall announce our final conclusions on the royal commission and publish a White Paper.

Trolley Task Force

4. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): If he will make a statement about the work of the trolley task force. [110856]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): Last year we set up an accident and emergency modernisation programme team, backed by an investment of £115 million, to spearhead improvements in accident and emergency departments. The programme has a much wider remit than looking at trolley waits. The team produced an interim report last November, which is available in the Library. Its final report will be presented to Ministers within the next three months.

Mr. Chope: That answer shows, in effect, that this is another new Labour broken promise. The Prime Minister addressed a big conference of health administrators on 20 June 1996 and said:

> Today I want to announce that in Government we will set up a task force to report urgently on how we can end trolley waits in the NHS for good.

That has not happened. Will the Minister now set up a task force to look into the delivery of Government policy?

Ms Stuart: I hate to suggest that Opposition Members could be mistaken, but on this occasion I am afraid that I have to do so. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on his visit to St. Thomas's A and E department, we are witnessing a revolution in critical care and in casualty care. One element of that is the process of how we deal with patients between the ambulance and the A and E department, and then subsequently.

Trolley waits are being studied by the winter planning team and by the A and E modernisation programme team. Chief executives of hospital trusts were given strict instructions over the winter regarding the management of trolley waits. Any wait of more than four hours is directly reported to the hospital's chief executive and any wait of more than 12 hours is reported to the regional director. A senior manager in each hospital has been given personal responsibility for trolley waits. As a result, since October the incidence of trolley waits of more than 12 hours has fallen by 48 per cent., and of more than 24 hours by 90 per cent. Far from breaking our promise, the Government have delivered far more than we initially promised.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I thank my hon. Friend for the £700,000 spent on accident and emergency at the Royal Liverpool hospital, which virtually eliminated long trolley waits over the Christmas period. I also look forward to the completion of the new medical assessment unit at the hospital. That is being built, at a cost of £1.4 million, to support the work of the A and E services.

However, does my hon. Friend agree that A and E services cannot be addressed in isolation? Does she also agree that we need more investment in our overall hospital services, such as the £15 million that has already been made available for the Broadgreen site in Liverpool? Can she promise that there will be further support for services in Liverpool to remedy the cuts in the years of Tory Government?

Ms Stuart: My hon. Friend is right: the problems in A and E departments cannot be dealt with in isolation. That is why we are reviewing ambulance services and making extra investment available. It is also why, as part of the national beds inquiry, we are reviewing the way that beds are used. That review includes observation units, acute beds and step-down facilities.

My hon. Friend requested more money for her constituency. We shall take that into account when we consider all the other bids.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): What was interesting about the Prime Minister's casualty stunt this morning was that there was no mention of how new Labour would abolish trolley waits in accident and emergency departments, nor of the fact that in 1999 patients waited for up to 49 hours on trolleys, nor of the fact that the average wait in casualty has risen to between four and five hours. To be fair to the Prime Minister, however, he did mention that there would be more nurse prescribing in casualty. If that is a real change, and not a stunt, will the Minister say what changes to the Medicines Act 1986 will be required?

Ms Stuart: To assume that an accident and emergency department will never use trolleys is to misunderstand how admissions to such departments work. Patients will always have to wait on trolleys for a certain time while assessments and tests are carried out before a permanent bed can be made available.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the changes that might have to be made to the Medicines Act 1986. We are looking into that matter at the moment.

Dr. Fox: The Minister could not answer my question. Her answer means that Downing street has not yet told the Department of Health what the Department's policy on A and E departments is to be. It is No. 10 that determines health policy, not the Secretary of State and his Ministers.

Today, the Prime Minister promised us that nurses would be able to prescribe and order blood tests and X-rays, both of which are already being done. He also said that major cases would be separated from minor ones in the A and E department, and that too is already being done. We are used to the Government reannouncing financial decisions, but now they appear to want to reannounce what is current medical practice and call that a revolution. Is not the £20,000 that Ministers will spend on replacing the tropical plants in their headquarters likely to be far better window dressing than the Prime Minister's waffle this morning in St. Thomas's?

Ms Stuart: The hon. Gentleman might find it useful to spend some time looking at what happens in the accident and emergency departments in our hospitals around the country. Some of the announcements that were made today are about things that are happening in some parts of the country. The legacy of the previous Government is the huge difference in the services that are being provided across the country. That is why we invested £115 million to ensure that every major hospital that needs improvement will get it. There are some 244 projects for improvement, and about 80 per cent. were finished this summer. It is clear that the previous Government would not have spent £115 million on improving the health service.

Beta Interferon

5. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): When the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will conclude its assessment of beta interferon. [110857]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The timetabling of the work programme is a matter for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, although I understand that it should have finalised its deliberations on beta interferon by 30 May, leaving time for appeals and dissemination of the results. The results of NICE's appraisals should be available in late summer this year.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but how does he reconcile the addition of affordability to the remit of NICE with the Government's policy statement in June 1998 that NICE would not become a national council for rationing? Does he not agree that all patients in the national health service should expect the best possible drug for the treatment of their condition?

Mr. Denham: It is certainly the case that NICE will provide authoritative guidance on the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of treatments. That will enable us to ensure that clinically effective and cost-effective treatments are spread as quickly as possible throughout the national health service, and that the best use is made of NHS resources. I think, to be fair, that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the nature of the amendment to the establishment order of NICE earlier this year, which was to ensure that it could examine questions of cost-effectiveness.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Will my hon. Friend reaffirm that one of the principal purposes of NICE is to overcome the long-standing problems of postcode prescribing of drugs such as beta interferon? What assurances can he give multiple sclerosis sufferers that the current NICE study will lead to greater consistency, transparency and equity in prescribing this drug?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the features of the national health service that, regrettably, we inherited from the previous Government was the unacceptable variations in access to care and treatment in different parts of the country. The guidance that is being followed on beta interferon was introduced by the previous Government. One of the great strengths, we hope, of NICE is that by providing consistent guidance to health authorities and to clinicians, those unacceptable variations in treatment and care for a whole range of conditions will be tackled effectively.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that I have been in correspondence with his Department about the problems in the Lincolnshire health authority area? Is he further aware that over the past four and a half years, of those for whom beta interferon has been recommended as treatment 81 per cent. remain untreated? Is he also aware that the Lincolnshire health authority contends that those numbers are because there are insufficient funds available within the Lincolnshire health authority area to treat more

people? Given that, what advice does he have that will ensure that more people can be treated with beta interferon in the Lincolnshire health authority area?

Mr. Denham: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for recognising in his question that the variations in access to care stemmed from the previous Administration. My advice is that the reason for referring beta interferon—and a range of other important, controversial, questioned drugs such as the taxanes—to NICE is to ensure that authoritative guidance is available to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's authority, and to others, which they should take full account of when making decisions.

Such guidance did not exist previously and that is why, on a range of treatments, health authorities take different decisions about priority or about the effectiveness or availability of different drugs. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence will enable us to tackle that problem.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): One of my constituents moved from Burnley to Cheshire to obtain beta interferon under the present arrangements, which, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, came from the previous Conservative Government. Will he give an assurance that everything possible is being done to ensure that when the current assessment has been completed, provision will be clinically based—on medical need and not on cost?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend raises the sort of example of which all hon. Members will be aware. NICE will give guidance both on the clinical effectiveness and the cost-effectiveness of the drugs—that is the basis on which the institute was set up. It will ensure that the most clinically and cost-effective treatments are spread rapidly throughout the NHS and that we make the best use of NHS resources—both factors will be taken into account.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): One understands the role of NICE, but can we have an assurance that cost-effectiveness will not rule out modern, more expensive drugs that could be cheaper for the health service in the long run and more effective in the care of patients? What about those patients who have already benefited from beta interferon, but have been taken off the drug because they were taking part in a random test? The patients and the clinicians discovered the benefits; cannot the patients continue their treatment?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman raises a couple of important points. When any drug is under consideration by the national institute, it is expected that manufacturers and others—such as patients' groups—will submit evidence on the best use of both NHS and personal social services resources, so that the full economic impact can be taken into account. Indeed, it will be open to people to submit evidence over a wider range of costs. I hope that that reassures him.

Sometimes, however, there are cases in which highly hyped new drugs are not necessarily any better than long-standing treatments. One of the advantages of NICE is that it distinguishes between them. As for clinical tests, the job of NICE will be to audit all those procedures that have completed their clinical trials and which, in certain circumstances, be made available to the health service and to assess them to see which are clinically and cost-effective.

Knee Replacement Operations

7. **Mr. Harry Cohen** (Leyton and Wanstead): If he will make a statement on the number of knee replacement operations carried out in the NHS in 1998–99. [110859]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): According to provisional data for 1998–99, 28,876 primary knee replacement operations were carried out in national health service hospitals in England.

Mr. Cohen: I have had a letter from my constituent, Mr. Bracewell, which describes as "great news" and "a miracle" his successful knee operation. He said:

as a Godfearing man, you will be rewarded for helping in due course.

Although such knee operations are not high profile, is it not vital to keep the elderly mobile and the young up and running? Is my right hon. Friend aware that in my health area, Redbridge and Waltham Forest, there have been 193 such operations over the past year and 500 over the past three years? That is a rising trend. When I praise the NHS for that, I am sure that the House will appreciate that it is not a knee-jerk reaction.

Mr. Milburn: It was going so well until then. I am sure that my hon. Friend will receive his due reward.

I can only agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, I cannot do anything other than agree with the Conservative central office briefing for today's Health questions, which makes very impressive reading.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): You must be getting desperate.

Mr. Milburn: Indeed I must be if I am reading that. The briefing states:

Knee replacements are important to enable patients to retain mobility and, therefore, independence. They should be available according to clinical need.

That is right; they should be available according to clinical need. However, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), the shadow Secretary of State, told *The Sunday Times*, on 16 January, that

conditions...like hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations

should be covered by private medical insurance. Why did he say that? His hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) told Sky News on 31 January that, under Conservative plans, people would look to the NHS

when they had serious, life-threatening conditions and would look to their private insurance to help them with the rest.

Why did the hon. Gentleman say that?

The Conservative central office briefing is right. That treatment should be provided according to clinical need, not ability to pay. Why does Conservative central office say one thing while those on the Conservative Front Bench say another? I hope that Conservative central

office spends half its time briefing against those on the Front Bench, but I did not realise that it had taken to doing so in writing.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): My constituent, Mr. James Hickson, agrees with the Secretary of State that such treatments should be provided according to clinical need. Yet six months ago, after an interminable wait under this Government to have a seriously diseased hip replaced, he was forced to go the private sector for an operation. He is without private health insurance and I have at least one other constituent who has been forced, under the Labour Government, to resort to private treatment without having insurance to pay for it.

Will the Secretary of State now recognise what is happening under his stewardship of the Department of Health and reimburse my constituents who have to pay but who have not got private health insurance?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman rails against private treatment for hip and knee replacements. People talk about joined-up government, but what about a bit of joined-up opposition between Conservative Back Benchers and Front Benchers? Once again, Front Benchers say one thing and Back Benchers say another, and the Conservatives' health policy is in tatters.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House not only that the Government will eschew any suggestion that we go down the route of postcode health care provision, but that they will eschew what Conservative Members would suggest—bank sort code health care provision?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right. It is about time those on the Conservative Front Bench came clean. They give interviews to newspapers and to television companies, and it is the Conservatives' policy in which people are interested. Overwhelmingly, cataract, hip and knee operations are operations of old age. Older people will therefore literally pay the price of Conservative health policy. They will pay the price in a new tax on old age if the Conservatives have their way.

Conservative Members are now threatening to take a host of procedures out of the public sector, where they are free in the NHS, and instead force people to go private. That policy will not work and the people will not vote for it, either.

Independent Hospitals

8. **Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith** (Wealden): What assessment he has made of the role the independent hospitals can play in easing demands on national health service hospitals. [110860]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): We have considered at length the role that independent hospitals can play in easing demands on NHS hospitals. Our existing policy on commissioning health care services from the private sector allows the NHS to negotiate with the private sector where no local NHS beds are available, and where it is there has been little or no provision in the NHS—for example, for mental health secure units and termination of pregnancy.

We do not believe that we need to change our existing policy. Health authorities and NHS trusts are already aware of their powers and of the availability of private provision in their areas. We believe that commissioning from the private sector must be decided at local level, by those who are most familiar with their local circumstances.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: That contradicts everything that I have heard takes place not many miles from my home and in a wide area of the south-east. The complaint is—it follows very much the statement attributed to the Secretary of State, who came down like a ton of bricks on anyone who had anything to do with the private sector—that in point of fact—

Mr. Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): Ask a question.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I am coming to the question. Why does the prevailing evidence suggest that the national health service is prevented from sending its patients to charitably and independently financed hospitals that would help to relieve pressure on the national health service? Someone must have got the truth wrong in the information provided to the Minister.

Ms Stuart: Circumstances on the ground may not be precisely those rumoured to exist. Some hospitals—such as in Bristol, which had a shortage—negotiate with and use the private sector. This winter, local hospitals negotiated with social services and private providers. It is not true that there is a surplus of private beds that the NHS does not use. It is true that we need to build capacity across NHS. Beds in the private sector that are registered but not supported by staff would not be available for use.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Madam Speaker, in view of the conflicting evidence that I have—

Madam Speaker: Order. I thought that the right hon. Gentleman was seeking to withdraw and to have an Adjournment debate.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: In that case, I cannot proceed. That is reasonable.

Cataract Operations

9. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What progress is being made in reducing the waiting times for cataract operations. [110861]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The Government have launched action on cataracts—a major programme to ensure that all local NHS eye services can match the best in providing a modern and convenient service. It will enable us to build on the substantial progress that we have already made,

We have also allocated £20 million over two years to modernise and to cut waiting times for cataract surgery. That cash will enable about 50 local centres to streamline cataract treatment, so that patients can make fewer visits to the optician, General Practitioner, and hospital.

Mr. Kidney: I am delighted that the Government are planning for the best quality NHS cataract surgery nationally. That is also a feature of the strategic review of South Staffordshire health authority, which last year paid for 1,762 NHS cataract operations. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is right to reassure patients of improving free NHS cataract surgery, not threaten them—as the Conservative party would—with having to take out medical insurance to pay for operations privately?

Mr. Hutton: I strongly agree. It is clearly the Government's ambition to improve the quality of NHS services for people who need cataract operations—unlike the Conservative party's, whose intention is to privatise that aspect of the NHS, and whose policy is not popular with the country. I am sure that ours is popular with my hon. Friend's constituents, who have benefited from free operations on the NHS.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): A constituent recently wrote to me about his wife, who went blind in both eyes while waiting for a cataract operation, owing to the much longer waiting lists under the present Government. Does the Minister think it preferable to any other alternative that under the Labour Government, old people who are going blind are forced to go private and spend their savings, never having thought that they would need private health insurance? Does the Minister think that is the best system for this country's health care?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman ought to check his facts. If he will write to me with the details of the particular case he mentioned, I will look into it. This Government reintroduced free eye tests for pensioners—something that the last Conservative Government withdrew. If he is complaining that his constituents have to go private, he might like to take up his concerns with his own Front Benchers. The Conservative party wants to make sure in future that patients who need such operations go private rather than use the NHS.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Does the Minister accept that the problem with all waiting lists—including those for cataract operations—is that the Government's waiting list initiative is distorting clinical priorities? Dr. Peter Wilde, consultant cardiologist at the Bristol Royal infirmary, said this morning that heart patients are dying unnecessarily because they were waiting too long for surgery. Tragically, that is not due to a lack of resources.

Ministers are forcing health authorities to perform minor procedures to shorten waiting lists faster—even if that means sicker patients, such as those of Dr. Wilde, having to wait longer. Is that not an unfair, unethical and immoral way to run a health service? Patient care gets worse so that Minister's press releases can get better.

Mr. Hutton: I do not accept any of the hon. Gentleman's points. If he studies the December waiting list figures, he will see conclusive proof that the opposite

need alone should determine patient access to the NHS. If he is complaining about the Government's record on cataract operations, he ought to reconcile that with the concerns expressed by his hon. Friends about Conservative policy—which is to take the procedure out of the NHS and force people to go private. That is a completely unacceptable state of affairs.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): I am clear about the need for the initiative to improve the rate at which cataract operations take place, as there are 22,000 pensioners in my constituency and I hear of sad cases of some disabled pensioners having to wait month after month after month. Deteriorating vision must make their lives much more miserable, not least because of the risk of falling. Can the Minister give us any idea of how long a wait he would think reasonable once the Government have achieved their objectives—and how quickly will we reach that day?

Mr. Hutton: The average waiting time for cataract operations is falling. Currently, it is about seven months. Everyone in the House, including my hon. Friend, would want us to make further progress in reducing the waiting times—that is precisely what the initiatives that I have outlined to the House will do—but he, like me, would agree that the best way to ensure equitable access to health care for older people, particularly those who need cataract operations, is to ensure that a first-class national health service is available to meet their needs. That is what the Government are committed to doing, but sadly it is not the policy of the Opposition.

Acute Services

10. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): If he will make a statement on the number of NHS acute hospital beds and staff to support them. [110862]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The latest figures show that there are 108,000 acute beds in the NHS. We are currently consulting, through the national beds inquiry, on how we can best secure an increase in the number and the type of beds. Crucial to that are increases in nurse and doctor numbers. Both are rising under this Government.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but does he not accept that under successive Governments, Secretary of State hospital bed numbers have declined by 2 per cent. a year since 1980, even though patient numbers have increased by 3.5 per cent. a year? The problem is not of the Government's making; but does he accept that, rather than the Government going ahead with the 1p in the pound tax cut, the British public would rather see that money spent on the national health service?

Mr. Milburn: We are spending more money on the NHS—a damn sight more than the Liberal Democrats promised in their manifesto at the previous general election—but we need to reverse a 30 or 40-year decline in the number of beds in the whole system. Given the demographic pressures and our ageing population—we have seen this winter some of the pressures that they cause in hospitals—the Government want to expand services in

is that the decline in hospital bed numbers cannot continue. That is not only a question of getting the number of hospital beds right, however. We have to make sure that there are enough beds in the whole care system and we are committed to achieving precisely that.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Will my right hon. Friend consider the serious problems and pressures in north-east London? In particular, I draw his attention to the recent letter from the chief executives of the Redbridge trust and the Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority to the NHS London regional office, urging additional beds for the King George hospital site in my constituency.

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of the pressures in my hon. Friend's area and in other parts of London, too. The answer, as Christine Hancock of the Royal College of Nursing rightly said recently, is not only an increase in the number of beds. We can get beds on any high street, but we cannot get trained nurses. It takes time to train the nurses, but I can tell my hon. Friend that we are beginning to turn the corner as regards nurse shortages. There are 4,500 more nurses in the NHS now than there were a year ago. That is good progress. There is still some way to go, but the signs are positive.

We have more nurses coming back in and more nurses in training, and the number of people applying for nurse training courses is increasing. Those are all positive signs. We shall continue to build on them, but to achieve an increase in capacity in the system we also need to reform the way in which people work. It is very important that we allow nurses to take on new roles. That, in turn, will help to make nursing, midwifery, health visiting and the therapy services, which are so important to the NHS, even more attractive careers.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State acknowledges that the 15,000 nursing vacancies have such a disastrous impact on acute bed capacity. Given that the Royal College of Nursing estimated that there were 12,000 departures from nursing last year, is not the Secretary of State's claim to have turned the corner, with the equivalent of 3,000 full-time new recruits, a bit like the Home Secretary's over-optimism about the number of extra police officers?

Mr. Milburn: No, the hon. Lady obviously has not been listening. There are not 3,000 full-time equivalent returners; there are an extra 3,000 nurses working in the national health service—that is the full-time equivalence. There are 4,500 extra nurses. Many of them are taking advantage of precisely the sort of flexible employment that we are opening up to nurses, so the total full-time equivalence is fewer than 4,500: it is 3,000—*[Interruption]*—as I have just told the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), if he would care to listen.

We are making progress, and frankly we shall take no lectures from the Conservative party, which reduced the number of nurses and, more importantly, cut the number of nurse training places. Never was there such a short-sighted policy in the NHS, and we are beginning to

Mental Health Act 1983

11. **Dr. Lynne Jones** (Birmingham, Selly Oak): When he expects to report on Government proposals for the reform of the Mental Health Act 1983. [110863]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Our proposals, which are set out in the Green Paper, are subject to consultation until 31 March. We will report on the outcome later this year.

Dr. Jones: I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State earlier reinforce the point that the NHS exists to serve patients. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the main purpose of the review of the Mental Health Act is seen to be to give patients the right to first-class care and treatment, rather than to reinforce the negative stereotypes of mentally ill people as being a danger to the public?

Mr. Hutton: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend that it is precisely the purpose of our proposals to improve mental health services. Those proposals do not consist only of the Green Paper; I am sure that she will be aware of the national service framework that we published in September and the additional £700 million that we are making available to modernise mental health services over the next three years. The entire thrust of our proposals is to ensure that people with mental health problems have access to a first-class national health service, and I am sure that she will be supporting them.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Can the Minister assure the House that those who are detained compulsorily under the Mental Health Act will always have a voice? There is a concern that people get lost and forgotten. Will the Minister give consideration in the consultation paper to ensuring that those people have an advocate so that they are not simply lost in the system?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I can assure the hon. Gentleman about those points. I hope that if he has had a chance to study the Green Paper, he will agree that in addition to improving the protection of staff, patients and the public, we have struck a better balance between resolving those issues and ensuring that patients who may in future be subject to compulsory treatment have access to a better process of decision making about their treatment. That has certainly been our intention in proposing detailed reforms in the Green Paper, and it makes a significant change in the way we deal with such issues in legislation. I hope that he will, in his own way, be able to support them.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): Last year, the Secretary of State announced that there would be 231 new secure places in mental hospitals, 31 of which would be in the south-east. Where have the Government got to with those plans? Is the Minister aware of the case of my constituent, a patient who was attacked in a unit in St. James's hospital when a cup of boiling water was thrown over him? That resulted in his being taken to the special burns unit and the offending patient being held in a ward that should take five patients; so four patients had to be moved to accommodate one patient with seriously

Mr. Hutton: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the 221 beds to which he is referring have already been provided in the national health service. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in November that we were increasing the total number of additional secure beds that we wanted to provide in the NHS from 300—a target that we set in the national service framework—to 500, and that we were bringing forward the meeting of that target by a year, so those additional 500 beds will be available in the NHS by April 2001.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I welcome reform of the Mental Health Act 1983, but will my hon. Friend pay attention to the anxiety expressed by members of the general public in the past few weeks about the protection of the mental health of children, especially regarding the over-use of mood-modifying drugs such as Ritalin?

Mr. Hutton: I am well aware of the concerns that have been expressed about the use of Ritalin. That is why its use has been referred to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. I hope that the institute will be able to provide authoritative guidance on the use of Ritalin in the future.

I should reassure my hon. Friend that we want the maximum safeguards in any future legislation to be available to children. There are no specific safeguards available to children under the current Mental Health Act, and the purpose of our consultation exercise is to initiate a wide debate about the future of that legislation. If any serious proposals are made about children in relation to any future legislation, we will of course examine them carefully.

Road Casualties

3.30 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) *(by private notice)*: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's new proposals to reduce deaths and injuries on our roads.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): We shall be publishing the road safety strategy tomorrow. To the best of our knowledge, there is no precedent for making a statement to the House about road safety policy, but I am happy to come here today to tell the House some of the measures that will be in our strategy. It will be a long document, so I shall not be able to cover all the details.

This country has, overall, a good road safety record, second only to Sweden in Europe, but our record on child pedestrian safety is not good. We have, historically, been near the bottom of the European league table for child pedestrian deaths. Although we had a better year in 1998, 103 child pedestrians were still killed.

The strategy will therefore include a major thrust on child safety, and a separate casualty reduction target for child deaths and serious injuries of 50 per cent. by 2010. We shall set a reduction target for all road deaths and serious injuries of 40 per cent. over the same period.

We do not, of course, disregard slight injuries. We have not been so successful in reducing those. They went up by 16 per cent. between 1981–85 and 1998. During that period, traffic increased by 55 per cent. We shall set a target to keep slight injuries well below the rate of traffic growth.

There will be new measures, and reinforcement of existing ones, to support those targets to improve road safety for all road users. Many of the measures will be aimed at increasing the safety of children, so we will strongly encourage local authorities to use their powers to create 20 mph zones—powers that we gave to them last summer—especially around schools and on the way to school. That fits in well with our policies to encourage walking and cycling to school, which will happen only if they are thought to be safe.

We have for the first time placed road safety in the national curriculum. We do not accept the proposition that we should not tell children about road dangers. We plan properly researched practical training for child pedestrians.

There will be a range of other measures in relation to speed, which is the greatest contributor to accidents. We must persuade drivers to slow down, and make speeding as socially unacceptable as drinking and driving. The speed review, published tomorrow, will demonstrate overwhelming evidence of the dangers.

However, such persuasion must be effective. It is no good just changing speed limits in the hope that they will be observed. We need to target our measures. Of course, limits have a part to play and we will give details of what we propose at greater length tomorrow. It will be a mixture of targeted changes in limits, appropriate safety engineering in vehicles and roads, and persuasion of drivers by presenting them with the facts and improved enforcement of limits.

We shall publish a range of measures to reduce the number of deaths and injuries in which new drivers are involved, in response to the helpful and timely report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. We shall concentrate on improving the training that new drivers receive, and indeed, the training of all drivers.

We shall tackle the problems of irresponsible drivers—those who have had too much to drink, which is a continuing problem although much progress has been made. Most measures will tackle the worst offenders. Drug-driving has long been an offence, but we suspect that it is more prevalent now. We have proposals to provide effective means of controlling it, but we also need to know far more about it. That is why we shall continue to undertake ground-breaking research, especially on the effects of cannabis. We also need to give more publicity to the effects of tiredness on drivers. We now suspect that tiredness contributes to 10 per cent. of all accidents.

We shall propose measures to protect walkers and cyclists in line with our policies to encourage those activities. We are committed to reviewing the strategy and the targets every three years. We shall do better if we can.

We shall naturally set out the strategy in more detail in a written answer tomorrow. We had always intended to do that. Copies of the strategy and associated documents, including the review of speed policy, will be placed in the Library from 10 o'clock tomorrow morning.

Mr. Jenkin: I welcome the broad thrust of the Minister's response. Conservative Members have always attached the highest priority to improving road safety. The Labour Government inherited an enviable record from the Conservative Administration—one of the best road safety records of any developed country.

However, I agree with the Minister that the number of road casualties remains intolerable. They are the equivalent of 100 Paddington disasters every year. We therefore welcome the Minister's intention to set new casualty reduction targets and I would be grateful if he could specify them to the House.

Given the supreme importance of road safety, where is the Secretary of State? Will the Minister confirm that, had we not tabled this private notice question, the Government would have given Parliament no information before the Minister for Transport delivered a speech elsewhere tomorrow? Is that the priority that the Government attach to road safety—no statement to Parliament and no Secretary of State?

Why were the Government so reluctant to address the House on the issue, when many hon. Members on both sides would wish to support their objective of reducing road casualties? Why have the Government taken so long to introduce their policies? The strategy was promised for last year.

Will the Minister assure the House that he has given a full statement of all the Government's proposals that were due to be announced tomorrow? Does he accept that a successful road safety strategy depends on a combination of improvements in vehicle and road design, the right penalties—appropriately enforced—for dangerous driving, and better awareness among all road users of the risks and responsibilities of using the road?

[Mr. Jenkin]

Does the Minister agree that speed is only part of the equation? I welcome the fact that he has dropped plans to prosecute every minor speeding offence, which would have absorbed a huge amount of police time in pursuing largely law-abiding motorists.

I also welcome the Minister's confirmation that there are no plans for blanket reductions in speed limits, which would be an ineffective short cut rather than a proper review of speed limits with a formal timetable and a budget.

Will the Minister confirm that the Government have dropped their more extreme proposals, such as raising the driving test age to 18? I support retaining the current drink-drive limit, but urge the Government to target the small minority to which the Minister referred.

I also welcome the proposed initiative to pursue training for company car drivers. We read about that in the papers, but the Minister did not tell us about it today. Company car drivers represent only 10 per cent. of drivers. Nevertheless, if they are responsible for almost half of all accidents, it is sensible and imaginative of the Government to make the suggestions that they have outlined.

What are the Government doing through public education for the generality of drivers and pedestrians, who comprise half the casualties on our roads? If we are to create the same intolerance of dangerous driving as that of drink-driving, will the Minister commit the Government to the necessary public information campaigns that will achieve that?

How can we expect our courts to hand out stiffer penalties for dangerous driving in an atmosphere that is still too tolerant of bad driving and accidents on the roads?

Will the Minister also acknowledge that the savage cuts in the roads programme included cuts in many schemes that would have reduced deaths on the roads, according to the Government's own appraisal tables?

What measures will the Government introduce to deal with the increasing incidence of driving while under the influence of drugs? Is the Minister aware that the Transport Research Laboratory is merely repeating research that has already been undertaken in other countries, and that there are many who believe that the Government could act now on this issue?

I welcome the special target for child casualty reduction and the proposals for educating child pedestrians. What are the particular measures the Minister proposes to reduce the number of child casualties on our roads? If he plans to leave this entirely to local authorities, what figure will he put on the resources he will give them to achieve the 10-year child casualty reduction target?

Finally, will the Minister confirm that the way to reduce the number of casualties on our roads is not to demonise the car, but to work with car manufacturers and responsible representative organisations of all road users, including cyclists and pedestrians, and to increase public awareness of how many lives can be saved by working with the grain of people's common sense?

Mr. Hill: I think that on the whole I can express my gratitude for the brief elements of welcome in the remarks of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) in response to my statement. We heard the grinding of a few rather ancient axes, such as the charge that the present Government are in some way anti-motorist. That is not the experience of motorists, who are benefiting this year from an increase in the road maintenance budget, which is absolutely critical to road safety, of no less than £450 million on the levels projected by the previous Administration.

However, I do not want to be wholly churlish. Indeed, I fully accept the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the success of the road casualty reduction targets initiated by his Government. I go even further and pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) who, as the junior Transport Minister, was responsible for setting those targets. The remarkable decrease in the level of deaths and serious casualties on our roads will be an abiding monument to his contribution to British public life.

I wish that I could pay tribute to the contribution of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). The hon. Member for North Essex referred to the absence of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, but we are getting used to thinking of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells as the silent Member on the Conservative Front Bench.

I should like to pick up one or two of the specific points raised by the hon. Member for North Essex, who asked a wide range of questions. I shall not be able to answer all of them in detail, but I shall try to answer some.

On targets, I reiterate that our objective is a 40 per cent. reduction by 2010 in the number of people killed or seriously injured; a 10 per cent. reduction in the slight casualty rate; and a 50 per cent. reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured.

The hon. Gentleman asked about public education. As I said in my statement, the Government are committed to a major programme of investment in a campaign to improve attitudes towards speeding. That is partly a matter of enforcement measures, but we have to effect a cultural change among drivers. Drivers must recognise that speeding is as socially unacceptable as drink-driving. We are committed to a major programme of public education.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about proposals with regard to those travelling for work. It is our intention to improve safety standards in work-related driving, and we are about to set up an inter-agency task group to examine the scale of the problem and how to manage it. We shall consider the development of an occupational highway code.

The hon. Gentleman asked about our proposals to improve the safety of children. That is central to our concerns. I have already mentioned our target for reducing the number of deaths and serious injuries. Within the terms of the local planning system, we shall be encouraging local authorities to create more 20 mph zones, to provide safe crossing facilities and to make enforcement more effective. As the House will recall, last year the Government announced the establishment of nine pilot home zone schemes in England next year: we hope that they will be a success, and that more can be created in due course.

We shall be instructing the Highways Agency to establish child friendly areas on trunk roads near schools and residential localities. That is one of a range of

measures designed to enhance children's safety. Many of them were announced a couple of months ago when we published the report of the School Travel Advisory Group, which contained many practical suggestions that we want to implement at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): As my hon. Friend will know, in my capacity as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for road traffic victims and their families I have made representations to a wide range of Departments. I am pleased by the progress that I have made.

I entirely accept that a cultural change is needed, and I hope that it will be led by hon. Members on both sides of the House. May I ask specifically, however, whether any of the proposals relating to sentencing policy and the role of the judiciary will be dealt with tomorrow? At present, the judiciary in particular do not seem to understand the needs of victims and their families when they are dealing with such difficult circumstances.

Mr. Hill: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's excellent work. He asked about enforcement. We want to make penalties and enforcement more effective, and more appropriate to the seriousness of the offence. The Home Office is to conduct a major review of all road traffic penalties—for example, for speeding and drink-driving.

We take on board my hon. Friend's point about the way in which the relevant authorities deal with victims' families, and are giving the subject wider consideration.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): I welcome the broad thrust of what the Minister is saying, but, like others, I regret the fact that he had to be forced to make his statement here. Does he recall what the Deputy Prime Minister said on the occasion of his rail safety statement last week? He said:

> there are always complaints about leaks and whether statements are made to the House. It has always been my intention—and my history—to make statements for which I have responsibility to the House.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1383.].

Can the Minister tell us whether he has instigated a leak inquiry into how some reports have appeared in the press?

Given the Minister's statement that there are a great many more details yet to be released, will the House have a proper opportunity to debate important issues? As has been pointed out, road safety, especially that of children, is an important issue for the country, and one that has been ignored for too long. Will the Minister also confirm that he intends to ensure that local authorities have the resources that they need to implement the proposals, and that police forces will have the resources that will enable them to enforce those proposals?

Mr. Hill: I shall take the hon. Gentleman's questions in reverse order.

Many of the measures designed to improve safety will be the responsibility of local authorities, and we expect them to be included in authorities' transport plans. I need hardly remind the hon. Gentleman that this year investment in local transport plans, at £755 million, is 20 per cent. higher than it was last year; next year, it will increase by a further £250 million to the great sum of £1 billion. Part of the guidance that we offer local authorities says that we are looking for precisely such road safety measures to be included in their transport plans. The resources are there to sustain them.

With regard to the opportunity for a debate, the hon. Gentleman raises a proper point. It is not, of course, for me to decide what issues are debated in the Chamber. It is not only for the Government to decide which issues are debated here.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made it crystal clear when he came to the House to make his statement on rail safety that my Department was not in the least responsible for any of the leaks. He has a first-class record on honouring the conventions of the House and making the appropriate statement to the Chamber. There is no question of instituting a leak inquiry about the plans.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my hon. Friend aware that the target on reducing deaths among children will be warmly welcomed by every sensible parent in the land? It is not just the amount of resources available to local authorities and others who have to implement the new measures that will make the difference, but the degree of monitoring of the results. Too many young males are killing themselves and other people regularly. We need to know why, and how to stop them. We need to explain to our population the devastation that is caused by that unnecessary and unacceptable form of death.

Mr. Hill: I need say nothing more than that, as ever, my hon. Friend makes important and apposite points about the need for monitoring. That falls within our plans. I entirely agree with the sentiments that she expressed.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I thank the Minister for the way in which he made his statement. He is right to focus on crashes and casualties. Can we hope that, tomorrow, there will be acknowledgement of the work of the police, paramedics and major trauma centres, because post-crash treatment has helped to reduce deaths and serious injuries by a fair number?

I thank the Minister for his kind words to me. I read an article by Auberon Waugh, I think on 15 February 1986 in *The Spectator*, about the death of his sister in a hit-and-run crash. He said that only a fool would inquire into the causes. I was the fool. He is now the fool. The Minister is right to be concerned with reducing the devastation.

Tomorrow, will consideration be given to asking the Scottish Executive whether they would agree to changing to summer time in winter, which would save about 100 lives? Will the Executive be asked whether that can be considered in the interests of the Scots, as well as of those further south? I know that it is a sensitive issue, but there are 100 lives there to be saved.

If the Minister's general approach is to listen to what those with experience and expertise have to say, he will receive support throughout the House for the things that work. The reason that this country has done relatively well is that we have tended to avoid the things that do not work and we have done the things that do.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I join him in paying tribute to the fantastic work done by police, paramedics and trauma centres in dealing with victims of road accidents.

I am not aware of any intention to seek to prevail on the Scottish Executive to change whatever their attitudes are to British summer time. My recollection is that, when the matter has come to the House, there has been a free vote. On that matter, as on a number of others, the hon. Gentleman and I have stood shoulder to shoulder, but that was on an entirely personal level.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I strongly welcome the announcement that there will be a separate target for reducing child casualties. I hear what my hon. Friend the Minister says about reducing casualties through reducing speeds. Can I take it, therefore, that road traffic enforcement will be a core policing function?

Mr. Hill: I fully understand the points made by my hon. Friend, and have already described the measures for improved enforcement that the Government are contemplating. Although we take those measures extremely seriously, on this occasion I shall have to ask him to wait for the detail that will appear in the very detailed report which will be in his hands from early tomorrow morning.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Minister give an assurance that there will be no changes tomorrow to the age at which people can take their driving test?

Mr. Hill: I sometimes feel that there is nothing more deadly than a helpful intervention in the Chamber, and I was the victim of such assistance in that case.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of young drivers. The Government's intention is to tackle bad and irresponsible driving. We intend to propose a package of measures to raise driving standards, especially for young and newly qualified drivers, who are more at risk. We shall consult the public on a range of measures—for example, on probationary plates for new drivers. Our aim is to encourage people to get more experience before they take their driving test, and we will consult the public on how to improve the casualty record of young drivers. Raising the driving age may be one way of doing that, but we want to work through with the public what they think about the issue.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): May I take the Minister back to expenditure on local road safety campaigns? What monitoring does he propose to introduce to ensure that local authorities have sufficient funds to continue campaigning, particularly among children, on the need for improved road safety, and particularly to ensure that the many young people who ride bicycles—I welcome the fact that the number of such young people is growing—receive proper safety and cycle proficiency training? In many boroughs, there is insufficient funding for all children to be trained in how to ride bicycles safely. Will he ensure that such campaigning and training is considered in future standard spending assessment allocation, to protect local expenditure in addressing those issues?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those questions, and certainly take extremely seriously the issues that he has raised. Indeed, I have the pleasure and privilege of being the chair of the National Cycling Committee. The Government intend that local transport plans should include measures to increase cycling, walking and safety improvements. We also intend to promote and monitor cycle helmet wearing. It is certainly our intention, as I have explained, to devote to local authorities significant new sums to pursue their local transport plans, of which safety issues are an absolutely essential and critical part. I give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Will the Government empower and encourage the courts to disqualify from driving drivers who are found to have cannabis or another banned drug in their bloodstream?

Mr. Hill: As I have explained, we are certainly aware that the issue of cannabis and drug-driving has become more prevalent. We are conducting significant new research to identify the role of drugs in road accidents. As the hon. Gentleman will know, drug-driving has long been an offence. It is certainly our intention, when we have the right evidence, to ensure that there is better public education on, and better enforcement against, that particular offence.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I welcome my hon. Friend's comments thus far, and look forward to tomorrow's publication of the strategy document. Will he pay particular attention to improving road safety on what are commonly known as rat runs? At 7.30 this morning, I met some of my constituents who live in Sherwood road and in surrounding roads, in south Harrow, and they were rightly very concerned about the speed of traffic along local roads. May I commend road safety on such roads as an issue that is worthy of further attention both in the Department and in relation to local authority SSAs?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I am certain that his constituents, particularly those living in Sherwood road, south Harrow, will be grateful that he has raised their concerns in the Chamber. Rat running is a matter of concern to people across the country. It is a major issue on which we all receive representations during our advice surgeries. A number of measures are available to deal with it, including a variety of traffic calming devices. I also draw attention to the new powers that we have given to local authorities to introduce 20 mph zones. All the evidence, including that from the previous Government, is that such zones are very effective in road traffic reduction. They should be expanded and increased.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Minister said that he wished to change the culture of driving. Does he agree that reducing the speed limit to 20 mph will not work because it will not be policed and implemented properly? Reducing the permitted amount of alcohol in the blood will also not be helpful. The best way to proceed is to pursue persistent speeding offenders and those who are grossly over the alcohol limit. In the same vein, will he join me in a campaign to target company car drivers who persistently cause accidents and have the damage reclaimed on the company insurance? They should be

responsible for their insurance claims. Does he also agree that if we are to tackle the problem of cannabis in the blood, we need a drugsalyser?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her proposals. We shall look at all those issues. She will find that the reports that we are about to publish take up a number of them. She and I might disagree about some of the details of her ideas. We intend to develop a national framework for determining appropriate speeds for all roads. There is not necessarily a cut and dried, black and white answer on all such matters. The speed review does not recommend changing existing speed limits. That is also a matter for further examination.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward these important measures, which I am sure will be welcomed by my constituents. As one who is keen on joined-up government, may I ask him whether he feels that the support of the Department for Education and Employment is sufficient to ensure that children are fully aware of road safety issues?

Mr. Hill: I sometimes have reservations about the phrase "joined-up government" on the grounds of slight overuse, but it is appropriate in this case. That is why I was delighted to be joined two months ago by my colleagues from the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health to launch the STAG report. It is essential that all critical Departments work hand in hand on issues relating to the safety of children travelling to school.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the Minister agree that greater investment in traffic calming and 20 mph speed limits is good value for money? Will he confirm that the cost to the public purse of a fatal road accident is more than £1 million, the cost of a serious injury accident is more than £100,000, and that of a slight injury accident is £10,000? Would it not make sense to give local authorities more money to invest in road safety, thus saving lives and public money? Finally, will he confirm that he will be supporting the Transport and General Workers Union in its "Say No to Tired Drivers" lobby this afternoon?

Mr. Hill: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, I might have been with the lobby had I not been detained elsewhere.

The hon. Gentleman speaks good sense, as ever. It is important that he should draw to our attention the shared economic costs of road accidents, although the main issue in all our hearts and minds is the tragic consequences for individuals. He asks whether more money will be made available to local authorities to invest in road safety. As I have said, this year there was an additional 20 per cent. in the resources available to local authorities for their local transport plans. The figure was £755 million, and next year it will be £1 billion. The money is there and it is forthcoming. We very much hope and expect that local authorities will devote a good deal of it to road safety measures.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): In the context of child safety, I remind my hon. Friend of an issue that I have raised with him concerning MOT tests. It may come as a surprise to right hon. and hon. Members that child seats fitted to cars are not subject to MOT tests, despite substantial evidence that they are frequently badly fitted or adjusted, and that may potentially increase child casualties. Will my hon. Friend look again at making the fitting of child seats part of the MOT test?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I am certainly aware of his long campaign, which has been extremely helpful in highlighting the seriousness of the issue that he has raised. We shall certainly consider his proposal.

Let me explain the central thrust of our proposals. Motorists suffer the worst casualties on our roads as a result of road accidents, therefore motorists stand to gain most from decent, proper driving practices. I am glad to say that we are confident that motoring organisations broadly support our strategy. It goes without saying that we have consulted the motorists' forum which welcomes our proposals.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Can we take it that, unless the Minister says otherwise, if you or any other right hon. or hon. Member wants to go to the press conference at 9.30 am tomorrow at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in Birdcage walk, we might be able to do so?

Madam Speaker: That is a form of advertising. It has not much to do with me.

Control of Hedgerows in Residential Areas

4.7 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by extending powers to environmental health officers to intervene in neighbourly disputes involving hedgerows in residential areas; and for connected purposes.

I should like to thank Hedgeline, which has campaigned hard for a change in the law regarding nuisance hedges; the Styvechale ratepayers association and many other residents associations in Coventry; the constituents who have written to me in support of the Bill; and all the members of the public up and down the country who have given me their support. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) for their tireless work on the issue. Their efforts demonstrate the cross-party support for the Bill.

I am pleased that the Government published the Green Paper called "High Hedges: Possible Solutions". It is reassuring to know that the Government are listening to the concerns of thousands of people from all over the country. I would like to see a solution to the problem as soon as possible, either through Government legislation or through the Bill that I am putting before the House today.

There is no proposal in the Bill to ban leylandii or any other tree or hedge. The Bill provides for conciliation between neighbours by environmental protection officers. Failing agreement, environmental protection officers will be able to make binding and enforceable decisions about the height of trees or hedgerows.

We should not dismiss nuisance hedges as a trivial issue. It is a real problem causing suffering to thousands of people. I have received a number of letters from constituents complaining about it. The social and emotional problems described in those letters persuaded me to try to do something. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House have received similar letters in their postbags and are all too aware of the distress that is being caused.

The advent of the leyland cypress has made hedge problems far more widespread. It is a new tree, an unlikely hybrid between two distantly related North American cypress species. It was first bred towards the end of the 19th century. Its phenomenal growth rate is alarming because it is not known how high the tress can eventually grow. For example, a tree in Kent is more than 150 ft high and still growing. If a tree is not a nuisance, it should not be cut down. However, we need to take action now to prevent the situation from getting far worse.

These hedges can threaten roofs, guttering, drains and, in more serious cases, even a building's structure. They can deprive unwilling sufferers of light in their homes, and can prevent them from using their gardens in the way that they would choose.

As it stands, the law is biased almost entirely towards protecting those who want to grow leylandii and other high hedges. It offers no protection to people affected by an intrusive hedge. People can grow rows of fast-growing conifers to any height and as close to other people's properties as they like. Neighbours can cut branches and overhanging fences, but the continual expense and demands on time fall on the person who derives no benefit from the trees.

Trees lacking maintenance can be grown by an individual so that the burden of continual and sometimes hazardous work falls on the offended neighbour—a person who does not want a high hedge and who is prevented by law from reducing its height. The task of cutting back a high leylandii hedge to the perimeters of one's property can be daunting, especially for the elderly. The trees can grow by between 3 and 4 ft a year. Some of the many offending hedges have now reached considerable heights. As the hedges increase in size, they can be a cause of extreme anxiety.

Civil law has proved inadequate at dealing with hedge disputes between neighbours. Such actions can drag on for years, bringing further stress to a victim's life. The legal costs can be enormous. The sums involved can threaten life savings, and sometimes even a person's home.

The present legal situation forces the victim to plead with his or her neighbours to take action and, basically, to rely on the good will of others. The victim has no legal recourse to demand that an offending hedge be shortened or removed; the owner of the tree has the legal upper hand.

The Environmental Protection Act 1990 outlines a variety of nuisances, ranging from noise pollution to the treatment of animals. I urge the Government to look closely at such matters. My Bill would cause tall hedgerows to be included as environmental nuisances. In doing so, it would give legal recognition to the grave impact on people's lives often caused by nuisance hedges.

At the moment, environmental protection officers are reluctant to act. Their legal position is unclear, but the Bill will clarify it. It will allow environmental health officers to make a judgment. It will resolve disputes much more cheaply, easily and quickly, and without half the distress and cost now incurred.

We must strike the right balance between rights and responsibilities. No one wants to dictate the plants or furnishings that a person enjoys in his garden, but the right to make such choices must be accompanied by a responsibility not to intrude into other people's peaceful lives.

I hope that the House will agree that the measures in my Bill do not unnecessarily erode a person's right to enjoy his property as he chooses, because it is just as much a person's right to be free from the invasive practices of another. We must take action now.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Jim Cunningham, Mr. Alan Hurst, Mr. Tom Clarke, Dr. Lynne Jones, Mr. Simon Burns, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Mr. David Taylor, Mrs. Christine Butler, Mr. Richard Allan, Dr. Evan Harris, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle and Mr. Ian Pearson.

CONTROL OF HEDGEROWS IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Mr. Jim Cunningham accordingly presented a Bill to amend the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by

extending powers to environmental health officers to intervene in neighbourly disputes involving hedgerows in residential areas; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed [Bill 74].

Orders of the Day

Government Resources and Accounts Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 7

INVESTMENT: LIMIT

'.—(1) The Treasury shall ensure that the aggregate of outstanding expenditure under section 16(1)(b) and (c) does not at any time exceed £400 million.

(2) For the purpose of subsection (1)—

(a) outstanding expenditure in respect of the acquisition of assets, securities and rights shall be taken to be the aggregate of amounts paid for the acquisition of assets, securities and rights which have not been disposed of,

(b) outstanding expenditure in respect of a loan shall be taken to be the amount outstanding in respect of the principal,

(c) outstanding expenditure in respect of a guarantee shall be taken to be the aggregate of amounts which have been paid in fulfilment of it and in respect of which the Treasury has not been reimbursed, and

(d) the Treasury shall make arrangements for evaluating outstanding expenditure in respect of anything done under section 16(1)(b) or (c) which is not addressed by paragraphs (a) to (c) above.

(3) The Treasury may by order substitute a new amount for the amount for the time being specified in subsection (1).

(4) An order under subsection (3)—

(a) shall be made by statutory instrument, and

(b) shall not be made unless a draft has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, each House of Parliament.'.—*[Miss Melanie Johnson.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.15 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 8, in clause 16, page 8, line 44, after "on", insert "upstream".

Amendment No. 9, in page 8, line 44, after "business", insert "activities".

Government amendments Nos. 27 and 28.

Amendment No. 10, in page 9, line 6, after "provide", insert "further".

Amendment No. 11, in page 9, line 7, leave out from "connection" to end and insert—

'with the carrying on of its business, equal to 200 per cent. of the total finance provided under subsection (1)'.

Amendment No. 12, in page 9, line 9, leave out from "conditions", to the end of line 11 and insert—

'but may not comprise the following forms—'.

Amendment No. 13, in page 9,, leave out line 13 and insert—

'( ) long term equity investments in public-private partnership projects'.

[Madam Speaker]

Amendment No. 16, in page 9, line 13, at end insert—

'(5) The accounts of a body to which financial assistance is provided under subsection (1)(b) or (3) shall be open to inspection of the Comptroller and Auditor General and that body shall give such explanations of those accounts as he may reasonably require.'.

Amendment No. 14, in clause 17, page 9, line 14, leave out subsection (1) and insert—

'(1) In section 16, "upstream public-private partnerships activities" means acting as a manager in the organisation of public-private partnership projects, providing public sector organisations with expert advisory and implementation skills, providing interim finance for feasibility studies for local government public-private partnership projects and negotiating the necessary arrangements for particular public-private partnerships with the relevant government departments and the Treasury.'.

Amendment No. 15, in page 9, leave out lines 34 to 36 and insert—

'(b) references to public-private partnership projects include those carried on outside as well as within the United Kingdom.'.

Government amendments Nos. 29 to 31.

Miss Johnson: The Government are introducing new clause 7 to provide a statutory limit to the level of investment that the Treasury can make in Partnerships UK. When the matter was discussed in Committee, I indicated that the Government had no objection in principle to the imposition of a limit, that we had been considering the matter and that we would return to it after further consideration. I also made it clear in Committee that we would ensure that our commitments were the minimum necessary to ensure the successful launch of PUK, while at the same time ensuring that they represented value for money. I also said, however, that we should not impose a restrictive limit because of the position that PUK will occupy. It is important to ensure that the company is funded to a level that will allow its continued development over time.

Opposition Members will note that the limit that we have set is £100 million below the figure that was suggested in Committee by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). The £400 million limit will apply to all forms of investments, including any loans or guarantees. It is a fixed, aggregate figure that is not insulated against inflation.

The limit is subject to change only by means of affirmative resolution. That ensures that the procedure for changing the level of the investment in the new company, which may be proposed by this or, indeed, any other Government, will be open to consideration by the House. I should like to take this opportunity to mention that my officials consulted the National Audit Office on the matter of a limit, as requested by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who has just joined us.

I shall speak briefly on the issues covered by the other Government amendments on PUK. Amendments Nos. 27 and 28 have been introduced to provide clarity of purpose. The redrafted clause gives a more accurate explanation of the Government's financial commitments to the new body. Partnerships UK will be a public-private partnership, and the Government will invest on a basis that ensures the best value for money. All financial provision by and on behalf of the Treasury will be on commercial terms.

Amendment No. 28 also makes it clear that the moneys provided may be used in connection only with a public-private partnership business. Under that amendment, the position remains that investment may be made only in one body. Those points, along with the imposition of a limit, should allay the fears of those who are concerned that the Treasury will be providing a blank cheque.

Amendments Nos. 29 to 31 are drafting amendments. They are necessary to remove from the Bill some text that is no longer required. I agreed to introduce these amendments during an exchange with the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs in Committee.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): If I may put it thus, the Government have, somewhat trickily, put into a Bill about Government resource accounting the legal provisioning to set up Partnerships UK. Announcements were made by the Government last July on the scope and activities of Partnerships UK. They included putting private finance initiatives into better shape more quickly, pump-priming for feasibility studies for local authority projects, expanding the range of projects that can be undertaken and seeking to make good the public sector skills deficit in putting together private finance initiative deals.

I submit, having looked at clauses 16 and 17, that what the Government intend Partnerships UK to do is unclear. The provisions go much wider than the announcements that were made last year, after considerable debate and spinning on the subject. The clauses as drafted would indeed enable the new body to step into territory that has been raised by the TUC, the CBI and the existing private finance initiative industry, which could lead to major conflicts of interest.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Before my hon. Friend expatiates on that point, will he confirm that he heard the Minister say that the investment limit would be increased only after "consideration" by the House? Trawl through the measure as I may, I can find no reference to "consideration"—only a reference to approval by resolution. Would my hon. Friend care to try to get the Minister out of the conundrum into which she has plunged herself?

Mr. Flight: I thank my hon. Friend for his, as ever, valuable contribution. New clause 7 is almost as opaque and as lacking in clear description of its intent as the existing clauses. It seems that the Government's intent is that anything in excess of the prescribed limit of £400 million should require the affirmative resolution of both Houses—but I question whether that is what the words in the measure really add up to.

Moreover, new clause 7 contains a loophole: apparently the £400 million limit applies only to subsections (1)(b) and (c) of clause 16 and not to subsection (1)(a). As subsection (1)(a) empowers the Government to put up finance for the body, how much do they intend to provide up front?

As the Minister commented, the figure is £100 million less than I had suggested as a maximum for all forms of finance—as a cap to prevent things from running out of control. I welcome the acceptance of the principle that there should be a cap defined by an amount of money. However, as I have pointed out, I am somewhat doubtful

as to how powerful the cap is. What is the total likely to be, including the initial expenditure under subsection 1 of clause 16?

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): When there were previous caps that could be increased—for example, in the nationalised industries—in each case the increase had to be made by a specific Bill. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the House was presented with measures for borrowing-power increases and so on for the nationalised industries. If the cap is to be increased, surely it would be far better if it were done by primary legislation, which would be properly considered by the House.

Mr. Flight: I thank my hon. Friend for that sensible and pointed suggestion based on his prior experience. I agree that, for a cap to be meaningful, it would be better if any increase were made under primary legislation.

Will the Minister say a little more about how the Government expect that money to be spent? Ministers have stated that Partnerships UK will have a balance sheet of £1 billion. A balance sheet implies the taking of deposits. Is that £1 billion target only to be the total net assets? The Government are supposed to be putting up 49 per cent., with 51 per cent. from the private sector. A £1 billion target certainly implies about £490 million from the Government.

Will the Minister clarify the meaning of subsection (2)(d) of the new clause, which contains some rather strange wording? It refers to

arrangements for evaluating outstanding expenditure in respect of anything done under section 16(1)(b) or (c).

That means matters that are not covered by the definitions of assets, loans and guarantees in the preceding subsections. It is not clear what the Government will be required to do under that provision, nor is it clear to which type of situation it will relate—apart from those already prescribed. Will the Minister also tell us how the Government intend to account for their investments in PUK, both in the new format of the national accounts and in terms of prospective forecasts of Government spending?

The crucial issue relates to what PUK will do. In that regard, I come to amendments Nos. 8 to 15, which were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) and me. Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 are designed to limit the purposes and activities of PUK to those which the Government have described to date and which the industry, lawyers advising on such matters and the PFI team in the Treasury have defined as reasonable activities that would not cause major conflicts of interest.

There is also an issue of European law. The process of procurement for private finance initiative projects is required under European law to be fair and to ensure a level playing field. If, as appears to be the Government's present intention, PUK is to have a privileged position in investing in PFI projects, that is likely to contravene European law.

Amendment No. 14 defines the specific territory of upstream public-private sector activities. We have subsequently defined the term "upstream", and I shall come to that in due course; it is well understood in the PFI industry and contrasts with the concept of downstream activities, which involves the management of equity investment after the financial closing of PFI deals.

Although the Government do not seem to have resolved what they want PUK to do and how they want it to develop its business, there has been substantial debate about it across the industry. The conclusion has been that upstream activities make sense in the provision of support and assistance to the public sector prior to financial close. It is unclear how the key features that have been outlined will be implemented, however. The aims of PUK appear—on the face of it, at least—to involve idealistic but clashing objectives: making money as a private sector entity and helping the public sector.

As described, PUK will be there to advise the public sector and to hold equity interests in projects. It will act as co-sponsor with Government Departments, but, at the same time, have a private sector business and culture. It will develop a revenue stream to finance its activities, but it is not supposed to compete with the private sector. How will those fundamental conflicts be reconciled? What do the Government expect PUK to do?

The principal focus appears to be the requirement on PUK to develop a skills base, to develop the means of financing PFI businesses and to support that skills base, but those aims seem to be an afterthought. That is contrary to the sensible way of setting up a business. It is generally accepted that the PFI team in the Treasury has been a great success and played a key role in negotiating with the Treasury and related Departments to make PFI projects happen, where previously many proposals had gone round in circles. The original proposals in the Bates report envisaged the main objective of Partnerships UK as being to continue the role of the Treasury taskforce but to "PFI-ise" it. That is dramatically different from the Bill's provisions and the range of activities described subsequently.

4.30 pm

The role of Partnerships UK as we believe the Government originally intended was to assist with deal flow. On 20 September 1999, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirmed in a speech to launch the Institute for Public Policy Research that Partnerships UK would act as a project manager for PFI deals, providing public sector organisations with expert advisory and implementation skills. He said that it would help get more PFI deals done better and more quickly. Helping deal flow and providing upstream support to public sector bodies is welcome and the Chief Secretary's approach is generally supported. It has been said that there will be a pump-priming role, in putting up finance for local authority PFI feasibility studies—to be repaid when PFI deals are signed off.

Partnerships UK will encourage the public sector not to impose unnecessary risks on the private sector, and it will promote stability and intelligent standardisation. That is welcome in all parts of the House and throughout industry.

In the early days of PFI, many deals were undeveloped owing to a lack of funds, to funds being misspent or to delayed decisions. If Partnerships UK can be a mechanism for the commercial testing of projects, that also makes sense.

Historically, the key private sector concern has been that the public sector is not sufficiently incentivised to close deals efficiently. Partnerships UK will incur its own costs during negotiations. That is a positive factor and

[Mr. Flight]

should encourage a deal-doing mentality. It is important that PUK seeks to streamline the bid process, to create a greater flow of deals.

In developing the skills base, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties involved in attracting and retaining staff for Partnerships UK. The existing pool of experienced PFI professionals is relatively small, and demand for them is high. Partnerships UK should not be staffed with project and corporate finance executives with limited or no PFI experience, as that would undermine the logic of establishing PUK. The standard of public sector project managers varies. It is key to the successful development of the PFI that each spending Department should be able to develop its own skills base.

How will PUK continue successfully with the two key existing roles of the Treasury team? Will it potentially serve as the negotiator with Departments for all PFI deals, or only for those in which it becomes involved? Will it play the same role in negotiating with the Treasury? How can it reasonably combine those roles with commercial roles, if it is to have them?

The relationship with other Departments and public sector bodies needs considerably more thought. There will have to be a close working relationship with the Office of Government Commerce, and historically the British Government have not been particularly successful in developing relationships with non-governmental bodies. If PUK is launched without the full support of Departments most active in PFI, that will clearly put considerable risk in front of its success.

We argue strongly that PUK should not be involved in the downstream side and I repeat that that seems to be the collective view of businesses and the trade union movement. The Government have not made clear whether it will be involved downstream, although the Bill would enable that to happen. There are concerns about PUK's involvement with the management and equity investment of project companies after financial close—that being the definition of downstream activities—and major conflicts of interest could arise here. How could PUK advise a public sector client on achieving the best commercial deal if it also had a commercial interest in the reverse occurring? The competitive bidding process would become compromised as PUK would participate in choosing the preferred bidder, in which it would have a future investment.

PUK could, for example, recommend for selection the bidder that offered it the most favourable participation. As it will not pay the on-going tariff, it is also difficult to see how its interests in that regard would identify with those of its co-sponsor, the public sector purchaser. Confidential information gained as a shareholder or lender in one transaction could be used against the same private sector bidders in later transactions. As a participant in a project management company—either as a shareholder or a lender needing to make returns and reduce investment risks—how could it negotiate effectively against the public sector tariff payer, its co-sponsor, during the concession life on a refinancing or a variation required by the public sector?

PUK's exit criteria may be different from those of the rest of the shareholders or the lenders to the concession, particularly if it needs liquidity to pay its overheads. The natural exit from a deal for PUK would be at a financial close, when it would be paid for its services in cash out of the proceeds of the project finance, in the same way as other advisers.

On European requirements, the procurement process for PFI projects is governed by European law. All projects need to be advertised in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* and to follow certain well-established rules to ensure that the process is fair and conducted on a level playing field. It involves moving through each selection stage on the basis of an evaluation that establishes technical competence to perform the project and, later, the best price. There are usually several stages. A number of potential bidders are chosen in pre-qualification and, following interviews, three or four are invited to tender. Further negotiations usually follow. After that, a preferred bidder is chosen, which takes the process through to financial close.

From advertisement in the *Official Journal* to financial close, the process takes between 18 months and two years to complete. Fundamental to that is the integrity of the process, which requires a clear separation between client and bidders. The client or its advisers must have no conflict of interest in the outcome, otherwise the process would be tainted and in breach of *Official Journal* rules and European Union law.

If PUK had the opportunity to invest in the equity of the winning bidder, and played a part in its selection, there would be a major risk that such conflict would arise and it would be accused by the losers of preferring certain bidders over others during the competition. In that case, the process would be tainted and the playing field uneven. That aspect has not been discussed adequately, and the Government have not fully focused on the integrity of the competitive process.

It has been argued that PUK should be a provider of last resort of equity in projects where the market is not willing to provide equity on sensible terms, and that PUK's investment guidelines might require it, on all transactions, to answer positively that the equity market had been approached and was unwilling to provide the required funding.

If such equity investment were limited to those situations, it could be argued that that practice would avoid PUK crowding out the private sector, but even that slant is inappropriate because PUK will be majority-owned by the private sector and there seems little logic in private sector shareholders wanting the business to invest long term in PFI projects that no one else will touch. Even though conceptually that argument might appear to make sense to the Government, I cannot see how it can work commercially.

Government amendments Nos. 27 and 28 remove references to financial assistance and grants and seek to make it clear that subscriptions to PUK will be for investments. I repeat: what sort of investments? Going back to the heart of the issue, is PUK to be essentially a skill advisory body or an investing body?

The amendments leave in the Bill the ability to provide finance by way of guarantee. The Minister wrote to me following the debate in Committee to make it clear that those guarantees would be provided on the same basis as other guarantees, but I note from her response that they will appear as contingent liabilities in the supplementary statements to the consolidated fund and national loans fund accounts.

The essence of our concerns about guarantees is that they are at the bottom of the page, on a contingent basis, and it will become ever more difficult to know what the real commitment is. Technically, one clearly cannot put guarantees in as capital expenditure to be depreciated, but we will stray into an area where, as Government guarantees mount, their real liabilities become more and more obscure.

Our amendments Nos. 10 and 11 seek to provide an alternative cap on Government expenditure and certainly to include the expenditure under clause 16(1). We are broadly happy to accept in principle the Government's approach, with the proviso that we want to know what will be included under subsection (1).

Amendments Nos. 12 and 13 seek to exclude from financial assistance guarantees and long-term equity investment in public-private partnership projects. The amendments have not been published in the form in which I tabled them, but that is their intent. As I have just said, there is no need to use the guarantee mechanism for putting up finance; it is much sounder if finance is provided up front and then appears clearly in the Government accounts.

4.45 pm

The central question is what the Government intend Partnerships UK to do. The industry does not know, Parliament does not know, I am not clear, and I question whether the Minister is entirely clear. She speaks of allowing it to develop and to have sufficient flexibility in the future. The danger of that approach is that it will develop major conflicts of interest and the same bad habits as the equity bank of the 1960s.

On amendment No. 16 to clause 16, it is of course correct and desirable that Partnerships UK's accounts should be open to inspection by the Comptroller and Auditor General, but what will be the accounting policies of Partnerships UK? What will be its depreciation policies?

The Government have an interest in PUK at one remove and as a minority shareholder. The accounting principles of Partnerships UK and who will determine them are a crucial matter still to be resolved. Few topics could be more relevant to the issues raised by the rest of the provisions. Unless the rest of the Bill is changed as proposed, no one will have a clue what the Government's interests are in Partnerships UK or how they will account for its activities.

I shall deal now with amendment No. 14. Reading through Government announcements at the time when Partnerships UK was launched, I attempted to distil its intended role as the Government perceived it. We have sought to limit the definition of Partnerships UK's role to those activities. As amendment No. 14 states,

"upstream public-private partnerships activities" means acting as a manager in the organisation of public-private partnership projects, providing public sector organisations with expert advisory and implementation skills, providing interim finance for feasibility studies for local government public-private partnership projects and negotiating the necessary arrangements for particular public-private partnerships with the relevant government departments and the Treasury.

Those are the activities that the Government claimed when they spun the story of the setting up of Partnerships UK. The definition offered by the amendment is considerably more explicit and narrower than that provided by the Bill, which is broad and unclear and which opens the door to all sorts of conflicts of interest.

The first potential conflict of interest arises from the fact that Partnerships UK exists in an idealistic sense to give good advice to public sector bodies, but it also aims to grab the business as profitably as possible for itself.

The second potential conflict of interest is that Partnerships UK will have privileged access to private finance initiative deals and a privileged position in its relationships with the Treasury and Government Departments, but it is majority owned by the private sector. It is therefore in competition with a considerable number of other bodies in the PFI industry. The Bill gives it a privileged position which will be impossible to manage. It would be improper for Partnerships UK to be permitted to participate as a long-term investor in PFI equity projects.

The rest of the amendments are relatively straightforward. Government amendments Nos. 29, 30 and 31 broadly cover the same territory as amendment No. 15. They try to make it clear that Partnerships UK can be involved in PFI business outside the United Kingdom. That involves less conflict than does such business in the United Kingdom, and it is clearly welcome if PUK can make money through business outside the country.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend hinted at a possible conflict between the Bill and European law. Given the unimaginable embarrassment that this Government of Europhiles would suffer if, in the context of the clause and the amendments, they faced legal action from the European Union, does he agree that it would be helpful if they published the legal advice that they received on the matter?

Mr. Flight: I thank my hon. Friend for his pertinent remarks. I suspect that this Europhile Government may not even have thought of the problem, just as they had not sufficiently considered European Court of Justice issues in relation to the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

I apologise if I have spent too much time in taking hon. Members through the precise arguments for the amendments, but I hope that I have made it clear that a potential problem exists unless the activities of Partnerships UK are limited to the upstream activities that I defined.

The Bill is at its Report stage, yet clauses 16 and 17, which are tucked away, provide substantial powers for Partnerships UK without giving a clear definition of its activities. The Government have not resolved that. The Government have been warned by the industry, business and the trade union movement that, if the measure is left as wide as it currently stands, it will put Partnerships UK in a position in which it will face unacceptable conflicts of interest.

For those reasons, our amendments try to limit and define much more precisely the activities of Partnerships UK. If there was reasonable scope for those activities to broaden in future, they could be reconsidered in further legislation. The argument that we must have the widest possible measure now to enable Partnerships UK to develop does not stand up. I urge the Government to

[Mr. Flight]

reconsider what they want out of Partnerships UK. The other place, if not the House, will need to follow up our points and limit the role of Partnerships UK to that which is proper.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I want to speak briefly about three amendments in the group. First, I want to comment on the limitation that the Minister mentioned at the beginning of our proceedings. Secondly, I want to consider amendment No. 16, which is in my name and the names of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel). I also want to probe the Minister slightly on the philosophy that underpins the accounting for Partnerships UK.

I welcome the Government's decision to accept our suggestion in Standing Committee on limitation. That is sensible. I also thank the Minister for consulting the National Audit Office on that; it was clearly worth while. I want to ask a question that may turn out to be about a technical point, but I hope that the Minister will clarify it when she winds up. Does the limitation refer to proposed new paragraphs (b) and (c) of clause 16(1), but not to subsection (1)(a), which states:

> The Treasury may incur expenditure in respect of the establishment of a body for the purpose of carrying on public-private partnership business?

That opens up the option of creating a dowry. I do not think that that was the intention; I suspect that it is just the way in which the wording is made rather general. But I should like to hear that that is the Government's view. There may be a need for amendment by the Government in the other place.

The second issue is raised by amendment No. 16, in my name and the names of two of my colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Swansea, West and the hon. Member for Newbury. It says:

> The accounts of a body to which financial assistance is provided under subsection (1)(b) or (3) shall be open to inspection of the Comptroller and Auditor General and that body shall give such explanations of those accounts as he may reasonably require.

The amendment is designed to remedy an omission from the Bill. It provides for the Comptroller and Auditor General's access to Partnerships UK. The Government intend to establish the body as a limited company to exercise a key role in developing the private finance initiative. Partnerships UK will take decisions having a wide impact on the use of public money. The Treasury will be able to use public money to fund it. It will take on functions that are currently performed by a taskforce within the Treasury, whose work is currently open to scrutiny by the Committee of Public Accounts through the Comptroller and Auditor General's current statutory access rights.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is an interesting test case of whether the Government intend to constrict the applicability of the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General, since, after all, the body in question is one that they are setting up de novo, and they have claimed repeatedly that they have tried to allow all new bodies to be within the purview of the Comptroller and Auditor General?

Mr. Davis: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. As will be clear in a second, it is a test case of something else, of whether or not we can have in statute, rather than by Executive promise, the rights that apply.

The Chief Secretary, giving evidence to the Committee of Public Accounts last month, acknowledged the important role of the Committee in scrutinising the apportionment and transfer of risk under public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives. He gave a commitment that the Committee would have full scrutiny of and oversight over public money paid to Partnerships UK, as well as of money going into projects for which Partnerships UK will be responsible. That commitment is welcome; it was unanimously welcomed in the Committee. The amendment would simply secure in statute the mechanism for providing the Committee with the oversight role, by giving the Comptroller and Auditor General the necessary access powers to obtain information to inform the Committee.

Mr. Letwin: I accept my right hon. Friend's correction. It is encouraging to many of us to hear of that commitment. However, does he agree that if the Government are reluctant to accept the PAC's amendment it would suggest that that commitment may be temporary?

Mr. Davis: I am perhaps more generous than my hon. Friend in my judgment of the Government. The problem here is not so much that the commitment of today's Government may be temporary; it concerns the commitment of some future Government. All Bills set the framework for the Government and Parliament in the future.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): The right hon. Gentleman speaks with much knowledge of the position inherited by the present Government, when, against all the appeals from the Public Accounts Committee, none of the outside arms-length agencies that were set up were required to be vetted by the National Audit Office. But I know that the right hon. Gentleman supports me and the rest of the Committee in applauding what the present Government have done to ensure that all arms-length bodies have been included since the last election.

Mr. Davis: Not quite all—19 out of 21. If the hon. Gentleman had been in the Chamber the other day he would have known that I tabled an amendment on behalf of the National Audit Office about the Financial Services Authority. That was not accepted. So the matter is not as clear-cut as he suggests.

The point that the hon. Gentleman perhaps wanted to make was that over the decades from the 1960s onwards Governments have slipped by this particular problem. It is one that should be straightened out for ever now.

However, let me return to my generous tone, which was to accept and applaud the Chief Secretary's commitment. It should properly be put into statute, for good reason. The private finance initiative is still new; it is still finding its feet; we are still discovering its weaknesses and its strengths. In the development of such a policy, one that is

common to both sides of the House, the gains from value for money studies are enormous. They relate not just to the particular body or project that is being considered at any one time, but to all the projects that may benefit from them in the future. The Public Accounts Committee has already published a report demonstrating the lessons learned from four PFI studies. Considerable leverage is given by the ability to scrutinise and to report.

5 pm

Of course, another important scrutiny function relates properly to Parliament, and should not be a discretionary consideration for Government. Parliament's rights are involved here, not the Government's wishes or the Government's good will. The amendment is offered not in any spirit of conflict, but because I—along with the other Members in whose names it is tabled, and others—believe that Parliament's rights should be recognised. The House is being asked to approve the statutory funding of Partnerships UK; the amendment would secure in statute the House's right to scrutinise the use to which that money is put.

May I ask the Minister another question about accounting for Partnerships UK? There is a philosophical point that we did not have time to consider in Committee, but which needs to be understood. The private finance initiative is, in my view, worth while, and I applaud the Government's intention to increase its use. It will give us better management, risk transfer, and a valuable weapon for the pursuit of output-oriented government. But how we account for the private finance initiative, or the private-public partnership, is critical, because it may lead to a perverse incentive in the way in which the PFI is used—an incentive driven by the way in which we account for it on the Government's balance sheet.

Traditionally, decisions about whether to put an item on a company's balance sheet are based on how the risk is allocated—whether it falls on the project or on the company. There is a good reason for that: the interest of those who are most concerned with the balance sheet. Both the company's shareholders and its creditors have an interest in the financial risk that afflicts it.

The taxpayer's interest in the Government's accounts is rather different. Most taxpayers do not expect the Government to go bankrupt tomorrow; neither do most of their creditors. The Government may be a late payer, but they are not going to go bankrupt. The taxpayer's interest is in the future taxation incurred by Government's decisions. That is why I want to know how the Minister expects Partnerships UK to be accounted for, in the context of the Government's overall accounts and the balance sheet that the Comptroller and Auditor General will be required to audit at some time in the future.

I think it proper for capital accounting for the PFI—the liability that goes on to the Government's balance sheet—to reflect, irrespective of risk transfer, the stream of cash that taxpayers will have to fund in the future. How does the Minister expect that to be dealt with? It is, I think, one of the key issues in relation to whether the PFI is treated properly. If it is not treated properly, future Governments will be tempted to try to minimise the apparent liabilities on the balance sheet by, as it were, having public services on the never-never, and none of us would approve of that.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I think the House is grateful to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) for their analysis of the amendments and the Government's proposition. The Committee was also grateful for their analysis of Partnerships UK. The Liberal Democrats support almost all that they have said today; we also support the Government's new clause 7, which deals with expenditure limits. The Minister suggested in Committee that the Government would table such a measure, and they have delivered on that promise, for which hon. Members—including those who were members of the Committee—are grateful.

Mr. Letwin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is the lacuna that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) pointed out: because subsection (1)(a) is not covered, the Government could under the Bill put in, for example, £1,000 million at the start and not be limited by the £400 million?

Mr. Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He has anticipated what I was about to say. With that exception, we welcome the new clause. I hope that the Minister will say that that was an oversight and that the Government will fill that lacuna in the other place.

I hope that the Minister will talk a little more about the philosophy behind the Government adopting the expenditure limit. The point was not touched on in Committee. Although an expenditure limit could prevent abuse of the Government guarantee for Partnerships UK and ensure that there is a level playing field for other companies, there is an alternative to such a limit. The Government could have ensured that the constitution setting up Partnerships UK had a no bail-out clause saying that they would not give it any guarantees after the initial funding, and would in no way come to its rescue if it encountered difficulties.

I would be interested if the Minister said why the Government did not choose that route, which is perfectly legitimate. Other countries have used it for corporations that have been set up by statute. The Liberal Democrats have examined it in other areas such as London Underground and the Post Office. It would perhaps have been one of the most appropriate ways to look at innovation in public sector finance and could have brought many of the benefits that the Government seek from setting up Partnerships UK, without having to have the expenditure limit. I make it clear: we are not against the expenditure limit approach. We would like to hear why the Government have gone down that route and not another.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs spent some time talking about the role of Partnerships UK and rightly sought from the Government clarification of what activities the body will undertake. I hope that the Minister will expand on that because many of us have worries that they have no clear direction for the body. Perhaps they will want it to take over more and more of the capital management of the public sector, but with no clear criteria about the sort of projects that will be most appropriate for Partnerships UK.

That is one of the problems with the private finance initiative. It is welcome in many areas of the public sector and has brought many benefits. Many projects have gone ahead that otherwise would not have done. Many lessons

[Mr. Davey]

and skills have been learned by public sector managers, particularly on procurement. It has clearly brought many benefits, but, as we all know, there have been many examples of PFI projects having problems, where assets have been undervalued and money has disappeared.

That is why some of us are concerned that Partnerships UK is being created without any clear framework for its activities. Although it may be the right approach, we do not feel that the Government are setting down the guidelines that are needed at this early stage.

A few weeks ago, members of the Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Treasury took evidence from various advisers on the PFI and looked at where it had been successful and where it had not. It was clear that there were a significant number of successful PFI projects but, equally, a range where the PFI was not so appropriate and had not worked so well. That tended to be where the body had many different parts—say, a large hospital—a service there was being PFIed, but was used by a number of different people. The transaction costs in performing that re-arrangement proved to be not only very high, very complicated and time consuming, but did not deliver good value for money.

In their remarks to the Committee, the specialist advisers made it clear that the PFI could generally be characterised as a case of learning on the job and of trial by error. That is not a good way of trying to discover the best way of maximising value for taxpayers' money and of ensuring that capital projects are completed in the most efficient manner. It is about time that the Treasury—perhaps using outside advisers, perhaps from academia—analysed rather more intelligently the most appropriate cases for use of the PFI.

If public sector managers operate a PFI project, they will have the benefit of cheaper capital and—potentially, in some cases—of lower transaction costs. However, those gains have to be set against the efficiencies that could be gained in many spheres by private sector management. There is therefore a trade-off in deciding who is best able to operate parts of a PFI project. Moreover, it seems almost self-evident that it is possible to analyse the spheres in which such a trade-off will work.

I hope that Partnerships UK will not have to learn by experience, and that, in a few years, we shall not have to contemplate a series of failures and projects in which money has been wasted.

Mr. David Davis: Some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised were addressed in the Public Accounts Committee's report on the PFI. However, rather than focusing on the trade-offs that he has described, the report made it clear that design of PFI projects is critical to their success. The report also made it clear that, in the public sector, understanding of the separation of risk is very primitive indeed. Under the previous Government, the pricing mechanism used in road projects, for example, served to increase risk, making projects more expensive than they needed to be. There is, therefore, much to be gained in addressing the issue of project design. Moreover, in relation to project design, Partnerships UK is a good development. However, the report also reinforces the point that value for money studies not only demonstrate the good and bad aspects of a project, but provide lessons to be learned for the future.

Mr. Davey: I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman on value for money studies, which would be promoted by his amendment No. 16, and which we must ensure are continued in all PFI projects. I do not think that he and I disagree on that. Liberal Democrat Members believe, for many of the reasons that he has outlined, that the PFI could be very useful in many spheres. His comments on project design also reinforce my previous comments. Although some projects can be designed so that the private sector is readily able to assist in improving efficiency, it is very difficult to see how other projects—I gave an example of one earlier—can be designed to ensure that we receive best value for money. I therefore hope that the Minister will say a little more—as she was pressed to do earlier by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs—on the activities of Partnerships UK.

Amendment No. 16 was tabled by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden and other members of the Public Accounts Committee, and is not, as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said, a Liberal Democrat amendment. However, Liberal Democrat Members are certainly happy to support it and, in many ways, wish that we had got there first.

Throughout our proceedings in Committee, the Government demonstrated a surprising unwillingness to expand the role of the National Audit Office. In Committee, although Ministers described their interest in and support for expanding that role, and even boasted about their record in doing so, when we made specific proposals, they moved away. We are now debating another specific proposal, and it will be interesting to see whether the Minister goes down the same road. In Committee, she made it clear that she was not attracted by such an amendment. She said that Partnerships UK would be a risk-taking private sector body, with the majority of its members being private sector investors and that those were not the normal conditions under which a body would be inspected by a public sector audit body.

5.15 pm

Mr. Letwin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the light of the interesting information that we have received from my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, that there has been a Damascene conversion in the Treasury and the Chief Secretary has made a commitment to allow the Comptroller and Auditor General in, it is extraordinary that the Government should apparently resist an amendment that merely locks in that commitment?

Mr. Davey: During the evening we may find that the hon. Gentleman anticipates what I was about to say on a number of occasions. The Chief Secretary has made that commitment. It follows that Ministers should accept amendment No. 16.

Mr. Letwin: I promise that I shall not pre-empt the hon. Gentleman this time, because I want to ask him

a question. Would he care to speculate on why there might be such a discrepancy between that commitment and a willingness or otherwise to accept the clause?

Mr. Davey: I was not about to go on to that, but I shall answer the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps the reason is that the Government are concerned about setting a precedent, because Parliament would then be entitled to say that many other corporations and trading companies with public sector involvement should be overseen by the National Audit Office. I suspect that that lies behind the Government's possible opposition to amendment No. 16, but we shall see.

Another reason why the Government should deliver on the Chief Secretary's commitment is that such public bodies, created by statute by the House of Commons, ought to be audited by the National Audit Office. Partnerships UK would not exist if statute did not create it. It is not a private company. That creates a prima facie case for National Audit Office involvement.

We know from new clause 7 that public money will be involved. Moreover, Partnerships UK will be a key tool of public policy. The Government want to develop the private finance initiative and public-private partnerships. There is no disagreement about that basic aim. Elsewhere in the Bill, the Government say that a body should be under the jurisdiction of the National Audit Office only if its role could be carried out by a Government Department. A Department clearly is undertaking the role of Partnerships UK. The Treasury set up a taskforce, which started work soon after the Government came to office. Yet again, by the Government's criteria, Partnerships UK ought to be under the institutional jurisdiction of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr. Flight: The hon. Gentleman has just raised the nub of the matter: is Partnerships UK going to take on the Treasury taskforce's role, as has been advertised, or is it going to do something entirely different? The Bill empowers it to do something totally different that may even be harmful to the present role that the Treasury taskforce has carried out well.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. I may be naive in accepting that the Government were going to do what they had said elsewhere that they intended to do. It is the Government's stated intention that the responsibilities of the Treasury taskforce will be taken on by Partnerships UK, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that, given the drafting of the Bill, Partnerships UK could go much wider. The point made in amendment No. 16 is that the body should come within the scope of the National Audit Office.

The Liberal Democrats want the Government to deliver fully on their commitment. We want them to ensure that all public money that goes to Partnerships UK is properly audited. We want to make sure that the commitment given by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is delivered and we believe that the best way to do that is for amendment No.16 to be agreed to.

Finally, let me say a word in favour of public sector managers. When we debate private finance initiatives and Partnerships UK, we are often left with the feeling that right hon. and hon. Members believe that civil servants cannot procure capital goods or get good value for taxpayers' money. In reality, over many decades they have performed those functions very well. Indeed, in many areas they are still charged with the responsibility for capital procurement for the public sector. Whether or not Partnerships UK develops and takes on more of that work, many public sector managers will retain that responsibility.

I hope that, in establishing Partnerships UK, the Government will ensure that public sector managers are able to learn from Partnerships UK, and that they are not simply able to get advice from Partnerships UK, but are brought in for their skills and expertise as they will still be in charge of much of the capital spending in the public sector.

Mr. David Davis: I applaud the hon. Gentleman's comment about public sector managers and draw attention to one factor that we in Britain take entirely for granted—the fact that more than 99 per cent. of our public sector managers are totally honest. We cannot take that for granted in respect of everything that happens on behalf of the Government. When something goes wrong, it is often at the interface between the public and private sectors. We are increasing precisely that possibility by going down the PFI route—not wrongly—and we have to be aware of it.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Government should accept his amendment so that the public-private partnership can be developed with the probity that we have come to expect from our civil servants.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): What worries me about new clause 7, and particularly the way in which the Minister spoke to it, is that the £400 million cap is the wrong cap. It is focused on what might broadly be called the operating costs of the monopoly organisation that has been set up to administer the public sector element of the PFI scheme. However, it does not restrict or contain the public moneys that are going into the PFI and that really should worry right hon. and hon. Members in the context of the Bill and the proposed new clause.

The Minister gave the impression that the new clause provided a real cap on heavy spending by the public sector on the PFI. That is quite manifestly not the case. As the provision is spurious and there is no such cap, there are all sorts of unfortunate consequences, some of which have been referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis).

For instance, more and more of a fudge is emerging between capital and current spending. The expansion of PFI in a totally unconstrained way is resulting in the breaking of the Government's own golden rules. Borrowing is being conducted through spurious capital expenditure, unconstrained through the PFI, which actually turns out to be current expenditure. That puts a horse and cart through the Government's self-proclaimed golden rules. More generally, this kind of mishmash of Government and private spending in an uncontrolled way will be combined with the phoney privatisation schemes that are beginning to emerge—the Post Office being one example. We shall have to wait for the result of the mayoral contest to find out whether the underground will be another. Less and less control is being exerted and certainly, as my right hon. Friend said, totally unaccountable control is being exerted over public spending, particularly capital expenditure.

[Sir Michael Spicer]

That is increasingly worrying. The Select Committee on the Treasury interviewed the Governor of the Bank of England this morning. There was discussion about the fact that, contrary to the public perception and the Government's propaganda, there is reason to believe that public spending is beginning to get out of control.

A report published yesterday by the Lombard Street research group showed clearly that the growth of public spending is taking off, and that it is matched by falling growth in tax receipts. Everyone thought that the deficit gap had been solved, thanks to the sound finances handed over by the previous Administration. It had been, for a while, especially when the Government took over the previous Administration's tight expenditure plans.

However, there is now the real possibility of laxity in this country's fiscal management. That would have all sorts of consequences, as the Select Committee discussed this morning. One of the reasons why our interest rates are on their way up is that there is an anticipation that public spending is getting out of control, as a result of the ways that the Government have found to get around their own rules and public expenditure constraints. There is a clear need for capping and constraining public expenditure.

New clause 7 is spurious. Its impression of great control and probity by an open Government contrasts with what is really going on. The Bill is part of a fudge that disguises loss of clarity and accountability in the Government's conduct of the public finances, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden rightly said. Many issues arise connected with risk, for example. There is a contrast between what the Bill proposes and the way that risk is managed in the private sector.

The Government are pretending to have achieved a match between private finance and public finance, and between risk and reward, in a way that is satisfactory to the private sector. However, their fudge means that public expenditure is gradually getting out of control. That is a worrying trend.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): I wish to draw particular attention to amendments Nos. 8 and 9, at whose heart is the critical distinction between upstream and downstream activities.

Upstream activities are defined in a later amendment as a set of activities that provide for support and assistance to the public sector prior to the financial close. Downstream activities are defined elsewhere as involvement in the project's management and equity investment after that close. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) said, it is the inclusion in the Bill of a role in downstream activity for PUK that most troubles Opposition Members, City practitioners and commentators.

That worry was noted when details of PUK were leaked to the newspapers last summer and aroused much confusion. The more one studies the Bill, the more one sees that many details are not covered. It was also clear in Committee that there were lots of loose ends. The devil really is in the detail. There are conflicts that have not been resolved thus far because of insufficient understanding of the critical difference between upstream and downstream activities.

5.30 pm

My hon. Friend correctly observed that with regard to downstream activity, a body advises the public sector on how to get the best deal while being able to take an equity stake by way of remuneration for its involvement in the deal. That equity stake will involve it in trying to get the best deal for itself as a shareholder. That inherent structural conflict is built into these provisions.

PUK will seek to develop a revenue stream to finance its activities, but we are being told that that will not and should not crowd out private sector activity. That is clearly another conflict.

The Minister will probably tell us a great deal about Ministers' consultation with the private sector before drafting the Bill and how the Government listened to Opposition views in Committee. They may have listened and they may have consulted, but they have not come to the proper conclusions. It is to some of the outstanding points that have not been tackled that I would like to turn my attention.

I do not think that anyone has a problem with upstream activities. They are typically undertaken by the Treasury taskforce—and a very good job it did in the main.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the upstream activities constitute the main burden of the Government's case, clause 16(1)(a) should have been captured by the £400 million limit? It cannot conceivably be the case that the upstream activities would require to have more than £400 million spent on them all told, including the initial investment.

Mr. Ruffley: Given my hon. Friend's premise, he is of course right, but he misunderstands me if he believes that I think that the burden of the Government's case is the importance that they attach to upstream activities. The importance that they attach to downstream activities is my concern. However, given his premise, he is right in making that logical and typically powerful point.

Mr. Letwin: Following his own logic, would my hon. Friend then agree that the fact that clause 16(1)(a) has been omitted from the £400 million limit is virtually proof that the Government intend the body to have a great deal to do on the downstream side?

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend has it. That is exactly the point of my remarks further downstream, if I may make such a pun. It is at the forefront of Conservative Members' concerns.

Let us remember what upstream activity is and why it is important. To demonstrate what a reasonable chap I am, I will gladly pray in aid the view of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In a speech to the Institute for Public Policy Research on 20 September 1999, he suggested that the importance of PUK was in helping to

> get more PFI deals done better and quickly.

We would all like that. It is what the Treasury taskforce was dedicated to ensuring, so there is no problem thus far.

PUK will also encourage the public sector not to impose unnecessary risks on the private sector. That is another of the Government's stated aims. We have no problems with that. It is also implicit in the logic of the role carved out for PUK's upstream activity that it should

promote greater standardisation of contracts. That is most important, as is the fact that PUK should try to streamline the bidding process so as to encourage greater deal flow.

However, when we try to find out what the measure says about upstream activity—the subject of amendment No. 8—we seek in vain. We cannot discover ways in which that pre-closing and troubleshooting advice could be delivered. We have what is technically a private sector company, which will employ staff who represent a better skill base; that is what we are asked to believe. The company will be better than the embodied form of the Treasury taskforce.

However, concerns remain as to the kind of staff who will be attracted to PUK and retained. The pool of experienced PFI professionals is relatively small and the demand for their services in the private sector is high. Will the Minister tell us what is being done to recruit and retain staff who will deliver high-quality, upstream activity advice?

As one considers the significance of upstream activity, another question automatically leaps out. What relationship will PUK have with other Departments? Those people who have wandered the corridors of Whitehall in a previous life will understand that some Departments are not awfully good at interacting with non-governmental bodies. Will the Minister tell us what mechanisms—if any—the Government have put in place to incentivise Departments to work efficiently, promptly and in a co-operative spirit with PUK when it has been set up?

I cannot close my remarks on the importance of upstream activity—the subject of amendment No. 8—without adverting to the points in other amendments about downstream activity to which my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) referred a few moments ago. The Opposition regard downstream activity as dangerous. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) alighted on that fact.

Let us consider briefly why the involvement of PUK in downstream activity—the management of investment and the participation in equity investment during a PFI or public-private partnership deal—could be problematic. What conflicts of interest might arise if PUK indulged in the downstream activity of which we disapprove?

PUK will be advising public sector clients on how to achieve the best commercial deal. However, at the same time, it will, in some cases, have an equity stake in the deal. The commercial interests in securing the best return on that stake would be diametrically opposed to the interests of the public sector client to whom PUK was giving the advice in the first place. The competitive bidding process could be compromised if PUK participated in choosing a preferred bidder in which it had a future investment interest. In other words, PUK could recommended a bidder to be selected if it offered the most favourable participation to PUK.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): Is not everything that my hon. Friend says in support of his amendments and about the pitfalls likely to be found in downstream activities a powerful argument in support of amendment No. 16, which was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) and relates to the Comptroller and Auditor General's right of access?

Mr. Ruffley: I concur with my hon. Friend's assessment that our right hon. Friend, who is Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, has alighted on an important point. That is why he tabled an amendment to act as an important set of belt and braces if we cannot get rid of downstream activity. I fear that, despite the power of our arguments, we may not succeed in doing that today. However, that amendment would ensure that there would be proper accounting of the PUK's spending and scrutiny by the National Audit Office.

Mr. Letwin: Even if we do not succeed today, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is almost certain that, if the Government continue to resist such amendments, the other place will ensure that they are not allowed to continue with their proposals for downstream activities?

Mr. Ruffley: I stand corrected by my hon. Friend. Perhaps, I am too much of a pessimist. I heard what he said, and I now share his optimism that the Government will listen to the objections that we are making in a reasoned and sensible spirit about the risks posed by the downstream activity envisaged in the Government's new clause.

I return to the list of potential conflicts of interest. Confidential information that PUK gains as a shareholder or lender in one transaction could be used against other private sector bidders in later transactions.

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend again, but I have just caught up with his lightning intellect and realised what he was saying. Does he really mean what he said? Is it not likely that the Government will not so much listen as hear an enormous shout from the other place? Eventually, they will be compelled to listen.

Mr. Ruffley: I hope that the Government will be compelled to listen to the points that we have made, and that the other place will no doubt make, about the dangers of downstream activity. My hon. Friend is right in that regard.

We have a further concern about downstream activity. If PUK is a participant in a project company either as a shareholder or a lender and needs to make returns and reduce investment risk, how will it negotiate effectively during the life of a deal against the public sector tariff payer that is its co-sponsor if that deal has to be renegotiated? For example, it might need to be re-financed and, in those circumstances, there will be a clear conflict of interest.

We are not totally clear from the Bill what price PUK will charge for its services. It has been observed in many quarters outside the House that a natural exit from a deal for PUK would be at the financial close, when it would be paid for its services in cash from the proceeds of the project, financed in the same way as other advisers. If that route were followed, services could be clearly priced. Other advisers could see how much PUK was charging, which would result in benefits from more competition. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) observed that we are entering the realm of monopoly providers, when we want more competition.

5.45 pm

If remuneration were paid up front, it would increase PUK's liquidity and avoid the need to scramble for sweat equity, which would be unattractive to many parties—not least bid sponsors and the public at large in the shape of taxpayers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, referred to the way in which European law impacts on the way that PFI procurement is undertaken in the European Union. All projects must be advertised in the *Official Journal* of the European Commission and follow well-established rules, to ensure that the process is deemed fair and conducted on a level playing field.

The process, which is lengthy, begins by establishing the technical competence of bidders and goes on to examine whether best value and best price have been secured. Pre-qualification involves a number of potential bidders from a wide field. Following the third or fourth round of beauty contests, an average of three or four bidders are invited formally to tender. Thereafter, further negotiations are conducted, normally resulting in two bidders being invited to put their best and final offers. Then a preferred bidder is chosen, which should take the process to final closure.

That legal—and legalistic—process can take one and a half to two years to complete. I should like to hear from the Minister whether the integrity of that process is compromised in any way by the kind of conflict of interest that I and others of my hon. Friends have outlined in relation to downstream activity. It is widely suggested by eminent legal practitioners in the City of London that, under that regime, there should always be a clear separation between the client and bidder in the interests of fairness, transparency and integrity. The client and its advisers—PUK in this example—should have no conflict of interest in the outcome, otherwise the process could be tainted and possibly in breach of EU law.

I repeat the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham. What legal advice have Treasury Ministers received in relation to conflicts of interest compromising or breaching EU law? If the Minister will not publish that advice, perhaps she will tell us whether she was given any in the first place or thought it prudent to request such before introducing the Bill. I think that I saw rubric to the effect that the Bill is deemed to accord with the principles of the European convention on human rights. Does it accord with the principles of EU law, other than the ECHR?

I should like to go on—

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Glasgow, Rutherglen): The hon. Gentleman is going on and on.

Mr. Ruffley: If the hon. Gentleman stops muttering and wants to stand up to engage in the debate I shall happily give way, but I see from his rather strange expression that that is probably beyond him.

The Government pray in aid various arguments to the effect that they are well intentioned, that none of those conflicts of interest will conceivably come to pass and that one should not be concerned about breaches of law, conflicts of interest or double dealing. But it is worth reminding ourselves of their professed intent when they introduced the proposals. We were told that PUK would recover the cost of financing any public-private partnership feasibility studies by direct reimbursement from the Treasury, that the Treasury would be reimbursed when the projects got ahead and that it would not always or even necessarily be the case that PUK would have to take an equity stake to recover its costs. We were also informed that it saw its role as merely supporting Departments, acting as a co-sponsor with them and smoothing the passage of PPP projects that it had worked up in co-operation with public sector clients.

I am afraid that that is not good enough because the Government clearly want PUK to be a significant pump primer and, as has already been observed, the figure of £0.4 billion should make us all pause and scrutinise the thinking behind the creation of PUK. We are in the realm of empire building and the Bill does not spell out exactly what is going on. I refer to comments by Sir Stephen Robson and Mr. Adrian Montague, the chief executive of the Treasury taskforce. Let me quote Mr. Montague on why there will not be any conflicts of interest that should bother anyone. He said:

> in designing the capital structure we won't allow PUK to be taken hostage by anyone on the private sector side of the fence in order to gain unfair preference.

As for the worry that PUK will do down the public sector to achieve a better return for itself, he said:

> the one thing that is not understood is that PUK will have a single client—the public sector.

The suggestion is that

> If PUK does a single deal, which the public sector regards as gouging, or exploiting a conflict of interest, it is dead. No one would ever deal with it again

and that it will have to be terribly careful as

> Its goodwill is single source and precarious.

We are being asked to rely on the suggestion that we do not need to write any of that down and do not need to worry about conflicts of interest because they will not happen as PUK will be so sensitive to commercial and City opinion that it would not dream of gouging or doing a preferential deal when an equity stakeholder.

However, in the same breath Mr. Montague said:

> it is not enough to rely on the underlying understanding. We will have to have rules in place

to prevent the evil that he identified and that we have been identifying. I have looked in vain in the Bill and in Committee proceedings for the rules to prevent gouging or preferential deals arising from a conflict of interest. There are no answers to those questions.

Guarantees go to the heart of the Government's attitude to the PFI, which is why our amendment No. 12 would remove references to PUK making guarantees. We believe that giving guarantees in any particular deal and using taxpayers' money so to do would undermine the demand that private sector contractors strive to achieve the very best efficiencies, savings and cost-effectiveness under a PFI or PPP deal. The problem is that if a bail-out occurred during a deal as a result of a guarantee being given, that would look like nothing but shadowy, off-balance-sheet public spending. That is all that those guarantees would amount to and, for that reason, our amendment is very important.

The PFI and private sector contractors enjoying the benefit of guarantees that could run to many millions of pounds—if the Government amendments and new clauses

are anything to go by—should worry [illegible] because that is not in the spirit of the PFI and rep[illegible] a poor deal for the British taxpayer.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): This will not be my main contribution—amendments and new clauses in my name and those of other Opposition Members appear in every subsequent group—but as my name is attached to amendment No. 16, I am delighted to speak to it briefly. I strongly support the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, who said that—for some reason that is not fully explained and which I want to explore—the Government appear to be unwilling to put in statute their stated intention to give the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General the right to study the accounts of Partnerships UK to make sure that its finances are properly ordered and that it is using the money granted to it by Parliament for proper purposes.

The Government were prepared to give that commitment, but appear unwilling to include it in the Bill. That seems odd, particularly in the light of a perhaps slightly unfortunate party political remark made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths). I am sorry that he is no longer present as he seemed to suggest that the blame for the NAO's lack of access lay with the Conservative party, and the previous Conservative Government in particular. He rightly praised his Government for the number of new bodies that they have established over which the Comptroller and Auditor General has full audit rights. I echo that praise and, although the figure may not be quite 100 per cent., most have him in charge of their audit. We all welcome that.

6 pm

If the Government reject the amendment, we will lack a safeguard against any changes being made in future. Of course, we accept that the Government intend the amendment's effect to come into play, but if the amendment is not made, a future Government may make a different decision. Indeed, this Government may make a different decision in future, although presumably they do not, at present, intend to do so.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, South made it clear that he was worried about what might happen if, God forbid, we ever had a Conservative Government in charge of the country again. If that is a worry for him, I hope that he will be supporting the amendment wholeheartedly, in line with his support for the Public Accounts Committee's report, which suggests that the amendment should be made so that the Government's commitment would be in statute.

The Government said that the commitment should not be in statute because that was not the Bill's original purpose. They have used that argument in a number of instances during discussions on the Bill. It is an unfortunate argument for two reasons.

The first, and general, reason is that it seems rather odd that if a measure is right and proper and will benefit the public and Parliament, it should not be included in the Bill simply because it was not part of the Bill's original purpose. That indicates an almost childish pique on the part of the Government. It is almost as if they are saying, "We did not think of it first, and we are not prepared to allow you to get the credit for having thought of it, so we will not include it in the Bill." That is a silly way to behave, and I hope that the Government will recognise that and stop behaving in that way.

The second reason is particular to PUK. Part of the Bill's original purpose was to set up PUK. Part of setting up such a body is laying down how its accounts will be properly verified and audited and by whom. It is, therefore, part of the Bill's original purpose that statements on how that auditing should be carried out should be in statute. In this case the Government have even less reason for using their excuse about the Bill's original purpose than they do with other aspects of the Bill.

I hope that the Government will see the sense of amendment No. 16 before we come to vote on it at heaven knows what hour tonight or tomorrow morning. It would make a valuable change to the Bill; it is in line with the Government's thinking, and the Government could easily accept it without losing face.

Mr. Fallon: I do not entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) that the new clause gives the impression of control—that is not the way that I read it. However, I agree with him that the Government have chosen precisely the wrong cap.

It is after all ironic that the Treasury, which is telling every other Department of State that what matters is the quality of spending, not the quantity, and is negotiating public service agreements all over Whitehall, is simply setting a quantitative cap on the expenditure of its own body, rather than a qualitative cap. It is saying that it does not matter what the body gets up to, provided that it does not spend more than £400 million.

I would far rather that new clause 7 fleshed out the meaning of the terms and conditions in clause 16. At the moment, PUK and the Treasury can simply make things up as they go along. They can draft whatever terms and conditions they like under which assistance can be provided. Rather than setting a quantitative cap of £400 million, the Minister should have come to the House with a new clause that imposed qualitative control over the type of assistance provided, whether grants or equity, and gave us a handle on that process in statute, so that it was not left to the Treasury or to PUK to define the terms and conditions themselves. That is a central weakness of the new clause.

A second weakness of the new clause and of clause 16 is the coyness about what the body is. I notice that even my hon. Friends refer to it as a "body". Let us be clear that it is a bank. The Government deny that. In a written answer to me last July, the then Chief Secretary said:

> There are no plans for a state investment bank.—[*Official Report*, 16 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 367W.]

Now we are to have a body that is enabled by the state to make investments on behalf of the state. If it sounds like a bank and looks like a bank, it probably is a bank, and we should refer to it as a bank, because it has banking functions. They are set out clearly in clause 16 and new clause 7. They are functions of lending and of taking an equity stake, whether in assets or securities.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend raises an interesting question. Does he imagine that the body would or should

[Mr. Letwin]

be under the control of the Financial Services Authority? Does he believe that the Bank of England might want to take an interest in it?

Mr. Fallon: I shall deal later with the way in which the valuation is carried out, but my hon. Friend touches on an important point. A banking function will be carried out by an agency of the Treasury, so perhaps that function should be subject to supervision by the banking authorities.

The first step in the whole process is for us to stop being coy and to call the body a bank. It is a state investment bank. I know why the Minister does not want to call it a bank: it conjures up rather dismal memories of the 1970s, which you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will recall. The previous Labour Government made a rather unhappy attempt to pick winners through the National Enterprise Board, but none turned out to be a winner—"picking losers" might have been a better description of its activity. It would have been helpful if the Minister had clarified the purpose of this body.

I turn now to the lending function. The body will be able to commit money in the form of a loan, so it is essential that it is subject to terms and conditions that it does not itself define. There must be independent assessment. We shall come to the accounting function later, and that is the afterthought because it consists of examining whether the money has been properly spent for the purpose for which it was designated. However, we cannot get a handle on the accounting function unless we can measure and audit what the loan was intended for in the first place.

As the Bill is drafted, nobody is clear about who can decide the terms and conditions under which financial assistance may be provided. Clause 16(4) simply says:

> Financial assistance . . . may be provided on terms and conditions. . .

That is completely meaningless; it does not even make it clear whether PUK or the Treasury will set the terms and conditions, or whether the terms and conditions will be made public.

There is a good example of that practice in public-private partnerships in the new commercial freedom being given to the Post Office. Even before legislation was brought before the House, the Post Office was enabled, under secret terms and conditions, to go wandering around Europe, playing at being an international business and buying outfits such as German Parcel. When we asked what were the terms and conditions under which the Treasury had allowed the Post Office to purchase other businesses, we were told that they could not be made available because the memorandum of understanding could not be published. Now the Government have had to bring legislation before the House and the matter may well become a little clearer.

There is no point in the Minister saying that the Government cannot clarify the terms and conditions or tell hon. Members exactly how the money will be lent, but they can tell us that, however messy it all is, at least the amount involved will not be more than £400 million. That does not help us at all, and that is a weakness in the new clause.

The third aspect of the new clause to which I want to draw the attention of the House is PUK's power to take an equity stake. I am surprised that, even at this late stage, the Minister has not had second thoughts about that. Everyone else thinks that it is a thoroughly bad idea. The Minister will have seen—it has been published—the evidence taken on the matter by the Select Committee. The Major Contractors Group, the Business Services Association and the CBI all think that it is a bad idea, and even the Trades Union Congress was opposed to the Government taking an equity stake through Partnerships UK.

The reason is simple. Even the TUC understands that once Partnerships UK can take an equity stake in some projects rather than in others, the projects that it chooses will be labelled and endorsed. There will be an A list and a B list. There is obviously the danger that Partnerships UK may cherry-pick the best projects. There is equally the danger that having invested political capital in particular projects, it will start interfering with the contract terms to make sure that it achieves the right outcome. The project must succeed if Partnerships UK has not only been working on it but invested in it.

There is a huge danger that there will be two different types of project—those in which there is a significant equity stake, and all the others. There is nothing in new clause 7 to eliminate that danger or to clear up the confusion. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) draw attention to the difficulties that Partnerships UK will have with other bodies, particularly with the Office of Government Commerce, which will try to police this aspect.

I am not sure what powers of supervision the Office of Government Commerce will have over Partnerships UK. Perhaps my hon. Friend, who has been labouring on the Bill in Standing Committee, is a little clearer. I am not at all sure what will happen when Partnerships UK has taken an equity stake in a project with a high political profile and the project starts to go wrong. If PUK starts tweaking the original terms of the contract, will the Office of Government Commerce be able to come in at that stage in a supervisory role and prevent PUK from doing that? Can my hon. Friend enlighten me?

Mr. Flight: I am as unclear as my hon. Friend, but there is a further matter on which he may wish to comment. How can Partnerships UK negotiate in the same way with the Treasury and Government Departments in circumstances in which it is an equity investor, and in circumstances in which it has no involvement at all? How can it continue the existing role of the Treasury taskforce if it is charged as an investor?

Mr. Fallon: That is precisely the weakness of giving Partnerships UK a banking function. That is tantamount to asking PUK to construct within it a Chinese wall that cannot be constructed.

Everyone will know which projects Partnerships UK will invest in or is considering investing in. If we are to go down that route, we will have to hear a great deal more about the Office of Government Commerce and give it more supervisory power, to make sure that PUK does not abuse its position, otherwise PUK will be able to muscle all over Whitehall and all over the contracts, putting others at significant risk.

In an earlier intervention—I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for having to slip out of the debate for another meeting—I referred to the weakness of subsection (3). What is the point of setting the limit at £400 million if the Government can increase it any time they want? I do not understand that.

As I said earlier, every time a nationalised industry in the bad old days wanted to extend its borrowing limit, which happened often enough, with British Shipbuilders, British Coal and all the other endless drains on the taxpayer, at least it had to come back to the House. It was, perhaps, allowed to increase its borrowing limit once, by another £100 million or whatever, but thereafter, in each case it had to get permission from the House through primary legislation—through another borrowing powers Bill.

6.15 pm

Mr. Ruffley: Is my hon. Friend as troubled as I am about how the figure £400 million was arrived at? How were limits determined in the 1960s and 1970s for nationalised industries? What was the methodology?

Mr. Fallon: I cannot assist my hon. Friend. I was not in government at the time. I do not know how that was done, but at least the nationalised industries recognised some restraint. They gave themselves power to borrow up to a particular sum, which could be increased once, by order, and that was it. They then had to come back, which they did, with fresh legislation—another British Shipbuilders borrowing limits increase Bill, for example.

As the new clause is drafted, the Minister does not have to come back to the House, except through statutory instrument, and there is no limit to the number of statutory instruments that she can promote. She can come back and help herself to another £100 million, week in, week out. Indeed, she can double or treble the £400 million.

That is a meaningless limit, because the new clause that introduces it gives the Minister the power to increase it, which she can do by statutory instrument. We all know the deficiencies of that procedure. I hope that when the Minister sums up, she will give us some reassurance that the £400 million limit is for the first five years or whatever, and that she has no immediate plans to come back when Partnerships UK takes a fancy to a particular investment proposal, or, as we get nearer to an election, is cajoled into investing in a project that has a high political profile but which the market otherwise would not touch.

We are justified in asking the Minister to do that. The reason is simple. The £400 million is being provided, essentially, for Partnerships UK to invest in projects in which the market is not prepared to invest fully; otherwise it would not be necessary. The Minister should at least be able to clarify where the figure of £400 million came from, the time scale over which it will last—I assume that it is not an annual total—and the prospects of her coming back to extend it.

Subsection (2)(d) of the new clause deals with the arrangements that the Treasury proposes to make for "evaluating outstanding expenditure". I have not seen that phrase before. Evaluating outstanding expenditure should be done by some body other than the Treasury. It is the Treasury's money, which it is giving to Partnerships UK, and we will want to judge not just the record of PUK in spending its way through the £400 million, but the Treasury's wisdom in giving it the money in the first place. The Treasury should not be judge and jury, deciding how well the money was spent.

I would support any of the independent arrangements proposed in other amendments. Indeed, I would have hoped that the evaluation could have been done independently, and that the Treasury would have seen no problem in inviting another body—the NAO or the CAG, for example—to make the evaluation.

Amendment No. 14 is a helpful amendment. It distinguishes much more carefully between the upstream and the downstream activities. There was an exchange on that involving my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley). When my hon. Friend ran through a little menu of upstream activities, he did not touch on the provision of interim finance. He described his approach as reasonable, but I wonder whether he and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs are not being a little too reasonable in the drafting of the amendment.

I am not at all clear what "interim finance" for a feasibility study is. Either it is finance, or it is not. How can it be "interim"? Is it a loan? Is it a grant? If it is a loan or a grant, how can it be justified as an upstream activity? Perhaps my hon. Friend can help.

Mr. Flight: The activity is upstream because it ceases when the PFI deal is signed. Finance is provided for feasibility studies of, for example, potential local government PFI projects. As I said in my speech, when those projects are finally negotiated and put to bed, the money will be repaid from the total finance for the project. The Treasury could repay it. The inclusion of that in upstream activities is intended to support the objective for Partnerships UK—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot make a winding-up speech in an intervention.

Mr. Fallon: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I tempted my hon. Friend too much. However, I want to press the point. What happens if the feasibility study recommends that the project should not go ahead? What will happen to the finance? Will it be repaid? If so, who will repay it? Does it constitute a grant that will simply be written off? I am unhappy about allowing Partnerships UK to go even further than the existing Treasury taskforce and start spraying public money around town halls on all sorts of feasibility studies for projects such as supertrams that will not be realised, and for which we will not get our money back. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds can assist?

Mr. Ruffley: I seek not to assist my hon. Friend but to ask a question. If the Treasury taskforce were involved in upstream activity, who would bear the loss if a feasibility study was undertaken but the project did not go ahead?

Mr. Fallon: The Treasury would bear the loss. I hesitate to criticise my hon. Friend because he is a distinguished lawyer, but perhaps the phrase "interim finance" needs more work. However, amendment No. 14 is helpful.

[Mr. Fallon]

I hope that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will be robust about new clause 7. I oppose it. My hon. Friends have already criticised it so strongly that I conclude that we should not accept it and I hope that, such is the power of their arguments, the Economic Secretary will reconsider it. At least she said that she was trying to allay some concerns and did the House and the Committee the courtesy of acknowledging that anxieties exist. They have been expressed to the Select Committee by all sorts of reputable bodies and by those who we want to be engaged in the specific work that we are considering.

If the Economic Secretary acknowledges the problem, I hope she will also recognise the solution. We need much firmer controls on the expenditure that we are discussing, and they must be qualitative as well as quantitative. Simply sticking a figure into the Bill and claiming that, however messy matters become, at least the amounts will not exceed £400 million does not satisfy the genuine anxieties of Conservative Members and industry.

Mr. Letwin: Before I begin, I shall reiterate the declaration of interest that I have made repeatedly on Second Reading and in Committee in relation to the Bill and the amendments: slightly ironically, when I have spoken, it has been against my interests.

The most important feature of the debate on new clause 7 and the accompanying amendments has been that we have revealed a symptom of the problem with the Bill. Hon. Members have tackled the vexed question of the scope of the application of the £400 million limit for which new clause 7 provides. I do not generally prefer to spot a conspiracy when error will serve as an explanation. On the principle of Occam's razor, one should always choose the simpler explanation. It could be mere oversight, as the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) suggested, that the £400 million limit does not cover clause 16(1)(a). However, if that is the case, I am surprised that the Economic Secretary has not brought it to our attention. I have two reasons for supposing that it is not the case.

First, the articulation of new clause 7 and amendment No. 28, and the original distinctions in clause 16(1), lead one to conclude that there is meant to be a difference between incurring expenditure in the initial phase and thereafter. That suggests that the £400 million limit has been specifically targeted at expenditure after the initial phase, rather than through mischance. It is notable that new clause 7(1), to which amendment No. 28 refers, makes it clear that the original phrase in clause 16(1)(b)—"may provide financial assistance"—needs to be expanded. In amendment No. 28, proposed new paragraphs (b) and (c) of subsection (1) read:

> may incur expenditure for the purposes of investing in the body . . . and may provide loans and guarantees and make other kinds of financial provision.

New clause 7 invites us to perceive a fundamental difference between clause 16(1)(a), which will not be capped by the £400 million limit, and provides that the Treasury,

> may incur expenditure in respect of the establishment of a body,

and proposed new paragraphs (b) and (c) of subsection (1), which provide that the Treasury,

> may incur expenditure for the purposes of investing in the body, or
>
> may provide loans and guarantees.

There may be some deep inwardness that we laymen miss. However, if that is the case, I am again surprised that the Economic Secretary has not seen fit to intervene and correct us amateurs on the basis of advice from her gurus.

On a layman's statutory construction, I incline to the view that the scope of clause 16(1)(a) is not only uncapped but unlimited. To take an absurd example, it could permit the expenditure of billions of pounds on

> the establishment of a body.

I am sure that the Economic Secretary will tell us that it is not the intention of the prudent Chancellor of the Exchequer to permit billions of pounds of expenditure to be incurred. However, if I am right, and the scope of clause 16(1)(a) would allow for such investment, the massive concession that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) so painstakingly eked out of the Government—that new clause 7 should impose a limit of £400 million—is vapid, nugatory, empty and meaningless: the £400 million limit is no limit.

I draw the House's attention to that not only because it is important—although several of my hon. Friends have proved its importance through eloquent speeches—but because it is symptomatic of a general problem, which is that matters are not as they appear. There appears to be a control, just as there seems to be proper accounting in other provisions, which we shall discuss later. We have a limit that is unlimited, a concession that is not a concession and a control that is uncontrolled.

6.30 pm

The problems with the £400 million limit, so called—the unlimited limit—do not end there. The situation gets considerably worse. Here, I am much indebted to prolonged discussion with my hon. Friends. The scope of the £400 million limit is constricted in another respect: it very specifically refers to the expenditure of moneys by the Treasury, not to the expenditure of moneys by the body itself—the body which my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs referred to as a bank. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) pointed out that the £400 million limit in no respect limited the totality of PFI expenditure. This we must agree, and knew.

I am speaking not of that failure of control, which might be expected in such a new clause, but of the fact that there is no limit on the activity of the body which it was the purpose of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs to have limited: there is a limit only on the expenditure by the Treasury on that body. According to my reading of the new clause, the body itself is capable of piling up unlimited liabilities that are not capped by the £400 million limit: indeed, there is no articulation in the new clause that would allow such liabilities to be capped.

After traversing some other ground, I shall come on to the question of the accounting of those liabilities, which is a vexed question indeed. Before we come to that, let us deal with the economics. I take it that it is part of the body's purpose that it should not be utterly controlled in its day-to-day operations by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, because were it to be so, as my hon. Friend has repeatedly pointed out, the purpose of transferring

from a Treasury taskforce to a separate body would be nil. PUK may well seek to build up large liabilities in carrying out its business, and if it does, the following economic question arises: is the full faith and credit of Her Majesty's Government behind this body in what may be sizeable guarantees?

If those guarantees should, for example, grow to billions of pounds—or tens or hundreds of billions of pounds—over time, will Varley Marshall Assurance principles obtain? Will ECGD principles obtain? Which principles will obtain? Who can say how much Parliament will find Her Majesty's Government have turned out—on purpose or by error—behind liabilities that we thought, or might have thought, would be capped at £400 million but which in practice have not been capped at any amount, £400 million or otherwise?

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the hon. Gentleman think that the solution is to introduce in another place a cap on the liabilities, or does he think that Partnerships UK should have in its constitution a no-bail-out clause? I was probing the Minister for her views on that. Does the hon. Gentleman think that it may be the way forward?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman and I are swapping inclinations. I was about to observe that I thought that his proposal of a no-bail-out clause to handle this potential problem was highly intelligent. I do not know, and I do not know whether the Government's lawyers in all their wisdom—and they have much—know, whether a no-bail-out clause would work. I do not know, because I do not think there has yet been a case that has been seen to work.

We all recall the vexed situation when local councils got into considerable financial difficulties and lenders found to their surprise that there was no bail-out, without that having been stated. But there have also been cases—British Leyland and Varley Marshall Assurance, to which I alluded, are cases in point—in which it was at least believed that full faith and credit might operate, notwithstanding the fact that the original agreements had been so constructed as to avoid its operating. This is a vexed area of law, about which great experts may disagree. It may be that a robust no-bail-out element could have been inserted in the new clause; I do not know.

What is clear is that either Ministers did not intend such a result, or that the draftsmen did not know how to achieve the desired result because it cannot effectively be achieved in law, or that Ministers did not consider the question. If Ministers did not consider it, of course the draftsmen would not have considered it. In fact, no one would have considered it. That, I suspect, is the empty box into which we are staring.

I think that what happened is that the force of rhetoric of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs in Committee, and the force of logic behind his rhetoric, were such that Ministers said, "We are in a frightful fix. The PAC, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives—and, for all we know, many of our own Members—are worried that we are doing something that may not be quite kosher. Officials—go away and construct the best limits you can that will have the following characteristics: they will not limit anything or even seek to impose a limit that would actually limit anything because they will not to any degree control the activities of the body but will merely control the Treasury. And just in case there is any kind of gap in the total discretion that we shall allow ourselves, just make sure as well that we can give PUK however many billions we want up front without any control whatever." If that is what happened, it is a symptom of an attitude to our proceedings in Committee and on Report that is very distressing.

Another possible interpretation, I admit, is simply that there was undue haste. It is possible—it may even be plausible—that the problem with the new clause was brought about by undue haste. The whole of the Bill has been afflicted by the insertion of an extraneous foreign body. In the first place, there is no reason for clauses 16 and 17 being in the Bill; they belong in quite another Bill—a serious Bill dealing with the serious matters concerned—and got into this Bill, where they now sit, by the mysterious processes of Cabinet committees and the like. The Government have been in undue haste to get the whole of the rest of the Bill, which deserved prolonged consideration, through because they are so desperate to get clauses 16 and 17 through. That, at least, is what we have been told.

If the result of that is that, through honest error, new clause 7 has been introduced in its present form—with a limit that is not a limit and does not address the problem—the situation is much less distressing. There is the possibility of the Government's bringing forward on slightly more mature reflection—for which I have no doubt their lordships will give them ample opportunity, because I hope that another place will reject the new clause as it stands—a proper new clause that provides the limit that we seek. Then we can ditch all the ghastly conspiracy theories and recognise that the problem was simply one of undue haste.

Why this haste? I know that this is a matter of Government policy, but there are many Government policies. It does not seem to me to be a matter of life or death whether these provisions are passed tomorrow or the day after. I cannot see that there is such a rush. This is not controversial—so in principle it will not be got rid of by a future Government. We all accept in principle that the PFI is an excellent thing.

In constructing the new clause, therefore, Ministers should have had in mind the necessity for something with consensus behind it—something that provided a robust solution in the long run for a policy that hon. Members on both sides of the House support. The new clause certainly does not do that in respect of control.

Mr. Edward Davey: Has the hon. Gentleman considered two other possible reasons why the Government have not adopted the no-bail-out solution to their problems? One may be that they are concerned that it would set a precedent that could be applied to other public corporations or corporations in the public sector in which they have an interest. The other is that the Treasury is so used to exercising absolute power that it does not believe that, if a no-bail-out clause were written into the constitution of such a body, Parliament would not, because it is sovereign, simply override it.

If the hon. Gentleman agrees with that second possible answer to the question of why the Treasury did not go down that route, does he not think that that demonstrates the dinosaur attitude in the Treasury?

Mr. Letwin: I do not think that the first explanation can be right. If, in this instance, the Treasury were

[Mr. Letwin]

concerned about the maintaining of control or power—as the hon. Gentleman knows, we will allege that later, but in respect of other matters—it would surely have introduced provision for a genuine control, phrased, perhaps, as "a limit on the total liabilities" that could be incurred by the body. The fact that it neither did that nor introduced a no-bail-out clause suggests that the Treasury was not in control mode on this occasion.

The hon. Gentleman suggested a second possibility: that the Treasury, or the draftsmen—or, indeed, Ministers—did not wish to create a precedent. I am well aware that Whitehall is particularly keen not to create precedents. Government are not like other bodies; they are often afflicted by precedent, and often take steps that they do not consider right in particular cases because they are influenced by the argument that they have done the same in other cases. They may have acted without due heed.

I accept that that is frequently a powerful argument, and it is possible that the desire not to create a precedent is one of the causes—or even the cause—of the opposition to a no-bail-out clause; but, if that were the explanation, it would be irrational. I see no reason for the Treasury to object to such a clause becoming a widespread precedent: it is the bail-out clauses that create the precedent to which, on a rational basis, the Treasury should object. The idea of a range of bodies that are somehow associated with the state, but against which no claim ought to be made entailing a claim on the state and in respect of which no faith and credit are given by the state, is surely attractive to the Treasury. It might not be attractive to a Department wanting to achieve a particular result in particular circumstances, but I should have thought that it would be highly attractive to the Treasury.

I cannot think that that is the explanation; certainly, I hardly ever accuse Her Majesty's Treasury of being irrational. I think that the explanation is either undue haste, or a mild conspiracy. I hope that the Minister will tell us that it is a case of undue haste: that would give us an opportunity to reverse the position, and improve on new clause 7.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) and other PAC members have tabled an amendment dealing with the important question of the scope of action of the Comptroller and Auditor General—a theme that we shall traverse in awesome detail when we discuss the general issue of the CAG's scope of action in regard to non-departmental public bodies, which we debated at length in Committee.

The amendment presents us with an interesting example. My right hon. Friend rightly corrected me when I made the improper assertion that the Government did not want the PAC, the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General to be involved. He corrected me because he had information that I should have possessed, but did not. It appears that after the Minister had said in Committee that she would not have the Comptroller and Auditor General anywhere near this stuff—I parody slightly—her esteemed colleague the Chief Secretary to the Treasury went to the PAC and said that, as a matter of fact, the Comptroller and Auditor General would not just be somewhere near but would be allowed to audit the body.

That proposition, which we welcome, led to this question: why is the PAC amendment—amendment No. 8, if I recall correctly—necessary?

Mr. David Davis: I fear that, for the second time today, a slight misapprehension has arisen. The amendment requires access, not audit rights: that is a milder requirement. Audit rights would not be possible, because the organisation would be constituted as a company, and it is not currently possible for the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit companies. The amendment asks for access, so that Parliament can know that its money has been spent properly.

6.45 pm

Mr. Letwin: My right hon. Friend is right to correct me. I slipped into talking of audit when I should have talked of access, which is one of the two limbs of what the PAC seeks to impose on a wider scale. That is all that is sought in this instance—but this question remains: why is it necessary to table an amendment to put in statute what we now discover that the Chief Secretary wants to do in any event? I invited both my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton to speculate about that, but I am not yet satisfied that we have got to the bottom of the matter.

The Economic Secretary had ample opportunity to intervene during that discussion, and, if she catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, she will have another opportunity to explain. I am, of course, prepared to be corrected if my speculations prove to be wrong; but I am bound to say that it is a rum situation when a Government have an avowed intent to do something that they have an open statutory opportunity to do without any delay or difficulty, and do not do it.

Normally, when Ministers do not want to enact proposals, they say that they have no time in which to legislate, but if the Economic Secretary said that this evening, it would be a slightly weak excuse, because here we are, legislating. There cannot be a drafting difficulty, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden has behind him just about the largest group of drafting assistants available to any living human being, in the shape of the National Audit Office. In any case, the draft is blissfully pellucid.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton speculated that it might again be a matter of precedent—that the Treasury wanted to avoid setting a precedent by giving the PAC access to a body such as this. But why should it want to avoid setting such a precedent? If the Chief Secretary has decided that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have access to one body, it presumably follows that the same should apply to other such bodies. I see no logic that should lead to one conclusion without leading to the other.

Mr. Edward Davey: I tend to agree that the logic suggests that it should be possible for all such bodies to be scrutinised by the NAO. However, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport recently made it clear that the Government were not willing to allow the NAO properly to scrutinise the BBC, which is a not dissimilar body. Surely the Government are not following the logic of the Chief Secretary in any respect in regard to corporations such as this.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to agree with him—and, indeed, I do, in the case of the BBC.

I wish that we could debate that subject, but you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, ruled that the amendment concerned should not be selected.

There may be deep concern about the possibility of extension to bodies such as the BBC. The fact is, however, that if the Chief Secretary thinks that he can avoid having that precedent argued against him when he has conceded the precedent in this instance, he is much mistaken. I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden and his pack of hounds from both sides of the House in the PAC will assail the Chief Secretary daily with points about the precedent that he has set, and rightly too.

The Chief Secretary has set the precedent anyway, and I cannot for the life of me see why he should make it worse for his own cause—his own bad cause, in this instance—by incorporating in legislation a provision that will have the effect that he says he wants in any event. The only people he could possibly limit are a future Government, and that will not involve him. He cannot feel that, having said something to the PAC—that awesome and solemn body—he can go back on it. Putting the provision in statute would involve no loss to him.

I apologise for coming up repeatedly with the same febrile explanations, but I am bound to say yet again that I consider this to be a case of undue haste. I think that the Government feel that the PAC is being a frightful nuisance. They are willing to tell the PAC that they are going to do things and then, no doubt, to do them. When the Chief Secretary—a thoroughly reasonable man—is in front of the PAC, he finds himself compelled to make thoroughly reasonable utterances. When the Government talk to the draftsmen, however, their basic instruction is "Press ahead. Delay not. Do not tarry. Do not instil in the Bill anything that could lead to further doubt or hesitation. We want the thing out quickly. If the PAC presents an amendment that is not drafted quite correctly we might find that it would have to be revised later. There might have to be Government amendments; the Lords might be given more of an opportunity to delay. No, keep it out: we will give the assurance, and the PAC will go home to bed."

The presence of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden proves that the PAC has not gone to bed, and is not going to. If this is a matter of undue haste, it is also a matter of hastening slowly. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury would do better to slow down, to incorporate my right hon. Friend's amendment and to proceed deliberately to consider applying the access rights to a wider range of non-departmental public bodies, as should, indeed, happen.

I turn to the next element of the debate on this important Bill. I admit that it is an odd topic in the context of the Bill. It is the broad range of questions about the forethought—or rather, I regret to say, the lack of forethought—that the Government have displayed on the purpose of the entity or, to use the phrase that my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) used, the bank. May I say in passing that I genuinely do not know whether it is a bank. As there is no reference to the Securities and Futures Authority, I take it that it is not a bank. If it is not, what it is I do not know. I suspect that my hon. Friend was trying to say that none of us has the foggiest clue exactly what the item is. It would be helpful if someone told us.

Mr. Fallon: I hope that my hon. Friend is not suggesting that he does not know what this body is. He is supposed to know what it is. Does he agree that, if it has a lending and an investment function, it will be a bank?

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend raises an interesting question—the sort of question that is much debated in the City, when it has time to debate things, which is not often: whether an investment bank is a bank, particularly when it is not a licensed deposit taker. The body is not a licensed deposit taker, and it may or may not be an investment bank. I am not clear whether it has the capacity even to be funded as an investment bank is funded, or to gear itself up as an investment bank does. The honest truth is that no one the length and breadth of Whitehall has the foggiest clue what the answers to those questions are.

My hon. Friend is slightly unfair in saying that I should know. It is not possible to know the nature of something that has been created by people who do not know what it is.

Mr. Fallon: May I clarify? I was not implying that my hon. Friend should know something because he should know it. I was implying that, because of his background and great expertise, if anyone in the House could judge what it is, it would surely be him. That is why we look forward to him throwing further light on that particular vehicle.

Mr. Letwin: I am charmed and delighted that my hon. Friend, who is a much greater expert in these matters than I am, thinks that I have some expertise on what is a bank and what is not, but my problem is that I do not even know what this body does in the first place. Even if I knew that it was to be a bank, as my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs has abundantly and eloquently pointed out, we do not know whether it will engage in investments. We do not know at which stage in the process it will intervene, or is meant to intervene.

There is a possible explanation, which is roughly the one that Ministers, in certain moods, have given of the entity: it is a sort of consultancy or facilitator. Another possible explanation arises from reading the Bill, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks has done, with all his customary acuity: it looks very much like a bank. If something is made to look in statute very much like a bank and, in descriptions of it by those who founded it, very much like a consultancy, we are left with the question: what is it? Does anyone know what it is? My answer to those questions is that I do not know and no one else knows.

Mr. Fallon: Does my hon. Friend at least accept that, if the body—let us call it a body—takes an investment under subsection (4)(c), it will not be a consultancy?

Mr. Letwin: I feel that we are going to intrude on your good will in a moment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but there are consultancies that take investments. Every time a consultancy takes a success fee, it takes a kind of

[Mr. Letwin]

investment. I suppose that the bank or consultancy—whichever it may be—might take success fees, call them investments and thereby satisfy the terms of the Bill, yet might be in no sense a bank.

If the body is designed to deal with what, in the hideous jargon, is called the "upstream" bit of the activity—which means consultancy, helping a project off the ground—it could agree, for example, to offer its services for equity, which is a sort of success fee and investment but not a banking activity. However, if it is intended, as my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs suspects, to use the clause 16(1)(a) loophole to spend a large sum of money from the Government and, no doubt, from the private sector to finance projects in which, in a conflict of interest, the body has previously engaged as an adviser, it verily is a bank making proper investments, but is not the item that Ministers have described in their various statements. I repeat: I genuinely do not believe that we have the slightest idea what the body is. What is much more worrying is that I do not believe that Ministers have the slightest idea what it is.

I suspect that the account that Ministers would give, if they were being honest and at the same time as transparent as possible, is that it is an advantage not quite to have decided what the body is because they want to leave a little flexibility—they do not quite know how it will operate and there is an experiment going on. We could have some sympathy with that proposition, except that statutes are not the places in which to base experiments. Experiments are much better done on an administrative basis, under all the control that that allows. Statutes are much more applicable to things about which one has a pretty clear idea, so that the statute clearly describes the controls and the nature of that which it sets up.

I would have thought that that was a reasonable principle of legislation. I do not think that Ministers have followed it. I assume that they are being straightforward; I do not think that they are trying to pull a fast one on us. If they are being straightforward, they are setting up the basis for a widespread, over-hasty experiment without a clear idea of where they are going.

It is not really on those matters that I wanted to concentrate in relation to new clause 7. Above all, I wanted to draw out the impact of the new clause and of how it relates to clause 16 on our understanding of matters that are to come before us later. I think that the impact is profound and that I have at last understood how deep the problem with clauses 16 and 17 is in the context of the rest of the Bill—and hence how deep the problem with new clause 7 is.

It is not just that we do not know what the body is, which might be regarded as an ontological problem that Parliament does not need to concern itself with. There is a much more practical problem: we have not the foggiest clue how it will be accounted for.

I admit to being a simple man when it comes to such matters, but the Bill is entitled Government Resources and Accounts Bill. It is meant to be the Bill in which the Government set up a system of accounts in which things will be accounted for—

Mr. Flight: Properly.

Mr. Letwin: Properly, as my hon. Friend helpfully says from a sedentary position. That is the whole purpose of the rest of the Bill. Clauses 16 and 17 are in the Bill, I admit, by sleight of hand, but they are there. They should display, if any provision should, the principles of proper accounting that are meant to be enunciated in the rest of the Bill. It will be a sad day for accounting if this is meant to be a sparkling example of clarity about how something should be accounted for.

Despite repeated entreaties about these matters in Committee, as far as I can see, new clause 7 contains not a single mention of the accounting treatment of that mysterious body, whose nature we have already owned we cannot discern. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks has pointed out repeatedly, if we look at new clause 7 and clause 16, to which it refers, it may be that the body will incur considerable liabilities in respect of guarantees, loans and non-equity investments. How will those be accounted for?

The body may have investment assets. We may be told by Ministers that that is not the intention, but I repeat: that is what is provided for in the Bill and, by implication, in new clause 7. The very first paragraph of the register of assets, which underlies the whole of the Bill, states:

> The National Asset Register covers all central Government departments together with their executive agencies (including trading funds).

7 pm

Is Partnerships UK a trading fund? We are back to the ontological question. I do not know whether it is a trading fund, but I suspect that it is not. I may be wrong about that, and am open to correction. Is it an Executive agency? I do not think that it is. I may be wrong, and am more than happy to be corrected on that point, too. However, I am convinced that it is not a central Government Department, so its assets will not be in the National Asset Register.

Therefore, the first point about the body's accounting is that the asset side of its balance sheet will not be there—it is Macavity; it is gone; it has disappeared. It has, in fact, not even appeared. It is pretty bad news, is it not, to discover not only that a body being established by the Government Resources and Accounts Bill will be exempt from the access of the Comptroller and Auditor General, but that the body's whole purpose will be entirely mysterious and its assets will not be accounted for? That is genuinely self-parodic.

The situation is much worse on the liabilities side. In what, I have to admit, is one of the most remarkable and brilliant pieces of apparent clarification ever offered by a Minister to a Standing Committee member, the Economic Secretary has cast a profound veil of obscurity over the issue of liabilities. In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs raised the pertinent issue that I am raising now in relation to new clause 27. He asked how the liabilities, and particularly the guarantees, that the body might give, and that might be given to the body by the Government, would be accounted for.

On 10 February, the Economic Secretary replied at some length to my hon. Friend in a letter. Although I would be surprised if it were the intention that anyone

should be able to understand what she said to him in that letter, I am certainly assured that no Opposition Member in the Chamber has the slightest understanding of it. She said:

> Firstly, you asked about the procedure for reporting guarantees and whether any guarantees given to PUK will appear in Government accounts or in a note to them. I can assure you that Parliamentary reporting arrangements in respect of contingent liabilities—which includes those arising from guarantees—will not change under the GRA Bill.

Therefore, the first thing that we are told is not the answer, but that nothing will change. As we did not know what the situation was in the first place, that is not helpful. Nevertheless, the Economic Secretary went on to say:

> As I said in Committee, there is no intention to hide guarantees. The arrangements for reporting guarantees are set out in section 26.3.13 of—

at this moment in reading the letter, one hopes to hear the "Resource Accounting Manual", which is the document that has been produced in line with the Bill, but no. The letter says that the arrangements

> are set out in section 26.3.13 of Government Accounting,

which I take it is to be superseded, or at least outdated, by the very item that underlies the Bill that we are discussing.

The letter continues:

> "In respect of PUK this would mean—

or that item that was no longer relevant would mean—

> that a statement would be laid before both Houses of Parliament in the event that a guarantee were given. Such a statement would indicate that the liability would be charged to the Consolidated Fund. Any guarantee provided would appear, like other contingent liabilities, in the Supplementary Statements to the Consolidated Fund and National Loans Fund Accounts.

We have before us two of the most distinguished members of the Government, but I venture to prophesy that they have never seen, let alone read or studied, the supplementary statements to the consolidated fund and national loans fund accounts. I suspect that there is not an hon. Member who has the slightest idea which guarantees are or are not contingent liabilities recorded in those supplementary statements.

I may be wrong about that. Perhaps, all of a sudden, the Financial Secretary and the Economic Secretary will leap up and tell me the exact figure for the contingent liabilities recorded in the supplementary statements to the consolidated fund and national loans fund accounts. I doubt it, however, not only because those are among the most profoundly mysterious documents that have ever been produced by Whitehall, but because they are intended to be so.

Mr. Edward Davey: Is not the hon. Gentleman simply criticising the whole Supply procedure? Such documents exist, and they are very important documents that Ministers and the House should examine. The fact that the House does not properly examine the Government's estimates is the real reason why those documents do not receive the attention that they should receive.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is right. At a more serious level, I am saying the same. He says the same in other amendments that we shall discuss later, and with which we profoundly agree. There is a massive issue here that goes way beyond the scope of new clause 7, and we shall discuss it later in our proceedings. Perhaps the most interesting development in Committee was that we touched on the issue, when some of us began to understand the profound lack of parliamentary scrutiny that occurs because of the intense opacity of the arrangements that have been constructed for the control of genuine public liabilities.

I am making the much narrower point that the Economic Secretary's letter was a masterpiece of opacity, the purpose of which was to tell us about an outdated system, which itself was obscure, for making a contingent liability disappear. The letter said nothing about how contingent liabilities will be accounted for in the system that the Bill—this is the supreme irony—establishes. One might have thought that that would be relevant to the question of how far, in the Bill, the liabilities from the new body to the Government and from other entities to the new body will be accounted for. That, of course, takes us straight to the "Resource Accounting Manual".

The extraordinary thing is that when we go to the manual, we discover nothing more, or at any rate nothing more that is in any way clear. The point is very pertinent to the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks expressed about the nature of the beast.

In paragraph 4.7.6 of the "Resource Accounting Manual", we are told:

> separate disclosure of information about a particular contingency need not be made if that information has a protective marking.

There are, therefore, certain types of information that have a "protective marking", about which not even a statement on contingent liability needs to be made. As I cannot understand paragraph 12.1.23, I do not know what it is to have had a protective marking or what qualifies as having a protective marking. I understand from paragraph 12.1.23 that the description of protective markings is given in the "Manual of Protective Security: Framework and Guide", issued by the Cabinet Office. I spent a while with that document, which, for all I know, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden is the author of or a guru on. However, I have to admit that my paltry intellect was quite incapable of deciphering the rules for protective marking.

Mr. Davey: In Committee, did not the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden describe protective markings as sophisticated and not for National Audit Office eyes?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman may have a valid point. However, let me pass on from all of that.

Let us assume for a moment that the protective marking is not an issue, and simply ask ourselves whether the contingent liabilities that we are discussing will have to be disclosed. The answer is that we do not know, because we do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks was right about the nature of the beast.

If, broadly, Partnerships UK will give financial guarantees—which are almost certain to be called if the risks that they are covering materialise—and if the chances of those risks materialising are high, according to the "Resource Accounting Manual", it will be necessary to disclose those contingent liabilities, although they will remain simply a disclosed item and not on the Government's balance sheet. Conversely, if the body will not give those types of guarantees, but something quite different, it is unclear whether those will have to be listed as contingent liabilities.

[Mr. Letwin]

The long and the short of it is that on neither the asset side nor the liability side of the balance sheet do we have the slightest idea—nor, if we are to judge by what Ministers have said in new clause 7 and in the Bill, do Ministers have the slightest idea—how the body that Ministers are creating will be accounted for. That is in the realms of self-parody.

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is important to say first that Partnerships UK will fill a unique role. The Government make no apologies for that. There will be nothing to equal it in the private sector to address the weaknesses in the public sector, particularly in skills and commercial experience. I take nothing away from the good quality of management that we have in various areas of the public sector, which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) celebrated. PUK's role will be that of co-venturer, strengthening the public sector client in private finance initiative and public-private partnership transactions. PUK will help the public sector to raise its game, as the Treasury taskforce has done to date. It will enable the public sector to become a more effective client. That should mean more opportunities for everyone, more deals, lower costs and greater clarity and speed in PFI and other PPP deals. PUK will not only improve the deal flow in existing PFI sectors, but open up new sectors and develop new models of public-private co-operation.

The Opposition amendments would do nothing to further those aims. There could be a reason for that. They may not be intended to help us to pursue those aims, but perhaps that is uncharitable. I am a little confused by the debate, because some hon. Members seem to be experiencing extremely bizarre problems. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) believes that the relevant clauses are tucked away. I am not sure how a clause can be tucked away in a Bill. I await elucidation.

If we accepted the amendments, PUK would be unnecessarily restricted. Its role should be to adapt to fit the needs of particular public sector bodies and projects. Under the amendments, PUK could help to negotiate arrangements for a PPP project with Whitehall Departments, but not, for example, with NHS trusts or non-departmental public bodies. I am not sure why Opposition Members have made that distinction and why they appear to want to leave out NHS trusts and some NDPBs. In addition, PUK would not be able to participate in PPP deals as a co-developer with public bodies, as we envisage that it should. It must have the freedom to develop in a changing PPP market if it is to build on our reforms to the PFI process and the current success of the taskforce.

Opposition Members have expressed concerns that the body will have an unfair advantage because of limitless funding from the Government purse. That is not the case. I shall deal with some of the specific points that have been raised. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs raised what he saw as a conflict between making money and helping the public sector. PUK will act as a co-venturer and co-developer of projects. Its role will be structured to maximise the overlap of interests with the public sector. There will also be appropriate checks and balances in the corresponding structure to ensure that PUK works in the public interest.

There is no question of PUK competing unfairly. It is not a bank or a general adviser. Opposition Members spent a long time speculating on whether it was a bank and entertained themselves greatly on the subject. That entertainment was not universally experienced. Apparently, they had not listened to a word that was said in Standing Committee. In a brief contribution on 20 January, I said:

> Partnerships UK will not operate as a bank. It must retain the flexibility to generate new business.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 266.]

I could not have given a clearer statement of the fact that we do not view it as a bank. It will not invest or pick winners or losers. Its core business will be to make the public sector a better procurer and to make the PFI work better.

7.15 pm

Mr. Letwin: I entirely accept that the hon. Lady said the words that she has quoted from column 266, which I have before me. I mentioned that she had said that. Does she accept that new clause 7 wholly fails to put those principles into the Bill?

Miss Johnson: No, I do not accept that. PUK has a distinct role that will address the skill deficit in the public sector. I thought that Conservative Members appreciated the work of the Treasury taskforce and recognised that someone needed to fulfil that role. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs asked why we did not continue with the Treasury taskforce. Private finance needs private sector skills. Private sector people cannot be kept in the public sector for ever. It is likely that in the longer term they would go native or leave. The only way to sustain private sector deal-doing expertise over the longer term for the benefit of the public sector is in a PPP classified to the private sector, which can offer appropriate rewards and disciplines. If we were to carry on with the Treasury taskforce, we would need to expand it. That is another point that Opposition Members have not considered.

Departments will choose whether to use PUK. We are consulting public bodies during the business planning on PUK. Reaction from them and from the City has been favourable. A question was raised about the role of the Office of Government Commerce. The OGC, PUK and the Treasury will work together. We made that clear when we published the Gershon and Bates reviews.

PUK will not be out cherry-picking. Because it is a private sector organisation with a clear public sector mission, its focus will be on those parts of the public sector that currently find it hard to engage in PFI projects. It should result in additional business. Like its predecessor, the taskforce, PUK will have selection criteria for the deals that it chooses and will concentrate on difficult, complex and awkward projects where it can add most value. The public sector will use PUK on a voluntary basis when it believes that it can add most value.

The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) asked whether PUK was a state investment bank. As I have said, it will not operate as a bank and it will not be state-owned. Its core business will be to make the public sector a better purchaser. It will be a private sector body and will not invest on behalf of the Government.

There has been considerable discussion about expenditure under clause 16(1)(a). That issue was initially raised by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and

Howden (Mr. Davis). That paragraph relates to the establishment of Partnerships UK. Opposition Members have suggested that large sums—I believe that there was a mention of dowries—could be provided to PUK. I assure hon. Members that that is certainly not the case. Such sums would relate to on-going activities and would be covered by clause 16(1)(b) and subject to the limit. That is a good reason for introducing a specific limit, which Opposition Members have accepted in principle.

Mr. Flight: I specifically asked what the intended establishment costs were.

Miss Johnson: I hesitate to put a figure on that, but we are talking about less than £10 million. I think that we will probably come in under that maximum, but I hesitate to specify a figure, because only when the body is established can we be clear about the cost. We are certainly not talking about sums anything like the overall figure of £400 million or to any figures that might be mentioned in relation to dowries.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady who has been very good about giving way. Would she consider the possibility of including those costs within the £400 million so that the whole issue can be laid to rest?

Miss Johnson: I am happy to take that idea away and think about it, but I can give the hon. Gentleman no specific assurances.

Mr. David Davis: I support my hon. Friend's suggestion. I raised the matter in the first instance because the phrasing of the Bill is not very clear. I did not believe that the Government had another agenda; it seemed to me that the phrasing in the Bill ought to be clear. I would not object if those costs were included within the limit and the limit was increased by £50 million, or whatever figure was appropriate. That would be a sensible move.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden for those suggestions. I am particularly grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for clarifying his response. I shall give the matter further consideration, but I can give no specific assurances. It is important to emphasise, however, that our intention is no different from what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. He is concerned that the provision is not sufficiently clear. Parliamentary draftsmen and my advisers clearly believe that it is, but the point has been debated this evening.

In regard to the £400 million, I feel that I should not have listened to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs. Having virtually taken up the suggestion that he made in Standing Committee, I sat here this evening and listened to complaints from some Conservative Members—not the hon. Gentleman—that any figure had been included in the provision. Others complained that the figure had been set at £400 million. However, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said in Committee that at one stage the Government

> said that the figure should be taken seriously. A maximum of £500 million should be more than sufficient to finance whatever substantial portfolio of start-up feasibility studies may be necessary in the public and local authority sectors.

We agreed with him, but we thought that £500 million was a little too much and that we should look at a lower figure. We have come up with £400 million, which I believe is the right ballpark figure because it provides maximum benefit at minimum cost. It will still allow the new company some flexibility.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but perhaps she should take another look at column 256. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs said:

> £500 million should be more than sufficient to finance whatever substantial portfolio of start-up feasibility studies may be necessary . . .

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) then said:

> It will be useful to draw attention to the potentially unlimited expenditure in which the new body could engage.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 256.]

There were serious signals to the Minister that we needed an overall limit on the financing of the body and its expenditure.

Miss Johnson: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, however there has been a certain lack of charitableness in the Opposition's response to our picking up the exact drift of the intentions of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs and his hon. Friends in Committee.

As I have said, we have no objections in principle to imposing that limit, and within the limit we shall ensure that our commitments are the minimum necessary to enable the successful launch and development of PUK. At the same time we shall make sure that they are on terms that represent a sensible investment for the public sector.

Mr. Fallon: I am grateful to the Minister who is being extremely kind in giving way. I know that she is trying to answer a number of points, but if she is leaving the £400 million limit, will she say for how long it is likely to apply? Will it be one year or five years? Will she explain why it is extendable only by order?

Miss Johnson: I shall come to that in just a moment. First, let me turn to Opposition amendment No. 16.

Mr. David Davis: I could have raised this matter on a point of order. The Minister describes amendment No. 16 as an Opposition amendment, but the amendment is in my name, that of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) and that of the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel). It reflects the Public Accounts Committee report on the matter.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that clarification. Of course I am aware of which right hon. and hon. Gentlemen have put their names to the amendment. However, it is not a Government amendment. Perhaps I should refer to it as the Public Accounts Committee amendment. It seeks to open PUK's accounts to scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General. As I said in Committee, PUK will be a risk-taking private sector body. It will have a majority of private sector investors who will expect a return on their investment. PUK will, of necessity, need to act commercially to raise finance and make a success of its business. That is a job for a Companies Act auditor appointed in the normal way for private companies.

[Miss Johnson]

There has been some question as to the accountability for PFI and PPP projects which will, as now, remain with Whitehall Departments and other public sector bodies that commission them. The National Audit Office has already reported on a considerable number of private finance schemes. In addition, last July the Treasury issued guidance on the standardisation of private finance contracts which make it clear that PFI contracts should include an appropriate clause which will ensure appropriate NAO access. So I do not believe that there should be a problem with the NAO securing the access that it needs to PFI projects, although the matter has been raised several times during the debate.

Any Government investment in Partnerships UK under the provisions of the Bill will come out of voted money, and so will be covered by appropriation, or soon by the resource accounts, which are also audited by the NAO. It is no different from other payments to the private sector by various Government Departments, so I do not believe that the Comptroller and Auditor General does not have the access that he requires to do his job effectively.

I now turn to some other points that were made in the debate. I start with some more specific comments on the interest of the taxpayer in relation to the accounting in whole of Government accounts to which the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden referred in his opening remarks.

PUK will be accounted for in accordance with the guidance on the PFI schemes which has been reviewed by both the Accounting Standards Board and the Financial Reporting Advisory Board and has been incorporated in the "Resource Accounting Manual". In terms of accounting mechanisms it is fully covered and we have set out very clearly the way in which we intend it to be treated. It is difficult to believe that there should be any problem with that.

Mr. Letwin: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Johnson: I should make some progress as we have spent a considerable time on this motion.

Any financial provision to PUK will be out of voted money. As I said, the NAO can audit those sums. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has made clear, as a private company in a commercial environment, it would be entirely appropriate for PUK to have commercial audit arrangements. That means that the NAO should not have unfettered access to PUK's accounts. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman accepts that.

Mr. David Davis: Although I do not expect a response from the Minister, I want to put on record that her judgment of what is the appropriate access for the National Audit Office is clearly different from that of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Amendment No. 16 was drafted by the National Audit Office on the basis of the Comptroller and Auditor General's judgment of what he needs. His judgment is obviously different from that of the Government.

7.30 pm

Miss Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman said that he did not expect a response, so I shall take up that generous offer and not give one.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton commented on the objectives for managers and the objective of making the public sector more efficient. He should remember that the Office of Government Commerce is being set up to find £1 billion in savings through better procurement.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) is not in the Chamber, but he asked about the limit of expenditure. I believe that I have answered that point. That limit was never the purpose of new clause 7, so he must have been confused when he asked his question.

The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) spoke about EU public procurement rules. Policy advice to Ministers is confidential, as the hon. Gentleman—who is a former special adviser to the Treasury—should know, but the Government, of course, will adhere to those rules.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs asked about the affirmative resolution procedure in the House. I explained that any changes to the limit would be subject to that procedure. I do not understand what the problem is with that. If the Government were to consider any changes to the limits, there would have to be a debate in the House. At present, the limits are set at specific sums, rather than being inflation-proofed. I think that that also covers the point raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who is also absent from the Chamber.

In conclusion, the process of procuring a PFI project under the European procurement arrangements will be just as it is now, but more tightly managed. There is no question that PUK's return, whether as a royalty or an equity, will affect the selection of the preferred bidder. Arrangements will be put in place so that that will be impossible. All bidders will make bids on the basis of the same information.

As to where the guarantees appear in the accounting, I can tell the House that Government accounting rules apply to the guarantees for PUK in exactly the same way as they do for any other body. As I said in my letter—which I am delighted has been much pored over—all the relevant detail will appear in supplementary statements. Nothing will be hidden—a possibility that has exercised Opposition Members.

I commend new clause 7, and the associated Government amendments, to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 1

INDEPENDENT BODY

'.—(1) The Treasury shall by order designate an Independent Body, which shall have the functions assigned to it in this Act.

(2) The Independent Body shall be either—

(a) an existing body serving the accounting profession in the UK; or

(b) an existing international body serving the accountancy profession; or

(c) a new body, established for the purpose, whose members are appointed solely upon the basis of their expertise in

accounting practices and who are not subject to dismissal by the Treasury or by any Minister.'.—*[Mr. Letwin.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Letwin: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 1, in clause 5, page 2, line 41, leave out "the Treasury" and insert "the Independent Body".

No. 2, in page 3, line 1, leave out "the Treasury" and insert "the Independent Body".

No. 3, in clause 9, page 5, line 7, leave out "the Treasury" and insert "the Independent Body".

No. 4, in clause 10, page 5, line 15, leave out "the Treasury" and insert "the Independent Body".

No. 5, in page 5, line 17, leave out "the Treasury" and insert "the Independent Body".

Mr. Letwin: After the hors d'oeuvre of the previous debate, we now come to the main meal, the central feature of all our arguments over the Bill so far. New clause 1 has been moved, in the irenic spirit of compromise, to make the Government change their mind. We have been joined in that endeavour by Liberal Democrat Members. I hope that we shall garner support also from those members of the Public Accounts Committee who are present. If the Government do not accept the new clause, I am confident that, in due course, we shall garner support from many in another place, from all parties.

When the Economic Secretary studies new clause 1, she will see that it has gone a long way to accommodate the valid points that she made in Committee. I hope that she will accept it. If she does not, I fear that the Government will be in the bizarre position of having to employ the Parliament Acts to force through a measure to achieve stable and transparent Government accounting that should be based on consensus.

The new clause has attracted cross-party support in both Houses of Parliament. All hon. Members, of all parties, agree that transparent resource accounting should be implemented as quickly as possible, so it would be extraordinary if the Government had to railroad through the Bill as drafted because they were unwilling to accept an amendment that has commanded such cross-party support.

Conservative Members, in conjunction with Liberal Democrat Members and members of the Public Accounts Committee, first signalled our concern about the matter addressed by new clause 1 on Second Reading. The Economic Secretary will know that we made very clear our unease that the Bill provides that the Treasury, rather than some independent body, should determine the definitions governing all the accounts set up by the Bill.

Our attempt to draw attention to that matter on Second Reading can be found at column 581 of *Hansard* of 6 December. In repeated debates, we tried to draw the attention of the Standing Committee to the need for an independent body. At that time, we suggested a particular form for that body, to which we remain marginally attached. It is the form of independent body specified in new clause 1(2)(c), to which I shall turn in a moment.

However, our main purpose in all the debates on this matter, on Second Reading and in Committee, was not to establish some deep-seated preference for the form of independent body that we were recommending—an independently formed national accounts commission. Our purpose, rather, was to bring to Ministers' attention the inherent conflict of interest in the public policy sense between a Government who are seeking, inevitably, to satisfy an electorate and are bound to present themselves, quite legitimately, in the best light possible, and their need under the Bill as drafted—without new clause 1—to be the monitor of the accounting standards against which their performance as a Government will, in part, be judged. We argued with irrefutable logic that there was a public policy conflict of interest for the Government to set the standards, accounting for themselves, according to their own standards, when they had the proper, democratic incentive to present themselves in the most favourable light.

I say that our logic was irrefutable because I had the opportunity, in preparation for this stage of our debate, to read the Committee proceedings in which that point came up day after day. I do not think that the Economic Secretary can deny that there was an occasion on which she even took that argument head on. She said many things; she said some true things. Yet she never said anything that suggested that she had an argument against the fundamental proposition—shared, as I repeat, between my right hon. and hon. Friends, Liberal Democrat Members and members of the Public Accounts Committee—that there was a conflict of interest.

Perhaps tonight we will, for the first time, hear a genuinely reasoned argument from the hon. Lady that refutes our fundamental proposition. Perhaps we will hear why the conflict of interest that we see does not exist, but I doubt it. I do not think that such an argument can exist, because our fundamental proposition is unambiguously true. However, I am prepared to be proved wrong on that point.

If there is no argument against that proposition, and if there is a conflict of interest, how is it best addressed and will addressing it carry a penalty greater than any benefit to be derived? The Economic Secretary did not make that argument in Committee either. She did not say that she accepted that there was a conflict of interest and that that was a problem about working in a democracy. She did not say that she accepted that there was a deficiency in the proposals, whose cost in public policy terms would outweigh the advantage of addressing the conflict of interest. That would have been a reasonable structure for an argument. I do not feel so confident that we could have defeated it as I do that we could defeat any argument purporting to show that there was no conflict of interest. However, as I say, the Economic Secretary never put that argument either. I do not know what her argument would be; perhaps we will hear it tonight. I hope that if she refuses to accept new clause 1 tonight, we will hear her reasons. It would be by far the most powerful way in which she could justify such an attitude.

I doubt whether we will hear that argument tonight, because if it can be heard tonight, it could have been heard in Committee. If there is an identified cost in public policy terms to addressing this conflict of interest, it surely would have been identified in the many months that have passed while the Government have been considering these matters.

[Mr. Letwin]

Resource accounting is not, after all, a newborn babe. It was first conceived four or five years ago. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) knows better than I when the previous Government first began to discuss it.

Mr. David Davis: Six years.

Mr. Letwin: My right hon. Friend says six years, from a sedentary position. I should have thought that in six years, whatever the public policy cost of addressing this conflict of interest, it would have been identified. If it had been identified, given the merciless grilling that, to my shame, we gave the Economic Secretary in Committee, I think that she would have told us what that cost was and would have put her argument in those terms.

I think that the Economic Secretary will probably not tell us this evening that there is no conflict of interest of the kind that we assert, or that there is one but the cost of addressing it is too great. I do not think that we shall hear either argument. What, then, could be the hon. Lady's argument for not addressing the problem addressed in new clause 1?

Mr. Edward Davey: May I caution the hon. Gentleman not to be too hard on the Minister? She said in Committee to the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams):

> I am promising to continue to think about the matter. . .—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 11 January 2000; c. 65.]

Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will reflect on that. Does he think that the Minister, having promised to continue to think about the matter, is in a position not to advance arguments against new clause 1 but to accept it?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman has spotted something which, in my perusal of the Committee proceedings, I overlooked. I am delighted that he did not. As the Minister promised to think about this, I may well be proved wrong and she will have thought sufficiently either to accept the compromise or to come up with one of the two arguments that I described. I remain slightly sceptical about the latter possibility. I attach my hopes to the former possibility—that the Minister has thought sufficiently to accept the compromise in new clause 1.

We discovered in Committee that it is profitable to eliminate arguments in advance—at least, those that are not good. Therefore, I want to eliminate a third argument that the Economic Secretary might be tempted to bring up this evening if she intended to refuse to accept new clause 1. She might argue what she half began to argue, I now see, in Committee—that somehow or other it is impossibly inflexible for the Government if there is to be an external setter of the standards and definitions in the accounts. I say that she half began to argue that because what she argued in Committee was that by and large the Government were going to apply the standards set up by the accounting standards body. She pointed on several occasions to the long lists that had been prepared by the Treasury on her behalf, indicating the particular reporting standards that were going to be applied that had derived from the accounting standards body.

The hon. Lady's line of argument was that those would be applied and there would be a few exceptional cases in which it would be necessary—she talked of necessity rather than desirability—to adapt the accounting standards of the accounting standards body, derived as they are for the private sector, when applying them to the public sector. I hope that I am not travestying her remarks by saying that that was the only argument that she used for supposing that it was not necessary or desirable to have an independent body set the standards. Taken at face value, that is no argument at all. The fact that there are only a few occasions on which it may be necessary to depart from the accounting standards body's reporting standards does not imply that it is not worth having an independent body deciding on which occasions it is necessary to depart from the accounting standards and on which it is neither necessary nor desirable to depart from them. There is no implication from one to the other. So the Economic Secretary's sole argument was no argument at all.

To be generous to the hon. Lady, as I have tried to be, I think that she was trying to get at the idea that it would be insufficiently flexible for the Government if the Treasury was not in a position to determine for itself these few occasions on which it was necessary to depart from the accounting standards body's standards.

That is the beginning of a recognisable logical form. It looks like an argument for the case; it has the right shape to be an argument for the hon. Lady's position. The problem is that it is not compelling because it does not acknowledge the force of the conflict of interest argument. The problem is mind-numbingly boring to most Members of Parliament and probably to most people sitting in the Chamber at present and certainly to most of our fellow countrymen. Nevertheless it is acute and profound. A working democracy needs transparent Government accounts that cannot be fiddled to present the Government as well as possible.

If democracy is reduced to being an argument about whether the data presented are an accurate or inaccurate reflection of what is going on, democracy becomes a shouting match rather than a rational discussion.

7.45 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not merely whether the accounts are fiddled, but whether there is a perception that they could be fiddled? That in itself would be enough greatly to erode the value of any numbers.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is right. We are talking about the Caesar's wife phenomenon. Not only do the accounts need to be transparent, they need to be seen to be transparent. Nobody in their right mind will be confident—to put the case at its weakest—that the accounts are transparent if the people who are responsible for setting the standards, or rather for setting the deviations from the independently set standards, are the very people who have an interest in ensuring that the deviations occur when it is convenient for the Government, and do not when it is not.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): My hon. Friend is an acknowledged expert on such matters. For those of us who are newer to the debate, will he speculate on how

wide the Government could make the figures that would not apply if our amendment were accepted? Will he help us to understand just how wide their scope could be?

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What does Caesar's wife have to say about it?

Mr. Letwin: I shall not be by tempted by that intriguing sedentary intervention from my right hon. Friend. Instead, I shall answer my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride). She is right to draw attention to the point that she raised. She is too polite to put it in these terms, but, in effect, she asked whether I was wittering on about a row of beans—a matter that need not concern us—or whether fundamental issues were at stake. The answer is that, abundantly, there are fundamental issues at stake. Before I return to my argument, I shall retail some of them for the benefit of the House.

We are talking about whether the public sector pension funds—unfunded liabilities—are to be recognised as liabilities. Nobody knows the amount at present, but it is many billions of pounds. We are talking about whether the basic state pension liabilities are to be recognised as liabilities. Some assessments suggest that the present value of those liabilities may be about £300 billion.

We are talking about whether the PFI liabilities—an unquantifiable number of billions of pounds over the period—are to be on the balance sheet as liabilities. We are talking about whether the liabilities of new bodies and of half-extraneous, non-departmental public bodies will be on the balance sheet, if they are in the form of contingent guarantees. We heard an example of that this evening, when the Economic Secretary failed to tell us—because she does not know—whether the assets or liabilities of a body she is creating under the Bill will be accounted on the balance sheet.

So far, I have totted up a figure that is probably broadly equivalent to the gross domestic product of this country. That is the scope of the lack of clarity as to how far things will be accounted on the liability side. However, I have not mentioned the biggest question. That relates to those things that are, or are like, benefits. Public concerns and private companies typically account for certain kinds of sickness benefit, for example. A question arises that is deeply material to public policy and to the whole structure of accounting: should disability benefits, in some form, be on the liabilities side of the whole of Government accounts, or should they not? That is an enormous potential sum.

On the assets side, we are talking about how far Government accounting ultimately includes all sorts of contentious items, some of which are currently included while others are not such as schools, hospitals or large elements of the Ministry of Defence estate. How are the latter to be accounted for? What does one do with tanks or nuclear missiles?

We then come to revenue and expenditure and the notorious question of whether the working families tax credit is a tax credit, and hence a negative tax, or a piece of public expenditure. Which side of the income and expenditure and cash flow statements should it be on?

There are many similar items—not least because the Chancellor of the Exchequer has shown us that he intends to expand, if possible, the scope of tax credits, perhaps widely. It is not inconceivable that, without an independent body, most of the non-pension public expenditure of the benefit sort might be transferred to being a negative tax. Some £70 billion a year could be removed from both sides of the income and expenditure account.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove is beginning to get the picture. We are not talking about a row of beans. We are talking about the shape of the whole public economic system. We have not the slightest idea of what the Treasury will decide when making critical decisions about the definitions that will govern the public policy debate on most of the items that are most contentious in that debate. That is a sorry state of affairs.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that I share many of his concerns. However, I caution him not to overstate the case. That sorry state of affairs has existed for many years. The Bill is about modernising Government accounts. The Government talk to us about modernising government, so surely the argument that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats should be making is that the Government should take this opportunity to modernise the public finance system properly and thoroughly.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is right. It is a sorry state of affairs, but that is not the fault of the Labour Government; it is the fault of our predecessors in Parliament and in government, of both parties over a prolonged period.

Mr. Davey: All parties.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me—all parties, of course. It is the collective failure of our democracy to address the issue since Gladstone took a large step forward. Broadly speaking, Gladstone took that step and the rest of us—collectively—held our breath from that date to this. The hon. Gentleman is right. In effect, we are saying that a glorious and golden opportunity is being missed to put the matter right.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tyrie: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. David Davis: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Letwin: That is more than a richesse. I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden.

Mr. Davis: That was a rush of assistance to my hon. Friend.

I agree, as I said in Committee, that the matter is one for which the blame—if that is the right word—falls on a series of successive Governments of all parties, but there is an acute problem at present. My hon. Friend touched on the tax credit issue and the calculation of tax burden. If the amendments proposed by him and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) are accepted, it is almost certain that the Government's judgment on the calculation of tax credits would be overturned. Every other

[Mr. Davis]

western country takes a different stance on that matter, because when there is no tax liability, a payment is made. That is the test—whether it is a payment rather than a negative tax. The tax credit system fails that test. As a result, it is almost certain that, were such an independent body to exist, the Government would have to account in the same way as the rest of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In that sense, there is a large price tag on the amendment, which makes it much more difficult for the Government to accept.

Mr. Letwin: I was trying not to prejudice the chances of the Minister accepting the amendment by drawing out the implications that, I am afraid, my right hon. Friend has with great perspicacity made abundantly clear. He is right to say that the position has been made significantly worse by the fact that there has been an accounting fiddle, if I can put it in those terms without being unduly prejudicial.

8 pm

However, if I had to judge, I would say that the biggest cause for concern is not the Government's fault. It is something that goes back a long way and has plagued the public policy debate to the extent that it has distorted the entirety of our policy on the matter. That concern is the treatment of pensions. I believe profoundly that an independent analysis of the definitions would bring pension liabilities in some way into recognition, whether as a note or as an item in the balance sheet. If those liabilities were included in the accounts, the nature of the discussion on social planning and social provision would change.

Mr. Cash: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another dimension to the subject that may have been considered earlier in the debate or when the Bill was in Committee? I refer specifically to the interaction between our public accounts and the accounts of the European Union. Just in case anyone should be surprised that I raise the matter, I note that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, rightly surmises that that is an issue of enormous importance.

If there is a fiddle, such as that which occurred with the convergence criteria, and if the pension liabilities are not properly taken into account, we cannot make any useful complementary analysis of what is happening in this country vis-a-vis the economic rules established under Maastricht and what is going on in other countries. I have every intention of exploring that point a little further, but will my hon. Friend enlighten me on whether that subject has been thoroughly investigated—or will I have an opportunity to do that this evening?

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend has cheered me up no end. I had thought that this debate—not least my speech—might be dull, but now I know that it will be lively. The subject was not debated in Committee and I look forward to hearing his remarks on it. The Bill, wide though its scope is, does not extend to forcing our comparator countries into the paths of righteousness on accounting liabilities. The problem of comparability might arise even if we cure the accounting problem here. None the less, I look forward with bated breath to my hon. Friend's analysis of these important matters.

If the Economic Secretary wants to expand the argument that she half began to make in Committee—that it would be unduly inflexible if the Government were forced into a straitjacket by an independent body and were unable to decide on the deviations from the accounting standard practices that were proposed by the accounting standards body—she should resist that temptation. She should resist it because it would be to misunderstand what the ability to play with definitions does to Government. Part of our argument is about the rights of a democracy as represented in Parliament. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden is principally concerned with those issues, and rightly so as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

However, part of our argument—we have this in common with those on the Liberal Democrat Benches—is about the effect on the Government's making of policy. It is not to their advantage, except in the very shortest term—a few weeks or a few months—to put themselves in a position where they may be tempted to conceal from themselves the real effects of their actions. They can do that by adjusting accounting definitions so that they purport not to be doing what they are in fact doing. That is not in the long-term, or even medium-term, advantage of the Government because they will be doing what they are doing. In the end, pension liabilities will exist whether they are on the balance sheet or not; the Government will have obligations under the PFI whether they are on the balance sheet or not; public sector pensions will or will not be funded; and there will be expenditure under the working families tax credit. All those things will happen. They are economic facts that will hit taxpayers, the macro-economic system, interest rates and, ultimately, the Government.

Mr. Edward Davey: After the election.

Mr. Letwin: It may be before or after an election, but those facts will certainly hit the Government at some time. That is not in the interests of government as conceived narrowly. However, I accept that the hon. Gentleman is right. If a Government are just this side of an election that they think they will lose—I wonder whether the Government think that they will lose the next election—they might try to conceal from themselves, and from their successors, the effects of actions that will be visited upon their successors.

Mr. Cash: I am a mere novice in this subject, but my hon. Friend made a bold and justifiable remark on the volumes of moneys that would be involved if public sector pensions, state pensions, PFI liabilities and contingency guarantees were aggregated. He said that that was equivalent to the whole gross domestic product of this country. I am developing my thinking on this issue, so I wish to ask him a simple question. He has referred to the integrity of the accounts and democratic accountability, so is the calculation of the 3 per cent. deficit of GDP in relation to the Maastricht criteria a figure that could be distorted by eliminating the items that he mentioned from the calculations? We might get a completely different figure that might well suit the

Prime Minister, come July, if he makes an announcement on the amount of money that he will make available in the public sector.

Mr. Letwin: As ever, my hon. Friend is eagle-eyed as to the implications of Maastricht. He is right that such accounting changes could have a significant impact on our deficit and its relationship to the Maastricht rules. When I tried to illustrate for my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove the scale of the implications, I was consciously confusing stock with flow. Some of the items that I mentioned are flow, or current spending, items; some are the present values of long-term liabilities, and some are assets. I tried to give a sense of the scale by adding them all up and wondering what they might all amount to. Once the figures have been so illegitimately added together, I do not know whether they would come to half, one, or one and a half times GDP. However, it would be of that order of magnitude.

In practice, on a flow basis and in terms of the annual deficit, the figure is nothing like that big. As a consequence, it is unlikely—although it is possible—that adherence or failure to adhere to the Maastricht criteria on a given occasion would be decisively influenced by such matters. However, public policy choices made in ignorance of the real liabilities could lead you to fail or succeed in meeting Maastricht or other criteria.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I am aware the that the hon. Gentleman is responding to an intervention from a Back Bencher, but he should address the Chair.

Mr. Letwin: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Moreover, you were kind not to mention the fact that I may have departed to some degree from my observations on new clause 1, to which I speedily return.

I was trying to argue that the Economic Secretary should resist the temptation to complain about the inflexibility that might be imposed on Government by an independent body's setting the definitions. She should recognise that, although in some particular circumstances—the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and I were beginning to expose them—there might be a political advantage in cooking the books, shifting the definitions is dangerous for Government when conceived as something that goes on for a year or so, as well as for the operation of our parliamentary democracy. It is just as dangerous for Government because they have terrible difficulty knowing what is going on. That is their biggest difficulty.

Most of the time, most people in Government do not know much about the effects of their actions or the circumstances in which they are operating. The last Administration discovered much of what was happening in the miners' strike by turning on the television in No. 10 Downing street. Governments are often ill informed and find it difficult, however brilliant their Ministers or officials, to get a grip on what is really going on with the immensely complicated beast of public spending, tax and the economy. If Government allow themselves to be flexible, they end up being confused about the effects of their own actions and making decisions that they did not intend, which often rebound on them.

It is not true that there is no conflict of interest. There is, because short-term interest is at stake in fiddling the figures from time to time. It is true that there is no long-term conflict of interest. If the Government view the matter from enlightened long-term self-interest, they will accept the straitjacket imposed by new clause 1, not unwillingly but joyously—seeing it not as a restriction on flexibility but as a way of ensuring that they know what is going on in the multitude of affairs over which they have control.

I want next to explain the differences between new clause 1 and our amendments in Committee, to demonstrate to the Economic Secretary how far we have gone to accommodate the points that she made. The Minister said in Committee that she was concerned about the prospect of a national accounts commission, and argued that there were already bodies sufficiently well equipped to deal with accounting standards. Subsections (2)(a) and (2)(b) recognise that such bodies exist. We have offered an olive branch to the Minister by abandoning our preference—which we shared with the Liberal Democrats and the PAC—for a new, independent national accounts commission and have opted instead for the existing body. Any practical difficulties otherwise associated with an independent national accounts commission thereby evaporate. No extra costs would be entailed. I am sure that the Accounting Standards Board, if asked, would be perfectly willing to take on that extra task without charging the Treasury a huge amount of money.

The ASB has every possible expertise. It is not lacking in any kind of knowledge or skill required. We have a body that exists, would not be expensive to run and knows what needs to be done—and we are saying that will do nicely. We have gone further. As we recognise that the Economic Secretary might think that, in the world of increasing global convergence, it would be retrograde to insist on standards in the UK, we have offered a second option. The International Accounting Standards Committee or some other such international body could be chosen in place of the Accounting Standards Board.

Mr. Cash: My hon. Friend is aware that accountancy proposals and directives have been compiled and applied in respect of the European Union. I wonder whether he has taken account of those directives in relation to the other international bodies to which he referred and the criteria applied there.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that my personal first choice for a body would not be a European-level body. Mirabile dictu that he should say it, but my hon. Friend is right. That could be a solution encompassed by subsection (2)(b). If I had to accept that as a means of getting the Minister to concur with the general proposition in new clause 1, I would do so.

We recognise that the Economic Secretary might have difficulty with the particular shape of the body we proposed. She gave us some cause for concern, referring on several occasions in Committee to the Financial Reporting Advisory Board. She thought that body already did a good job of determining deviations from standards set by the ASB. As a third option, we have redesigned our proposal by making it more general. Subsection (2)(c) expressly allows for a new form of the FRAB as an alternative to our national accounts commission.

[Mr. Letwin]

8.15 pm

Surely the Economic Secretary's resolve on the technical issue must crumble at this point. Surely she cannot maintain that the body she argued in Committee was doing a good job cannot do the job. If she accepts new clause 1, all she need do is take the FRAB, re-establish it as a new body, ensure that all its members are appointed solely on the basis of their expertise in accounting practices and make the change that those people cannot be dismissed by the Treasury or any Minister. That could be done in a trice.

We have tried to provide in subsections (2)(a), (2)(b) and (2)(c) the widest possible latitude to the Minister and the Treasury in implementing any form of independent body. The only thing they all have to be is specified in subsection (1)—independent. The Minister cannot argue that there is a conflict of interest because there is not—and she has not tried to argue that. The Minister cannot argue that there is a conflict of interest but public policy cost outweighs it because that is not true—and she has not tried to argue that. The Minister should not argue that which she was half tempted to argue—that the proposal would be too inflexible for Government—because flexibility will be an advantage in the medium and long term.

If the Minister is compelled to accept the logic of an independent body, and given that we have offered every form of independent body that anyone could imagine as a range of options—including the body to which she referred to first and second as an option—I am genuinely stumped as to why she should object to new clause 1.

I draw attention to the amendments that flow from new clause 1, particularly for the benefit of hon. Members who were not in Committee, and to the scope of the discretion restricted by the application of new clause 1 through amendments Nos. 1 to 5. Clause 5(2) states:

> Resource accounts shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by the Treasury.

No limitation, no control, no transparency—entirely unfettered discretion to decide how reporting will be done. The Economic Secretary repeatedly informed hon. Members on Second Reading and in Committee that it was the Government's intention merely to amend existing standards as necessary for the public sector. That is not reflected in subsection (5)(2) or any Government amendment or new clause tabled in Committee or now. She has never sought to limit the Treasury's discretion in any way.

By replacing the words "the Treasury" with "the Independent Body", we are making up for that gross lack. That is exactly how we have gone about amendments Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5—each of which replaces the Treasury, as the body with total discretion to decide its own accounting standards, with the independent body.

I refer to another element of great importance, to which we shall return later this evening. There is no doubt that the independent body that sets the accounting standards will be the natural locus of decision making on the form in which the performance measures are to be embodied. The Comptroller and Auditor General is a natural office for enforcement, but the natural body to decide what performance measures will measure the policies that the Government have announced is the independent body that we recommend. That would solve two problems at a stroke: the conflicts of interest that would otherwise muddy Government accounts, and the measurement of performance by the Government of the Government.

If the Minister sensibly accepts the new clause, that will represent a great improvement in the operation not only of parliamentary democracy, but of Government. If she does not, we shall argue that our friends and colleagues of all parties in the other place should seek to obtain the result that I mentioned at the beginning of my speech and send the new clause or a similar measure back to the House—for as long as is necessary and no matter how arduous that is—to draw the Government's attention to the fact that they would be using a parliamentary majority and the Parliament Acts to achieve a result that would be wholly at odds with the proper functioning of our democracy.

Mr. Edward Davey: Let me begin by discussing how this issue is likely to be dealt with in the other place if the Government reject the new clause—which is where the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) ended. Although I have been a Member of the House for a only short time, it is clear that these events are almost unprecedented. I have served on a number of Finance Bill Committees, as well as on the Committees that brought independence to the Bank of England and set up the Greater London Authority. The Liberal Democrats often found common cause with the Government—with whom we voted fairly often against amendments tabled by the Conservatives—but that has not occurred on this occasion because the issues to which the Bill gives rise go above party politics: as many members of the Committee said, they are constitutionally important, so taking a party line and playing party politics is not appropriate.

Conservative Front Benchers and Liberal Democrats have together tabled the new clause, and I pay tribute to the ingenuity of the hon. Member for West Dorset for dreaming up a measure that gives the Government so many options and so many ways out of the predicament in which they have managed to land themselves. Their lordships will read our proceedings and note that the new clause is wide-ranging and that Members of different parties have come together to support it. Not only Liberal Democrat and Conservative peers but independent-minded Labour peers and Cross Benchers will place some weight on the fact that we are witnessing a rather unusual process, and will recognise why we have agreed on it. As the hon. Gentleman said, when they recognise that, they will act accordingly to uphold Parliament's powers and rights in relation to Government accounts.

Mr. Letwin: I thoroughly agree with the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman is expressing. Does he agree that we are also considering Executive control? This is a case not of the Labour party voting in a certain way but of a Government using their majority in the House of Commons to assert Executive power. We are looking to our friends and others in the other place to reassert the power of Parliament against the Executive.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. It is important that those in the other place realise that that is what we are about, because, as he said, they may have to fight hard and be prepared to push the Government to the

wire. We should give the Government due warning that if they remain completely inflexible, we shall encourage our colleagues in the other place to stare them in the face and challenge them to invoke the Parliament Acts to get the Bill through. As the hon. Gentleman said in a previous debate, the Government have legislated hastily—perhaps because they want to make progress with the Partnerships UK proposals—but it should be borne in mind that such a delay would substantially undermine aspects of their programme. Neither he nor I want those aspects to be delayed, even though we have mentioned our concerns about them. If that is the unintended effect, we shall have to bear the cost, because the principles are so important: I believe that we are prepared to do so to win through on this key issue.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. His remarks are of the greatest importance because they will be read by those in the other place. With that in mind, does he share my experience, which is that some Labour Members who shall remain nameless have said privately that they have considerable sympathy with our position? For the sake of causing them no embarrassment, I shall not name those hon. Members, but is the hon. Gentleman also aware that one or two have said in open court—on television—that they have some sympathy with our position?

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right. I have had similar conversations with Labour Members, and I am tempted to suggest that even Ministers have some sympathy with our arguments, although they have not put that on the record. When we were debating clause 5 and an amendment similar to new clause 1 in Committee, the Minister said that she was open-minded and would think about the issue. She made no promises or guarantees, but she was at least prepared to think about it, and I like to believe that that is because she and her Treasury colleagues have some sympathy with our case.

The Chief Secretary spent many years in opposition and he is probably well aware of the frustrations felt by an Opposition trying to do their job and hold the Executive to account without having the proper information. On Budget day and when the public expenditure plans are published, we are given figures. We have great difficulty in understanding or believing what the Government are trying to tell us, so we cannot do our job properly. That is the crux of the issue.

If we vote to establish an independent body, we will improve the way in which individual MPs on both sides of the House can do their jobs, not only on macro-issues of public spending but on constituency spending issues. With an independent framework for accounts, we will be able to see more clearly what is going on and—most important—to have faith in the figures that purport to show us what is going on.

8.30 pm

Mr. Letwin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, oddly, the situation that he so vividly describes will worsen if the Bill is passed without the new clauses and amendments? Members of this House and the other place will then have before them a balance sheet and details of cash flow and profit and loss, and will think that they understand what is going on as we do not because we do not have such clear information. They will not in fact know, however, because they will not know whether the definitions on which their understanding is founded are fair and consistent.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is trying to push his argument slightly too far. I want the House to be in no doubt that Liberal Democrat Members believe that moving to resource accounting and budgeting is a major step forward, and that the information will assist us in our work. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the information will come with the same caveats and problems as all the information that we have received from previous Governments, as it will be the Government who set the definitions and frameworks. However, the quality of the information will be better. It will not be perfect, and that is why new clause 1 is needed, but the hon. Gentleman goes too far in suggesting that we will be in a worse position if the Bill is passed.

Mr. David Davis: I had not intended to participate in this part of the debate, but the hon. Gentleman's point strikes me as a little doubtful. We all agree that resource accounting, at its broadest, will be a major advance in the way that the country is run. However, we should not ignore that, in moving from what is effectively a cash system of accounting, which is hard to manipulate, to a system that involves many depreciations and other considerations, we are opening up judgments that will, without the new clause, give the Government more scope for manipulation, and therefore for corrupting the benefit that we all desire.

Mr. Davey: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point that there is a trade-off between the potential for manipulation and the fact that we will have so much more information. The problem with the existing cash accounting system is that it is almost meaningless, and the data that we have make it incredibly difficult to analyse what is going on in Departments.

The extra information and improvements that we will receive through resource accounting and budgeting, albeit with the problems that we are debating, are of such an order that the Bill is a step forward. That is why we have been supportive of the move and have always tried to persuade the Government that accepting the new clause and the amendments, which have been jointly tabled by Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members, is in their interests and follows the logic of what they are trying to do.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) for intervening. I wholly accept the point made by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that the move to resource accounting is overwhelmingly important and that we should not resist it in any way, but does he agree that, if the new clause is not accepted, not only will a golden opportunity have been missed, but until the problem is corrected, the situation will paradoxically have moved backwards? That would be a tragedy. It does not mean that there is an argument for not going ahead with resource accounting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Since I entered the Chamber a few minutes ago, I have noticed that interventions are extremely long. We cannot have such long interventions.

Mr. Davey: I understand the point that the hon. Member for West Dorset makes. New clause 1 is designed

[Mr. Davey]

to deal with the potential danger about which we are both worried. Resource accounting and budgeting brings a distinct advantage.

When the hon. Member for West Dorset introduced the new clause, he explained how independent bodies that already exist in the UK and abroad, and bodies that could be devised, would all fit the terms of the new clause.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I have listened to the debate with great interest, although I was not a member of the Standing Committee, and I have heard the forceful arguments that have been advanced.

As I understand it, the proposed independent body would have the power to move the goalposts if it wished to do so. If that happened, I assume that it would be accountable to no one, whereas if the Treasury had that authority as the Bill stands, at least it would be accountable to Parliament. Do I misunderstand the position and, if so, can the hon. Gentleman help me?

Mr. Davey: As we argued in the Standing Committee that established the independence of the Bank of England, the great advantage of an independent body is that its moves are transparent and public. Through that transparency and openness, accountability is improved. The problem that we seek to resolve by establishing an independent body is that the Treasury is often not accountable for its actions on matters such as setting accounts, because it is opaque: it does not report properly to Parliament about what it does. One finds out years down the line, if at all.

Accountability can be exercised in a meaningful way only if those who make the decisions are forced to publish their decisions. Because the independent body would be a separate body, and would have to publish its recommendations and make it clear to Parliament and to the public what it wanted the Government to do, accountability would be increased.

Mr. Stevenson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Even with his assistance, I am a little more confused than when I asked the question. Is not his response to my intervention a criticism of the procedures of the House, rather than an exposition of the principle of which he and the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) have been trying to convince the House? Is it not more important for us to consider the procedures of the House to achieve accountability, rather than setting up a separate body that is not accountable at all?

Mr. Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The cause of reforming the procedures of the House is dear to my heart. My hon. Friends and I tabled an amendment which unfortunately was not selected—for good reasons, no doubt—to set up what we called a resource estimates commission to report on the procedures of the House when it considered the Budget and to make recommendations for improving those procedures.

The Select Committee on Procedure, of which I used to be a member, made recommendations along those lines. It proposed an estimates office to provide hon. Members with the information that they would need to scrutinise the Budget properly. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point.

My criticism was not of the procedures of the House, but of the way in which Whitehall works. Often Whitehall is not open and does not tell Parliament what it is doing in the people's name and with the people's money. Unless we can be reassured about the accounting standards and the framework to which it must adhere and on which it must report to the independent National Audit Office, there will always be a suspicion in the minds of hon. Members and of the public that some skulduggery has occurred. It is that perception that is the problem.

Mr. Cash: The amendment refers to the functions assigned to the body by the Bill. Those are not specified in subsequent amendments—perhaps the relevant amendments were not selected. That could be redressed in the other place if the matter is taken forward. Accountability and its relation to the functions of the independent body is another matter. Perhaps the body would be similar to the Audit Commission. To a certain extent, I share the view of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) that the matter could be refined in future debates.

Mr. Davey: I would be worried if it were refined in the way in which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South suggests. As I said earlier, the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues rightly gave the Bank of England independence to set interest rates. He supported that. That step improved accountability for monetary policy because it set a clear, publicly set goal for the independent Bank of England to undertake monetary operations on a daily basis and to try to hit the inflation target.

The Monetary Policy Committee's actions are recorded in minutes. The Governor of the Bank of England appeared before the Treasury Committee today. My colleagues and I asked the Governor, the Deputy Governor and other members of the Monetary Policy Committee questions that held them to account. That structure has massively improved accountability in the way in which monetary policy is made. A similar framework for setting accounting standards would likewise improve accountability. There has never been accountability for setting standards for Government accounts. To my knowledge, there has never been a debate in the House about the directions that the Treasury gives Departments.

Mr. Stevenson: I do not wish to be a nuisance, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman wants to help me to solve my dilemma. He refers to the Monetary Policy Committee, but I am not sure whether we are comparing like with like. The House sets the terms of reference for the Monetary Policy Committee. If I understand the arguments for the independent body correctly, however, it will change the accounting principles if it believes that that is right, and will be accountable to no one. Surely there is a big difference.

Mr. Davey: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's view. The House is considering a Bill that would establish the framework for the independent body, which will therefore always remain accountable to the House and be subject to the Select Committee procedure. Just as the Monetary

Policy Committee is accountable to the Treasury Committee, the members of the independent body could be brought before the Treasury Committee or the Public Accounts Committee and held to account for their actions. Accountability would be greatly enhanced because those actions would for the first time be transparent, public and open.

Mr. Flight: There is a close analogy between the independence of the Bank of England in setting interest rates and the subject of our debate. The Government acknowledged the impossible conflict of interest that arises when Governments fix interest rates, and weighed the short-term advantage of elections against the long-term advantage. The Chancellor made his decision to escape that conflict of interest, which is analogous to that which exists when Governments determine their accounting policies.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right. When we debated the matter in Committee, I made that comparison. I also made an analogy with the BBC. There is cross-party consensus that politicians should not have their fingers on the BBC's broadcasting policies and approach. It would be improper. The Government's approach must be at arm's length.

Some public policy functions, for example, public broadcasting, setting interest rates, and setting accountancy standards for the public sector are so important that we must be reassured that they are removed from the party political debate.

The effects of some of their decisions last not just for a Parliament, but for decades—indeed, for centuries. We heard from the hon. Member for West Dorset about the pension liabilities. Some of these issues that arose from the matter of accounting standards are just too great to be left to political Ministers who happen to be in office for a short while.

8.45 pm

The amendment gives the Government a wide choice of bodies that they could select to be the independent body. In Standing Committee, the Minister seemed to go down the route of preferring the Accounting Standards Board. She said that the Government

> do not believe that a separate standard-setting body is needed, not least if it implies a body that will be in competition with the Accounting Standards Board. The Government are content to follow the standards issued or approved by the ASB, which already apply to all private and many public sector bodies.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 11 January 2000; c. 60.]

The Minister was right. I wish she would be prepared to extend the remit of the ASB and give it the independence for which we are arguing in the new clause, which is a vehicle that would enable her to do that.

The ASB already has a sub-committee, the public sector and not-for-profit committee, which looks at many of these issues. Its remit is not as wide as would be required by the sort of body we are talking about in the new clause, but its existence shows that the Accounting Standards Board has already considered some of these issues, and has some expertise and skills in this area. Members of the ASB have sat on the Financial Reporting Advisory Board. If the Minister believes that we need a single standard-setting body, the ASB is probably the sensible one to choose.

Other opinions have been expressed, both here and outside. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, in a report entitled "Setting Accounting Standards for the Public Services" a few years ago, thought that the sub-committee of the ASB was still too narrow, and favoured a totally new body, which it called the Public Services Accounting Advisory Board. However, it was not quite advisory in the way the name suggests, as CIPFA proposed that there should be a requirement on statutory bodies to follow the board's recommendations. Therefore, I believe that "advisory board" was an inappropriate title for CIPFA's suggested model.

The point is that there are many views about the sorts of bodies that could take on this role, both natural evolutions from the ASB and other bodies that already exist, such as the Financial Reporting Advisory Board. Therefore, the Government have plenty of bodies that they could turn to. They have to give us good reasons, as the hon. Member for West Dorset argued, for not going down this road. They failed to do so in Committee, which was a shame.

I return to my point about the importance of standard setting and why this issue should be seen on a par with setting interest rates and with broadcasting policy. It is because it goes not just to the heart of the financial management of the public sector, but to the heart of the quality of all decision making by Ministers throughout Whitehall.

The hon. Member for West Dorset talked about how Ministers are extremely busy and often do not have to hand all the information about what is going on in their own Departments. He is clearly right. Both by the activities of the hon. Gentleman's party, through privatisation, and now through the activities of the Government, with devolution, the leviathan state is being trimmed.

Mr. David Davis: Divided.

Mr. Davey: Liberal Democrats would totally disagree with the right hon. Gentleman about that. We believe that the devolution process is helping to ensure that the United Kingdom remains a united kingdom, and that it is assisting better decision making, because it is taking decisions away from Ministers who already have too much to do in this place.

Our proposal would help to transform the leviathan state. It would help ever-busy Ministers, who do not have perfect information at their fingertips, by ensuring that the information with which they were provided was transparent and consistent. It would also ensure that they and their civil servants did not spend time worrying about changing depreciation rates and changing accounting standards, because that would be a given. Instead, they would be able to focus on what they should be focusing on: policy, policy making, making better decisions, and ensuring that the taxpayer is given better value for money.

Mr. Letwin: After popping out for a sandwich, I reflected on the hon. Gentleman's answer to an earlier intervention. Does he agree that the answer to the

[Mr. Letwin]

comparison with the private sector advanced by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) should, in fact, be that directors should set their own accounting standards because they are accountable to shareholders, whereas accountants should not because they are independent?

Mr. Davey: I shall deal later with that wider issue, and with the parallel that the hon. Gentleman seeks to make; but I am sure that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) appreciates the power of his intervention.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South also raised the issue of the procedure of the House with regard to Supply. It is an important issue in the context of accounting standards. As the hon. Gentleman and I seem to agree, the procedures governing Supply in this place are, to say the least, inadequate: they are completely outdated, and effectively mean that the House allows just three days' debate on the subject. Moreover, often no amendment has been tabled to change the proposed spending plans, and the days tend to be taken up with Select Committee reports. Unfortunately, that rarely involves discussion of departmental spending plans. It is left to the PAC to do the real job; however, that is ex post rather than ex ante.

Partly because of existing procedures and partly because of customs that have grown up, the House and its Select Committees do not do their job in scrutinising supply. That is analogous with, and has the same effect as, the problems that we are discussing in respect of accounting standards, because, again, it lowers the quality of decision-making. Ministers do not have to come to the House and fully defend their budgets, and the hundreds and thousands of decisions that Departments make about those budgets.

If Ministers had to do that, they would have to be properly briefed. If they had to be properly briefed, their civil servants would have to ensure that they too were properly briefed, and that questions about their budgets were fully explored with Ministers. I believe that the dynamic that that would create, leading to a reform of estimates procedures, would make Ministers pay more attention to their budgets—that, indeed, Parliament and their civil servants would require them to do so—and that such a hands-on approach would enable them to spot problems. It would form part of the process enabling Ministers to root out poor decisions in respect of value for money for the taxpayer. I think that, if Ministers had such responsibility, there would be far better outcomes in regard to the money that the House votes to the Government through taxes.

The parallel with the supply process is clear. I think that if we could improve supply procedures—I suggested the establishment of a resource estimates commission—and the way in which accounting standards are set, we could make a second leap forward in regard to the quality of policy-making and fiscal policy generally. I describe it as a second leap forward because the first leap forward relates to resource accounting and budgeting. If we can get the supply procedures right, and if we can get the accounting standards-setting process right, I think that over quite a long period—10, 20 or 30 years—we shall see far more effective public spending. That may mean that we can afford to do more public spending, or to reduce taxes. That choice will be open to the Government of the day. What a wonderful choice it would be, arising from the reform of procedures of the House and accounting standards setting.

The hon. Member for West Dorset tried to tempt me to talk about the conflict of interest when the Government set their own accounting standards. He is right. There is clearly a conflict of interest. It parallels the conflict of interest that would arise in the private sector if company directors could set their own accounting standards. A shareholder would not be happy with that. Equally, members of the public and hon. Members should not be happy with the Government proposal to set their own accounting standards.

The hon. Gentleman speculated on the reasons why the Government are prepared to live with that conflict of interest. He got close to their key concern when he said that, with a body such as the Accounting Standards Board setting accounting standards, the system might be seen to be inflexible. I am sure that civil servants in many Departments may be slightly worried that there could be slight delay in changing accounting standards that they think are genuine, rational and necessary for a new policy, or a new area of Government activity, for example, if they had to wait until the ASB had given its approval.

Potentially, that might involve a slight cost, but how large will it be? How often will it occur? As the hon. Gentleman implied, will there always be a cost? Will there not sometimes be a benefit? Having some inflexibility over setting accounting standards seems quite a good idea. Surely, what we want from accounting standards is consistency and fixity. We do not want them to change the whole time. That would be totally inappropriate for such an important part of the financial system. Therefore, the argument that the Government could use against the measure seems weak and could be used against them.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is doing an important job in disinterring the internal logic of inflexibility. Does he agree that policy inflexibility is another type of inflexibility that the Government might be worried about? An ostensibly beneficial economic effect might be thought to be prevented by a rigid accounting system simply because it exposed things that the markets, for example, reacted to irrationally. What is the right answer to such a concern?

Mr. Davey: Given this country's fiscal position, I would have thought that more transparency over our accounts was beneficial. Presumably, the hon. Gentleman wants me to speculate on a circumstance where greater transparency would not be beneficial. That may lie behind the Government's arguments, although we have not heard them say so. We might have to pay a price. I do not suggest that there is no cost to greater transparency. There is always potentially a political cost to the Government of the day.

We have had that debate more generally with the Freedom of Information Bill, which is before the Houses of Parliament at the moment. When one considers such costs, one has to examine the wider picture and whether the benefits far exceed them. Having listened to the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members in

Committee, I am left in no doubt that the benefits outweigh the costs to an extraordinary degree. I have no second thoughts.

Mr. Flight: If there were some powerful argument for a particular accounting principle that was, for example, different from that in the private sector and that was in the national interest, could not the Government present that argument to the independent body? That body might even judge that that was the case, so the measure does not rule out the Government having a separate accounting principle from that of the private sector, where it is appropriate.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. I expect that the body established in new clause 1 would ensure that there are different standards, as different policy problems have to be dealt with by the Government, from nuclear missiles to the extent of pension liabilities. The problems faced by the Government, compared with those faced by private sector companies, are different only in degree—although it is quite a large degree.

9 pm

I should think that, on many issues, the independent body will treat accounting standards for public accounts differently from the treatment of private sector accounts, and that those standards will entail moves away from generally accepted accounting practices. I also think that that would be acceptable. As the different standards would be transparent, published and debated, and as members of the independent body could be brought before a Select Committee and questioned on them, I do not see a problem with them. Indeed, they would ensure that difficult public sector dilemmas could be solved more efficiently.

Mr. Letwin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the example of New Zealand—which is far more exposed than the United Kingdom to the markets, and is perhaps the most transparent example—shows that it is possible to get away with transparency perfectly well, even in such an exposed economy, and realise the long-term benefits?

Mr. Davey: Indeed; in this sphere, New Zealand is so far ahead of us that we can only struggle to catch up. Its example should be a lesson to the Government. In Committee, I referred right hon. and hon. Members to the New Zealand Government's website, at www.gov.newzealand. With a few clicks, one can access New Zealand's Acts of Parliament, including the Financial Reporting Act 1993, which established the type of independent accounting standards body that we propose in new clause 1.

Subsequently, the New Zealand Act has been amended several times, based on New Zealand's experience of some of the matters that we have been debating. It started off by saying that the board should simply adhere to generally accepted private sector accounting practices, but, because of experience, it has seen fit to amend those instructions. However, we could learn lessons from New Zealand. We could ensure that, in establishing the board, its remit goes slightly wider than New Zealand originally envisaged.

Mr. Cash: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the original advice given to the New Zealand Government on its new independent banking arrangements, and undoubtedly also on financial control, derived from Professor Charles Goodhart, who is a member the Monetary Policy Committee? If the Government sought to do so, they undoubtedly could have access to the type of advice that the hon. Gentleman is mentioning.

Mr. Davey: I have always admired Professor Charles Goodhart and thought that he was a great authority on monetary policy, but I did not realise that his expertise and skills have been sought on those aspects of fiscal policy. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for enlightening me on that.

The Treasury seems to have a problem in relation to the Accounting Standards Board and Departments' internal accounts. In evidence—I think to a Select Committee—Professor Likierman really focused on that issue. He said that he believed that the ASB had little experience in dealing with private sector internal accounts, and that it would therefore be inappropriate for the ASB to consider public sector internal accounts. However, I do not think that the two cases are related. The House could develop the ASB as we want it to be developed.

In the private sector, the various regulatory bodies are increasingly passing regulations, guidelines and advice on how internal management accounting should be performed within companies. The public sector could benefit from that information and learning, and from those processes in the private sector. The arguments against our proposals—to the extent that we have heard any from advisers or Ministers—do not stand up to analysis.

I conclude by reiterating the importance of the new clause. This place ought to take financial accountability far more seriously than it does and should realise its significance in the life of the nation. If we do not ensure that the information provided to the House is of the highest quality and has the mark of legitimacy and credibility so that we can have faith in the accounts, the whole process will be undermined.

Mr. Letwin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, shamefully, we have something to learn from local government? We would never tolerate the arrangements that are being proposed for this place and the Government being applied to local government.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right. Local government has had aspects of resource accounting for some time. Local government financial scrutiny is far from perfect, but it is better than in this place. On my local council, the royal borough of Kingston, the opposition parties—I am sure that this is true for all local authorities—table amendments to move resources from one spending area to another. The House does not have procedures for such amendments. We do not examine accounts properly. Local government is way ahead in accounting standards practice and the way in which debates take place. I hasten to add that there is massive room for improvement, but the room for improvement in central Government accounting and reporting is so huge that it does not compare.

We come down to an issue of democracy. Are the Government happy for their policies to be properly reported on and accounted to Parliament? It will be a great

[Mr. Davey]

shame if they do not accept the new clause and questions will increasingly be asked about what has happened to their modernising agenda.

Mr. David Davis: I had not intended to speak on the subject, largely because the Public Accounts Committee has not opined on it recently, but I have been provoked to offer a few words, however briefly, because this is a constitutional issue of some magnitude.

Democracies live on a diet of truth. Indeed, they die when they get the opposite. That is why the House spends a great deal of time battling over what is the real information in front of us. When the previous Government were in power, the battle tended to be about whether the unemployment figures were correct and whether the multiple changes in calculating them were properly founded. Now there are battles about issues such as tax burdens and hospital waiting lists.

Unfortunately, the battle in the Chamber does not serve to ground the real truth in the statistical areas that we are talking about, be they accounting numbers or performance numbers. That falls to a much more technical process. To some extent, the Select Committees do a better job. That is why they have been the jewels of this faded House in recent times. We are dealing with the fundamentals of the figures that will be in front of us if we are to see the public service revolution that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) referred to.

Labour recognised that in opposition. One of the jewels of the Labour manifesto was the notion of an independent national statistics office with an independent director of statistics. That has not yet come about, but its inclusion was a measure of the importance of the issue, particularly to Oppositions, but also to Governments and democracies in general. It is of course a pity that, if the figures are left subject to political influence of Ministers of whatever party, there is always a temptation to alter the numbers to suit the Government of the day.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that whatever logic gave rise to making the statistics function more independent must also apply to the accounting functions?

Mr. Davis: That is my general point. Whatever the argument—and it is one based on the importance of accurate factual data for a democracy—it applies to all data, whether they are accounting numbers or performance figures.

One of the few conversations with my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) in which I have agreed with him 100 per cent. was when he and I agreed that when we first became Ministers we were both shocked by the complete absence of decent management information in Whitehall. Ministers arrive and are interested in the effect of their policies, but they find it almost impossible to get a measure of it. I see the Chief Secretary smiling at me. He probably recognises the syndrome—certainly most Ministers do. When I was at the Cabinet Office trying to make the citizens charter work, I remember asking for examples of how it was working, only to be told by the civil servants that it was not possible to get those examples or the aggregate data that would tell us whether we were delivering a performance for the citizens. That is a disgrace in a small organisation; it is a total disgrace in an organisation as large, complex and public service oriented as the Government.

Resource accounting offers the first step towards that. Eventually, the existence of resource accounts, in conjunction with public service agreements, will mean that there will have to be management information systems within Whitehall. However, we face a serious risk if something like the amendments proposed today—I am concerned not so much with the amendments, but with the principle that they encompass—is not espoused by the Government or their successors. The temptation to bend the figures or to choose one set of figures rather than another because they are more favourable to the Government of the day will have the effect in due course of corrupting not just the numbers, but the belief in the numbers. That is very important. If the people who run the public service do not believe the information or it has no credibility for them, their actions on the basis of those numbers will be weakened. They will worry more about the perception than the reality.

Back in the 1960s there was a wave of creative accounting in the private sector, partly as a result of changes in accounting standards with which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton will be familiar. That had a massively deleterious effect on the operation of British business, which in my judgment was just as bad as some of the trade union problems that existed at the time. It was the capitalist half of the equation. All those factors undermined the entire decision-making mechanism in British industry. If we do not have some external standard, be it an independent FRAB, the ASB or some other body, we shall be taking a risk with that standard.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that in a sense the situation is even worse in the public sector because the Government necessarily have to deal with highly inadequate data on the macro-economic front? The only aspect of macro-economics which they could account for properly is their own income and expenditure if there were an independent body.

Mr. Davis: Of course my hon. Friend is right. However, I wish to focus on the single issue of the effect on the amount of information within the Government. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton spoke eloquently about the prospective revolution in public service delivery that we face in the next couple of decades arising directly from resource accounting and its associated measure of performance—output-related government and outcome- oriented government. They offer a massive transformation. I think that was rather too reticent about that. New Zealand is a good example, but it is only half way there. If the set of numbers that we are about to create in the next two or three years is not founded in such a way that it has the entire confidence of the public service and the public behind it, that threatens to undermine that transformation, which will be a massive cost to pay for what is in my view a short-sighted perspective on the proper approach to this method of resource accounting.

9.15 pm

Mr. Cash: I am intrigued by the title of the Bill. Before now, I had not taken great notice of it, but by chance some hon. Friends mentioned to me that I might find it interesting, and I do.

For some time I have been an adviser to the Institute of Company Accountants, and the Bill makes some reference to accounting standards. However, I am concerned about the way in which the Treasury would acquire vastly increased power under proposals whose principal I otherwise endorse.

For example, the resource accounting system would deal with income—which, in this context, means tax. It would also deal with expenditure, which here means expenditure on public services. The question of assets and liabilities depends on the balance between what is acquired by the private sector, and what remains in the public domain. That raises complex questions.

Clause 5(1) states:

> A government department for which an estimate is approved by the House of Commons in respect of a financial year shall prepare accounts (to be known as resource accounts) for that year detailing . . . resources acquired, held or disposed of by the department during the year, and . . . the use by the department of resources during that year.

That is the balance that has to be struck. However, clause 5(2) states:

> Resource accounts shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by the Treasury.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) spoke about how independence could be affected by the procedures of the House and so on. However, I am realistic enough to know that the Government's huge majority will ensure that the Bill will be approved at the end of our debate, despite the manful attempts of Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members to prevail against it. Although I do not know what the House of Lords will do, I assume that clause 5(2) will remain in the Bill when it leaves this House.

However, the words "in accordance with directions" raise several questions. First, will the directions be general or specific? We do not know. In my past legal career, I spent some time advising many bodies, including public bodies, about the nature of directions, and about remedies in judicial law with respect to them. Is it intended that the directions will be subjected to judicial review? If so, the questions that arise are closely related to the objectives of new clause 1.

Mr. Letwin: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Bill talks about both general and specific directions? The general directions are contained in manuals; no doubt, the specific directions will be the interpretation of the manuals. If it comes to judicial review, how will the courts respond?

Mr. Cash: Indeed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has mentioned clauses other than new clause 1. He has also referred to the Bill in its entirety. We are dealing with a specific amendment, which is the new clause before us.

Mr. Cash: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I am mindful of the fact that we are dealing with new clause 1. However, the group also contains amendments Nos. 1 to 5, and it is to those amendments that I address my comments, because they are relevant to the points that I am making.

I do not know whether the provisions have been devised in accordance with rules that have been concocted, not necessarily exclusively in-house within Her Majesty's Treasury, but in respect of the European Union as well. To achieve the degree of convergence that some claim should be achieved—which I prefer to deny—between the member states to enter the single currency arrangements, there are rules which are, in common, devised at a European Union level. Will the directions to be issued by the Treasury be connected with rules that go outside purely domestic considerations, but are devised within a framework of law that is devised by directives produced by the Central Bank, which we might be shadowing, or by specific directives that apply to us? What is the relationship between the Bill and our economy, having regard to the fact that considerable amounts of our taxpayers' money comes back into the British economy and is then called European money? In relation to achieving targets such as the 3 per cent. deficit rule of gross domestic product imposed by the Maastricht arrangements, will those directions seek to achieve the degree of convergence that is necessary between our economy and those of other member states? This must be relevant, because it is about the question—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's point is not really relevant; it goes wide of the amendment, which is about changing from replacing "the Treasury" with "the Independent Body". That is far more constrained than the matters which the hon. Gentleman is raising.

Mr. Cash: With respect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the question is also related, as I have just said, to the question of whether resource accounts

> shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by the Treasury.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is referring to the amendments that we previously mentioned. Those amendments would delete the word "Treasury" and replace it with "the Independent Body". Therefore, we cannot take the whole clause relating to that amendment and say that that is what will be discussed. All we can do is speak to the amendments. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to have a clause stand part debate, we cannot do so.

Mr. Cash: I am extremely grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as ever, for your guidance in these matters. However, if one is to substitute the nature of the body that will issue the directions, it follows that one must be able to make a comparison between the proposed body that is being put forward—in this case described as the independent body—and the Government's proposal that the body should be the Treasury. I am simply seeking to point out that comparing those two proposals means that we have directions issued by the Treasury—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman confines his remarks to new clause 1—and there is plenty of meat in new clause 1—he will be able to go along with my ruling. He is concerning himself too much with what

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

is further along the line, saying that under the amendments "Treasury" is replaced with "the Independent Body". Of course that is so, because they are consequential amendments, as the hon. Gentleman is well aware.

Mr. Cash: As ever, I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have the greatest respect for your rulings in all these matters. I shall address my remarks specifically to new clause 1.

Mr. Letwin: Will my hon. Friend help me? Is the burden of his argument that an independent accounting body, identified under new clause 1, would not have the temptation so to adjust the standards that the Government would be able to meet—for example—Maastricht criteria?

Mr. Cash: Absolutely. Under new clause 1, it is clear that any such independent body—

Mr. Stevenson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cash: I shall be happy to do so, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to finish the sentence.

Any such independent body would have regard to the fact that many fiddles go on in the EU—fraud has a significant impact on public resources and accounting. That independent body would thus be exceedingly vigilant in ensuring that those matters were thoroughly investigated. I shall come to that matter in a moment, but first I give way to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South—I would almost like to call him my hon. Friend.

Mr. Stevenson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am sure that *Hansard* would have corrected his slip.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the possibility of judicial review against the Government and to European accounting directives. If the independent body were to deviate from accepted practices, would it not follow that it too could be open to judicial review?

Mr. Cash: That is true. Furthermore, if I were right when I pointed out that there was some connection between the provisions of the Bill and more generalised European jurisdiction, there would, ironically, first be a judicial review in this country at the High Court and in the House of Lords and then a review at the European Court of Justice. That is the point I am trying to make.

If we have now entered a new world—a brave new world of European financial controls and economy, central banks and so on—it follows that it is essential to have the highest degree of impartiality, transparency and analysis at every stage, right up to the Court of Justice, if the provisions could be reviewed by that court.

I should be trespassing too far if I went into an enlarged argument as to the merits or demerits of the European Court. However, the hon. Gentleman's point has substance. As I pointed out earlier, when the Bill moves to another place—the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) told us that they even intend to take it as far as the Parliament Acts, if necessary—some adjustment to new clause 1 may be needed, in order to clarify the extent to which the proposals for an independent body could be changed, in line with the points made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South to take into account the public functions and procedures and the degree of accountability and parliamentary control that would be needed over that body. Such provisions would, indeed, be needed for the Treasury itself. A body can hardly be described as independent, if it is not subject to the higher surveillance of those who are elected.

I do not criticise the new clause; I am trying to offer some constructive help. It raises some important questions. I asked whether the words,

which shall have the functions assigned to it in this Act,

referred to subsequent functions that may have been included in amendments that were tabled, but which were not selected—no doubt because of the wisdom of the Chair.

9.30 pm

Mr. Letwin: Perhaps I can help my hon. Friend. That phrase refers to the functions that are assigned under amendments Nos. 1 to 5, which systematically replace the word "Treasury" with the phrase "the Independent Body".

Mr. Cash: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. That is one of the points on which you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, prevailed on me not to pursue too far.

My point is slightly different. Irrespective of whether those functions are referred to in amendments Nos. 1 to 5, the difficulty is that the independent body would have a degree of statutory authority that would exceed that of any other body or person that I can think of, except perhaps the Comptroller and Auditor General, whose functions are circumscribed by an Act of Parliament. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the position of the independent body in relation to its accountability to Parliament. It would be a little odd to find that the independent body was not subject to any surveillance by those who are elected even though it would have a role in tax, public expenditure, resource accounting and analysis and other complex matters, as well as in the labyrinth of European financing, accounting, pension liabilities, convergence criteria and all that goes with that. The New Zealand model was mentioned and that might be a subject for consideration as the Bill progresses.

Mr. Letwin: Is my hon. Friend thinking of the possibility that a Select Committee, a new Joint Committee, a Special Standing Committee, the Public Accounts Committee or some such body should scrutinise the activities of whatever independent body is designated under the Bill?

Mr. Cash: It might be such a Committee. However, it might be possible for a new schedule to be added to the Bill. That could more closely define the nature of the independent body, so that we have a clearer picture of its functions in relation to the fabric of parliamentary procedure. It is difficult for me to try to come up with ideas off the cuff, so I will not do so now. However, my hon. Friend's point is worth considering.

The relationship between the independent body and the Comptroller and Auditor General is another issue. The proposals for the body take me back to the time when some of my hon. Friends lost the Whip, not over Maastricht, as is sometimes suggested, but over a

subsequent Finance Bill. The issue was what resources should be made available to the Government of the day from the European Union and what the balance between income and expenditure should be.

At that time, I was very much engaged in trying to identify fraud. In a nutshell, my amendment to that Finance Bill tried to demonstrate the necessity for other member states to have similar bodies to our own. By extension, the independent body in the new clause would require a series of analogous of bodies in other members states to complement it. It would be ludicrous—as I argued in Committee—to have public accounts committees in other member states performing the same function for the sake of maintaining the democracy that is at the heart of new clause 1. At the same time, if there were to be such a thing as an independent body subject to the reservations I have expressed, it would be necessary to have a similar body in other member states. Given the acquis communautaire and all that goes with economic and monetary union, we may say that we will have one set of standards and analysis and the consequences of forming the adjustment as between resources and accounting in this country will be X. However, that will not be complemented by similar requirements in other member states.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that if other European Union countries do not want to maintain high accounting standards, we should not do so ourselves? That is an interesting reversal of his normal position.

Mr. Cash: I am making exactly the other point. Consistent with all that I have ever said on the subject, if we do not know that other member states will insist on the same standards that we expect, we will end up being cheated and gipped by them. A degree of equivalence is essential. I am not advocating that because I do not want the extension of powers to other member states. But if we are to have an independent body as proposed by new clause 1, I would want to know that the same degree of probity, transparency and accountability will apply in other member states. For sure they cheat us now. With proposals of this kind, we can manage to prevent that happening.

Mr. Stevenson: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that unless similar bodies are established in other member states or the EU accepts the proposed independent body, it would lack any credibility?

Mr. Cash: I am saying that the independent body would be able to provide—with the adjustments and reservations that I have described—a degree of objective transparency, provided that it was ultimately subjected to surveillance by elected politicians and Parliament. That is the burden of my argument. I agree with the idea that there should be a degree of independence as reflected by the principles that underlie new clause 1. If that is good enough for this country and if over my dead body—and that is probably true—we were to go into the single currency, we became absorbed by a megastate and our accounts were totally intermingled with those of the EU, it is essential that the same degree of transparency and accountability be applied to other member states, to ensure they do not cheat on us. That has been going on.

I tabled an amendment to a Finance Bill to be sure that we would achieve a degree of correlation between our PAC and the committees of other member states. Sitting more or less where the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South is seated now, I had an arrangement on that very question, through the Government Whips, with the then Prime Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is going wide of the amendment.

Mr. Cash: The anecdote is quite interesting but I take your point, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It may be interesting but it is beyond the scope of the amendment.

Mr. Cash: I accept that. If I do not have the opportunity to recount it in the House, I shall have to include it in my memoirs. It has often been said that the best way to keep a secret is to make a speech in the House of Commons.

I much agree with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who made a superb speech, and of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton, who addressed the question with a balance between technicalities and constitutional objectivity, which is essential.

On the face of it and by any reasonable standards the Bill is as boring as a Bill can be, until one considers the principles that underpin it. They are the key issue and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset for drawing attention to the democratic principles that lie at the root of the new clause to emphasise the necessity of achieving objectivity, transparency and accountability. The Government ought to give serious consideration not only to the arguments that have been made, but to what will happen when the House of Lords gets its hands on the proposals.

Notice has been given that the Parliament Acts will be invoked, but if they are and if the Liberal Democrats, the Cross Benchers and Opposition Members in the House of Lords combine—as they have, to considerable effect—the Government will experience increasing difficulties. Whether they accept the new clause or not, in the context of these myriad arguments they will find themselves required to consider the necessity for greater objectivity in relation to these provisions.

Mr. Tyrie: I am delighted to have listened to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), which was an impressive tour de force that raised a number of interesting issues that I had not thought about at all. I have three main points to make: the first concerns the relationship between obtaining better numbers and ensuring that there is public confidence in them, which is central to the new clause; secondly, I shall develop the argument that only an independent body can deliver that public confidence; and, thirdly, I shall argue that some of the benefits of an independent body would go way beyond the narrow intentions of the new clause to the benefit of macro-economic policy as a whole.

However, I want to touch on some of what has been said by others, although not at length, as it is worth considering further, if only as questions. For example,

[Mr. Tyrie]

might it be possible that the courts, through judicial review, could achieve some of what we hope an independent body would achieve by another route? That interesting idea had not crossed my mind, but should have done. My guess is that it would be extremely difficult for them to achieve that because they would be unlikely to be able to obtain the detailed information that would be required. Much of it will simply never surface in the public domain and always stay in the Treasury. A challenge would be difficult to mount, but I am not a legal expert and it would be helpful to hear a view on that.

Mr. Letwin: I agree that an interesting question has arisen. In the absence of the new clause, if a citizen felt aggrieved because of a particular accounting decision and if that citizen persuaded the High Court that the decision on the accounting principle had been taken unreasonably might there not indeed be grounds for judicial review?

Mr. Tyrie: I certainly think that there would be theoretical grounds for judicial review, but I would not be happy to leave that to the courts and drop the new clause. I would rather include it in the Bill.

Mr. Cash: Under the new clause, my point—which takes us back to the point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson)—also applies. The independent body's activities could be subject to judicial review. I am not certain, but I believe that the superior jurisdiction—which could give rise to an action in the High Court initially and subsequently in the European Court of Justice—may apply, given that those provisions fall in the general remit of economic and monetary union.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is far too long.

9.45 pm

Mr. Tyrie: Again, I could not possibly answer the question, but it is well asked because the possibility of judicial review of the independent body itself could have significant implications.

My hon. Friend mentioned the EU budget in his speech. It had not crossed my mind until this evening that the Bill's scope might stretch as wide as the EU budget. Does the Bill's scope in any way influence the requirements for scrutiny of EU spending in the UK? That is an interesting question, and I should be grateful for an answer from the Minister.

My hon. Friend asked whether accounting fiddles that might take place in the absence of new clause 1 could be used to meet the terms of the Maastricht treaty. The answer must be no, because the European central bank, in conjunction with the Commission, sets its own definitions and accounting standards for meeting the terms of the treaty. I cannot think of any circumstances in which those standards would not apply, and meeting the terms of Maastricht will therefore be dependent on those, and not on resource accounting standards.

Miss Kirkbride: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tyrie: In a moment.

It is true, however—I shall not dwell on this point—that Italy and Germany in particular managed to fiddle their terms of entry. Whether or not the terms of the Bill applied would be scarcely relevant in trying to work out what damage could be done in respect of the Maastricht treaty.

Miss Kirkbride: My hon. Friend has made the point that I was about to make. Why does he suggest that the EU would impose standards that could not be contravened when we know that when countries were seeking to meet their Maastricht convergence criteria, they fiddled their books? What gives him confidence that everything will be all right?

Mr. Tyrie: The answer is simply that Governments will have to satisfy not only their accounting standards but the standards of the ECB, so whatever their domestic arrangements are, those standards will not, at least in principle, be relevant. However, I shall not dwell on that point.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman will not dwell on that—he read my thoughts.

Mr. Tyrie: I should like to pick up on one point—

Mr. Cash: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Tyrie: I think that I had better not.

Mr. Cash: My hon. Friend has mentioned a number of points that I made.

Mr. Tyrie: Well, in that case, I will give way.

Mr. Cash: In the context of new clause 1 and the argument that my hon. Friend has just been making, for independent body, read also Court of Auditors.

Mr. Tyrie: I shall not pursue that intervention because I foresee all sorts of trouble if I do so.

I shall move on to an equally interesting point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson). He asked whether the independent body would be able to move the goalposts without any political scrutiny. That is a concern about new clause 1 which had not crossed my mind. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) did not give the hon. Gentleman a full answer on that point. There are two possible answers. One is that it would be possible for the Government to include a clause in the Bill to enable the Treasury, with a good deal of public scrutiny, to override the independent body.

Mr. Stevenson: In view of the hon. Gentleman's reputation and expertise, his last remarks are significant. Is he saying that the independent body would have to have some override from the Treasury to ensure that it acted in the public interest on all occasions?

Mr. Tyrie: There is an override clause in the Bank of England Act 1998, for example. I am not sure whether it is a good idea, but no one is suggesting now, after some

years of practice, that the Bank of England has not been able to exercise a measure of independence. Perhaps it should be given more independence. I am in favour of that. I thought that the 1998 Act was inadequate. The override approach could be taken with respect to new clause 1.

I do not, however, favour the override route. An alternative route would be to make the independent body accountable to a Committee of the House—probably the Public Accounts Committee—and for the PAC to scrutinise an annual report from the independent body on its work.

Mr. Letwin: I assure my hon. Friend, and, through him, the Minister, that if the Government introduced either of those possibilities, provided that in the first case that the override was sufficiently transparent and difficult to achieve, and that in the second case the scrutiny was properly conducted, it would be entirely acceptable to the Opposition.

Mr. Tyrie: I am glad that, while sitting in the Chamber, I have been able to think of two answers to what I thought was an interesting point from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South.

I want to get on with my speech, rather than dealing with interventions. The first point with which I said I would deal was the relationship between getting good numbers and making sure that the public were aware that they were good and that there was public confidence in the numbers. That is the main purpose of new clause 1.

I am not sure that resource accounting is worth having without new clause 1 or a similar measure. The benefits of resource accounting include better information about what is going on. We have heard from several speakers how difficult it is to find out what is going on in government, and I agree with them on the basis of my experience. We will get more information as a result of the Bill.

However, if that does not inspire public confidence—indeed, if it erodes public confidence—that will be worse than the present situation. It is worth having resource accounting only if it is accompanied by an increase in the transparency of the numbers. Both the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) made that point.

The main reason why we need transparency is straightforward. If one does not get good numbers in the private sector, the penalty for failure or for misinterpreting them is business death—bankruptcy. The reward for success is higher profits.

In the public sector, there is no such direct reward or penalty mechanism. Unless there is powerful scrutiny and transparency, the gains theoretically available from the better numbers are unlikely to materialise. That is because the incentives for the Government to reap them will almost certainly not be strong enough.

It is often said that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. The price of avoiding growing public sector waste is also public vigilance about where the Government's money is going.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Has the hon. Gentleman considered the inadequate provisions of the Freedom of Information Bill, which is going through Parliament at present? That would give class exemptions to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are dealing with a narrow amendment.

Mr. Tyrie: Resource accounting will work only if we get better numbers and they are better scrutinised. That is the nub of my first point. That is why, as has been said, the Bill is about the relationship between the Executive and Parliament. It is our job to exercise that scrutiny. If we are unable to do that because we do not have sufficient confidence in the numbers that we are given, we weaken the relationship between the Executive and Parliament and erode a fundamental part of our democracy.

Mr. David Heath: I shall try again. The Treasury would be exempted from providing information whereas the independent body would not. That is a problem with the class exemptions that have been suggested. The new clause is important because it provides the transparency that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Mr. Tyrie: The hon. Gentleman is probably right. He also made a point about the relationship between new clause 1 and other means by which to obtain much of the information. So much information is technical and requires judgment and a great deal of expertise to analyse it that, even with an effective Freedom of Information Act, which we do not have, or powerful judicial review, I am not convinced that we would get the benefits that new clause 1 would provide.

In the absence of new clause 1, it is relevant to ask how much confidence we can have in the numbers that we are given. I worry that, as matters stand, we cannot rely on the National Audit Office alone to do the scrutiny job. Clause 11 grants a great deal of power of scrutiny to the NAO. It sounds good. Clause 11 states:

> The Treasury shall send accounts . . . to the Comptroller and Auditor General.
>
> The Comptroller and Auditor General shall examine accounts sent to him under this section with a view to satisfying himself that they present a true and fair view.

The problem is that the Treasury controls the standards and definitions that lie behind that auditing process.

The nub of the need for new clause 1 can be found in clause 5(2) and (3), which state:

> Resource accounts shall be prepared in accordance with directions issued by the Treasury.
>
> The Treasury shall exercise the power to issue directions under subsection (2) with a view to ensuring that resource accounts conform to generally accepted accounting practice subject to such adaptations as are necessary in the context of departmental accounts.

In other words, the Treasury can do more or less what it likes. We have only assurances to protect us from the Treasury's exercise of almost arbitrary power.

Lest there be doubt about the Treasury's arbitrary power, it is worth considering clause 9. I did not serve on the Standing Committee that considered the Bill. I started to come to the view that I am expressing this evening

[Mr. Tyrie]

through reading the clause carefully recently. Hon. Members should take its phraseology into account. Clause 9 states:

> The accounts shall contain such information in such form as the Treasury thinks fit, and be designed to conform to generally accepted accounting practice—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have difficulty with the hon. Gentleman's reading various clauses. We are considering new clause 1, and the hon. Gentleman should refer to that.

Mr. Tyrie: The purpose of new clause 1 is to ensure that the Treasury cannot merely decide that the

> accounts shall contain such information in such form as the Treasury thinks fit, and be designed to conform to generally accepted accounting practice subject to such adaptations as are necessary in the context,

but that it should be subject to what an independent body says. That is nub of the argument. Far from straying from the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe that I was right on the button when I read out clause 9(2).

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the Chair makes a ruling that a point is out of order, is it right for an hon. Member to challenge the Chair without having the decency to allow the Chair to answer?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am very capable of dealing with these matters.

Mr. Tyrie: I have never doubted that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. For the sake of the record, I should like to say that I was not for one moment seeking to challenge your authority or your ruling, as I think you will understand.

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

> That, at this day's sitting, the Government Resources and Accounts Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Question agreed to.

As amended in the Standing Committee, again considered.

Question again proposed, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Tyrie: I would describe clause 9(2) as the ultimate "Trust us" clause: "Do whatever the Treasury thinks fit, and we can just jog along."

In fact, the situation is much worse than that, because in other parts of the Bill, the NAO's powers of access are being restricted: access to service providers to find out information, access to information on quangos, access to enable it to audit departmental performance measures and much else that we shall come on to later and that I shall not discuss at any length now. The fact that the NAO does not have unfettered powers of access is a further cause for concern and a further reason why the new clause may ameliorate the situation.

Clause 9 says, "Trust the Treasury". Why should we? I used to work in the Treasury, and I can assure every hon. Member that it is a great place, full of stout chaps and chapesses, full of very able people. But, although the Treasury is Whitehall's policeman, it is ultimately an institution which itself needs to be policed.

It was partly with that in mind that after I worked in the Treasury I started to write a long pamphlet, or a short book, on the control of public spending, in which I proposed a new clause 1. Of course, it was not called "new clause 1". The paper was finally published in 1996. I wrote:

> A further safeguard . . . would be to create a small independent fiscal policy committee with a few full-time staff. Answerable to the Public Accounts Committee,—

that answers the point raised a moment ago—

> . . . its primary role would be to police the definitions—

that is, the standards—

> in the public accounts (including 'capital accounts'),

which is a crucial issue in the whole debate.

So the idea of new clause 1 is not new. I did not invent it; I picked it up off ideas that were floating around in New Zealand at the time. I did not use the internet to find that out; I dropped them a line. The idea of having an independent body to police parts of fiscal policy and the accounts is of very long standing and is one that should commend itself to the House.

I hesitate to read out the new clause, because I do not want to be ruled out of order. Subsection (2)(c) is targeted specifically at the deficiencies of an institution that already exists, the Financial Reporting Advisory Board. The main weaknesses of that body are that the Treasury appoints its members and that it reports not to Parliament, but to the Treasury.

Mr. Letwin: The body could be the FRAB in a new form—I am sure my hon. Friend is about to come on to that—or to a specially constituted national accounts commission, which is where we started.

Mr. Tyrie: As I understand it, the FRAB has a very worthy role. It advises the Treasury on how to reconcile public and private accounting practices, but in my view it cannot do much to bolster the credibility of the numbers in resource accounting, because it is not independent of the Treasury. Clearly, it cannot be independent if it is appointed by the Treasury and answerable to it.

I do not want to suggest that all these problems have suddenly developed out of thin air. The Bill has not suddenly created a huge new crisis in the accounts. The existing system is not perfect, which is why the Bill is being brought forward. It is worth bearing in mind the system that we have in place—the Gladstonian system of scrutiny, which would be partly replaced by the new clause.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I hope that it will not come as too much of a shock to the hon. Gentleman to learn that hon. Members are often not astonished when the Treasury manages to fiddle the figures. We are only astonished that it ever does anything else.

Mr. Tyrie: Having worked in the Treasury, I can assure the hon. Lady that, although fiddles may occasionally have happened, they were the exception

rather than the rule. I shall say more shortly about how these ghastly practices get going in the Treasury, and about whether they are more prevalent now than they were in the old days; but I shall take her intervention as well meant, which I am sure it was.

Let me say something about the existing system. Earlier, I asked whether, if we could not have new clause 1, it was worth having resource accounting at all. The alternative to resource accounting is the existing system, which is at least fairly clear and understood by most Members. Incidentally, I thought that that was what the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) was going to say. Under the existing system, Parliament votes annual cash amounts, Departments explain how they are spent in appropriation accounts, the NAO checks that those Departments have done what they said they would do with the money, and the PAC reports to Parliament on the reports produced by the NAO.

As I said, the system of cash accounting is fairly clear and well understood, although it has led to many problems historically, largely as a consequence of inflation. Gladstone devised the system in a deflationary era, but it did not stop a lot of ripping wheezes getting into the accounts. I use the phrase "ripping wheezes" because it was used in a book by Joel Barnett, now Lord Barnett, called "Inside the Treasury", in which he described how he used to engage in such activities. He would sit down with a group of officials, and work jolly hard at getting as many ripping wheezes as possible into the accounts to fiddle the public sector borrowing requirement.

It is not just coincidence that no such passages will be found in the memoirs of Nigel Lawson or Geoffrey Howe. As far as I know, no such committees were convened to fiddle the accounts at that time. I believe that, on the whole, the problem of ripping wheezes has been more prevalent under Labour than under Conservative Governments. There is a good reason for that. On the whole, during most of the post-war era, Conservative Governments have been keener to see a lower PSBR than Labour Governments. That does not mean that the PSBR has not sometimes become unacceptably high under Conservative Governments, but it reflects a difference of intent, and a different level of concern about the PSBR, which has led, partly, to the package of confidence-building measures that the incoming Labour Chancellor felt obliged to introduce as soon as he took office in 1997.

Mr. Bermingham: I sit here quietly amazed—indeed, I have sat here for years, although mostly on the Opposition Benches, quietly amazed—at the misleading information that has been given. Am I to understand that the hon. Gentleman, a former employee of the Treasury, is blatantly admitting that over the years the Treasury has fiddled the figures time and again? If so, I—who declare an interest as a prosecuting counsel—shall be only too happy to call him as a witness against his own Government.

Mr. Tyrie: *Hansard* will reveal whether I am right, but I thought that I was saying that ripping wheezes—itself a phrase used by a former Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury—were very prevalent under Labour Governments, and far less prevalent under Conservative Governments. As far as I can recall, when I was an adviser to a Conservative Chancellor I never sat at a table with others trying to work out ripping wheezes, but when I consult the memoirs of former Labour Treasury Ministers, I find that they are happy to describe their participation in just such events. Indeed, they are proud to have been inventive enough to find ways in which the PSBR could be massaged down to stave off yet another crisis in the markets.

Ripping wheezes are still prevalent in the existing system. One that has carried on under both Conservative and Labour Governments is export credit guarantees. I have had a serious go at looking at the accounts of the Export Credits Guarantee Department. They are completely impenetrable; they are utterly incomprehensible. Why? Because they often conceal several billion pounds a year of public money, which is being poured down the drain for purposes that I have not yet fully been able to fathom.

The PFI is another ripping wheeze. It can easily turn into a means of passing to future generations the cost of benefits that we are enjoying now. It is a dangerous precedent.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): On the PFI, does my hon. Friend share my scepticism about the PFI attempting to draw the private sector into the provision of finance at which the state is much better? The taxpayer often gets a worse deal.

Mr. Tyrie: My hon. Friend makes his own point in his own way. I enjoyed it very much.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Would my hon. Friend like to comment on the concept of the year-end?

Mr. Tyrie: I am at risk here. I think that I will leave the year-end for another week, if not another year.

I could mention one other little fiddle that the Government have engaged in: the working families tax credit. As it has been talked of in some detail, I will not develop it further.

I have argued that we need independence and the drawing-up of standards and definitions in accounts. That is already a significant problem in the system that we have now, but it is likely to become much worse under a system of resource accounting. I wish to cite a few areas where there is a risk of the problem becoming more serious.

How will some of the Government's assets be valued—for example, recreational facilities such as public parks? How will we score parks under resource accounting? Does that not leave huge scope for massaging the figures? How will defence assets be scored under resource accounting? How much confidence can we have in the assumptions that the Government make when putting them into resource accounts? Would it not be better if an independent body scrutinised the definitions and standards that were applied?

The key PFI issue with respect to resource accounting is: are PFI projects to be on the balance sheet of the Department? Huge future commitments are involved with the PFI. There is a clear case for putting them on the balance sheet.

What about provisioning, which has not been raised at all? How will the public sector be protected from the pernicious effects of what is known as teaming and lading? I cannot possibly expect the Minister to know the

[Mr. Tyrie]

answer off the top of her head, but I should be grateful for some response from her via the Box on provisioning, which is central to time-sensitive issues in public accounts. That is what resource accounting is intended to improve.

Resource accounting can all too easily become a means for getting future generations to pay for present spending. We should be extremely cautious about that. That is why new clause 1, which creates an independent body, will be such a help.

10.15 pm

I said at the start of my speech that I wanted to discuss briefly some of the wider benefits that I think will come from the creation of an independent body. There are several such benefits, which will go far beyond merely clamping down on the scope for creative accounting.

The body could, for example, give much greater credibility to the Red Book and assist in giving the public a wider understanding of macro-economic policy. I have not met anyone who understands the current Red Book. I do not understand it, although I used to try to help to draft earlier ones. I used to sit down with late drafts of the Red Book and try to improve them.

I do not have a clue about the current Red Book. It does not matter which way up it is held, it is basically gibberish. All the definitions have been changed, there is no continuity in the series, and many of the phrases and much of the language is impenetrable. It has become a glossy apology for the lack of an explanation of what is going on in the economy.

Without an independent body to keep an eye on all that, I can easily see how resource accounting will make the Red Book even more difficult to understand, as we shall have a series of resource accounting standards built into a whole host of numbers. For a start, we shall have several sets of parallel accounts that could be extremely difficult to cope with.

I should give an example of one crucial concept that could get badly mucked around by resource accounting in the Red Book. The golden rule is a key notion in which the Government place great store. I think that it is a lot of nonsense, and, these days, so do the German Government, who more or less invented it. Nevertheless, just as the German Government have more or less abandoned the notion, the Labour party has discovered it.

On Second Reading, when I asked the Economic Secretary—who is having a chat at the moment—whether resource accounting would affect the calculation of the golden rule, which will be applied in the Red Book, she said:

> I should not imagine that it would.—[*Official Report*, 6 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 650.]

I must admit that I was a bit perplexed by that answer. Much nearer to the right answer is one that I received, via the Library, from the Office for National Statistics, which states:

> Initial estimates, based on dry run resource accounts for 1998/99, suggest an upward revision of the estimated capital stock of central government at end-1998 of around £6 billion. However, this is offset by downward revisions to the figures for local authorities and public corporations based on evidence from other sources. Overall the public sector depreciation charge for 1998 might be revised up by around £½ billion.

Resource accounting will therefore have huge effects—£5 billion or £6 billion in one direction, and £5 billion or £6 billion in the other—on the calculation of the golden rule. Although the Government say that the golden rule is one of the most fundamental concepts that they have introduced—I believe that it is a nonsense concept—the Minister was not even aware that it might be seriously affected by the introduction of resource accounting.

The independent body could, because it would truly be independent, decide to examine such issues. It could thereby give much greater credibility to the accounts, including the accounts provided in the Red Book. It could also help to establish a commonly agreed set of public accounting concepts by which Government performance could be judged, not only on individual spending programmes, but on overall macro-economic policy.

I fear that, far from moving in that direction, we are moving in the opposite direction. We are seeing the National Audit Office being used to give an air of respectability and stamp of approval to a whole range of tasks and issues, including the national accounts, when in fact no such respectability is deserved. The Government pretend that the fiscal forecast, for example, is being properly vetted by the NAO. However, in truth, the NAO does not examine the revenue or the expenditure assumptions in any detail at all. It cannot do so, it is not authorised to do so, and it does not have the resources to do so. In any case, the Treasury would not want it to.

The truth is that there is no real scrutiny of the fiscal forecast at all. It is just the type of function that a truly independent body, once created, could get its teeth into, and that would be immensely beneficial to assist with an understanding of what is going on in the public accounts, in enabling a wider public debate, and, ultimately, in strengthening democracy. That is why I favour an independent body with a name along the lines of "Fiscal Policy Committee". That would be preferable to some of the other names that have been suggested.

As I have tried to explain, the existing code for fiscal stability is meaningless, because the numbers are so easily subject to manipulation by the Treasury. That is true even before resource accounting. I shall give one example of how easy it is to fiddle the numbers. I should be fascinated to know what assumptions are built into the forecast for the oil price. Perhaps the Minister will be able to tell me—or perhaps she will decide that she does not want to. Do the Government assume that the oil price next year will be the same as it is today? Have they taken an average of the past three months, six months, nine months or 12 months, or is the price for oil in the futures market being used? Each of those assumptions will have dramatically different effects on the bottom line—the public sector financial deficit, as we now have to call it, although it is nearly the same as the public sector borrowing requirement. It is one of those numbers that has been put in the Red Book more to confuse than enlighten us. The NAO is not authorised to go into such detail, but an independent body along the lines suggested in the new clause could eventually do so. That would be all to the good.

The case for an independent body is overwhelming. I cannot think what possible reasons the Government have for opposing the new clause, unless it is that they want to retain the freedom to carry on with the ripping wheezes and fiddles. I understand that by accepting the new clause, the Treasury would be passing up the

opportunity for a good deal of leeway for creative accounting, but the Government must realise that not just all the logic but much accounting practice worldwide points to the creation of such an independent body.

I said at the start of my speech that resource accounting without full public scrutiny and transparency would not deliver enough public confidence and might not be worth having. Ministers need to think carefully about that issue. I strongly urge them either to accept the new clause or to come forward with a similar proposal to ensure public confidence and bolster democracy.

Mr. Swayne: I came late to the debate from Standing Committee F. I came with some suspicion, because I do not normally support consensus. I am normally particularly suspicious when there are such strange bedfellows as those who tabled the new clause. However, having listened to the debate, I am increasingly persuaded of the merits of the new clause. The Bill would be a poor affair without it.

In the interests of brevity, I shall deal with subsection (2) and then go on to the purpose of the new clause outlined in subsection (1). Whatever those who have framed the clause might be accused of, it cannot be of not presenting sufficient choice to the Government. The Government have a wide range of options to debate on how the independent body should be constituted.

I shall run briefly through the three options. Subsection (2)(a) refers to

an existing body serving the accounting profession in the UK.

One of my annual pleasures in this place has been to chair parliamentary gatherings of the Southern Society of Chartered Accountants. A finer body of men there could not be. They might well fulfil the function outlined in the paragraph, but their concerns might lack the national focus that would be required.

Equally, paragraph (b) identifies

an existing international body serving the accountancy profession. . .

That would be a fundamental requirement, as the international angle is very important. However, such a body would lack the proper focus of the Southern Society of Chartered Accountants with its parochial concerns. There has to be a balance between the two, so undoubtedly we are led by a process of elimination to paragraph (c), which identifies

a new body, established for that purpose,

as such a body would have the advantages of the Southern Society of Chartered Accountants and the international accountancy profession, with their national and regional perspectives and, I would suggest, the parliamentary gate-keeping role of the Public Accounts Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). Only a combination of all those attributes would produce a body that was truly fitting of the term "Independent Body" as set out in subsection (1) of the new clause.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Is not my hon. Friend concerned that the process of appointment to a new body might be suspect, or not as rigorous as one would wish, whereas paragraphs (a) and (b) would allow the designation of an existing body of undoubted standing and repute?

Mr. Swayne: That is entirely true, but the possibilities outlined in paragraphs (a) and (b) are simply too narrow. They do not fit the bill, so inevitably we shall have to take the risk that my hon. Friend has quite properly drawn to our attention. If the new clause was tabled because we do not trust the Treasury, one of the drawbacks of establishing a new body is that we do not trust the Treasury to make appointments to it. Nevertheless, to fulfil properly the challenge presented by the new clause, we have to choose option (c), despite the clear risk in respect of appointments to that body. However, if we take elements of (a) and (b) and merge them into a new (c), we shall end up with a body that will command the respect that subsection (1) of the new clause demands of it.

I now move briefly into my analysis of subsection (1), which goes to the heart of the Bill and provides a remedy to the problem that emerges from the Bill and our distrust of it, and to the problem that the Bill attempts to address—namely, our concern about resource accounting within the wider concept of national accounting.

Ever since the national accounts were first framed, we have argued about what they meant and what they were supposed to mean. We needed to draw up those accounts within the perspective of resource accounting because we wanted a measure of economic activity rather than just numbers. We wanted to know that economic activity represented genuine economic welfare. Initially, there was a requirement for an independent body to calculate what constituted economic activity in the first place, and that role was taken by academics at the universities. However, they could not agree what constituted the economic accounts, taking into account resource accounting.

Many hon. Members will remember the study by E. J. Mishan, which pointed out that the accounts meant the reverse of what they purported to mean, that many of the benefits of economic growth were in fact costs, and that therefore the accounts were meaningless because of their inability to provide a true measure of the resource in resource accounting. As a result, the Treasury found itself responsible for calculating the national accounts.

10.30 pm

The national accounts grew out of the desire to measure economic activity at a time when it was fashionable to believe that the Government could determine the level of economic activity. That was the essence of the science of macro-economic management, and the national accounting procedure was a means of measuring the effectiveness of Government policy. However, giving the Treasury the means of measuring the effectiveness of Government policy makes nonsense of independent scrutiny—the poacher is thereby turned gamekeeper.

Mr. Edward Davey: I am slightly perplexed. Is not the hon. Gentleman confusing the national accounts that measure economic activity with those that measure the state of the public finances?

Mr. Swayne: No, I do not believe that I am. The purpose of resource accounting is to take into account the wider concept of assets and liabilities. They are the essence of the national accounts, in terms of the measurement of economic activity and welfare.

However, I want to concentrate on the problems with the Bill. There was always considerable debate about what constituted the national accounts, and how they should be interpreted. Over recent years, the order of that debate has

[Mr. Swayne]

changed. What was once an academic and proper dispute is now based on distrust. I trace that to our entanglement with the European Union.

Much of the negotiation that takes place in the EU is clouded with the proper secrecy of diplomacy. No one can reveal his hand in negotiations, because neither adversaries nor partners should know what that hand contains. A culture of secrecy and deceit—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying rather wide of the new clause.

Mr. Swayne: I accept your stricture, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, my point is that the tendency towards secrecy and clouding true meaning in all aspects of policy was typified by the Treasury. The result is that we now dispute any figure that the Treasury or any other Government Department produces. At Question Time every day bar Friday, for at least an hour hon. Members in this Chamber dispute what figures mean and argue about their accuracy. That is symptomatic of the problem that new clause 1 attempts to resolve.

I suggest that the new clause is absolutely desirable for that reason alone. The requirement for an independent body to scrutinise the figures would at least mean that we could agree what the figure was. We could then concentrate our arguments on the interpretation of that figure. However, people everywhere believe that Governments—of all parties—set out to deceive them.

A number of hon. Friends have mentioned examples of how that phenomenon manifests itself. I do not want to go down that road, but in a brief intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), I took up his example about the private finance initiative. That is an area on which an independent review body would shed a great deal of light. My view is that the Government can raise finance rather more cheaply than any other body in the realm. Therefore, it is unlikely that they will be bettered by private initiatives, which are normally required for management rather than financial purposes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are talking about an independent body, and I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would refer his remarks to that.

Mr. Swayne: My suggestion was that the independent body would clarify issues of resource accounting where they are currently unclear.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Does my hon. Friend consider that any independent body should have both gender balance and ethnic representation?

Mr. Swayne: No, I do not, because as my hon. Friend knows, I am gender blind. I have never divided humanity into two antithetical categories whose interests differ. However, I think that it is now proper to return to the discussion of what should constitute that independent body.

I have already rehearsed the arguments with respect to the opportunities afforded by new clause 1(2)(a), (b) and (c). I reiterate my preference for paragraph (c), which would shed a great deal of light on the issues that have been brought before the House this evening.

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have listened very carefully to the points raised by Opposition Members and by my hon. Friends. Very few of the points made by Opposition Members had not been made before, and at considerable length. We heard some very reiterative speeches. Perhaps it was typical of the standard of some of the contributions to the debate that the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), in discussing ripping wheezes—which was probably a ripping wheeze itself—referred to that as an expression that Joel Barnett had used in his book: although it was used and quoted by Joel Barnett, it was dreamed up by Harold Lever. I presume that that was symptomatic of the accuracy of the hon. Gentleman's general grasp of this whole area.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I am not giving way, I am afraid.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I am giving way to no one.

The Government do not accept that it is necessary to designate an independent body to specify the detailed accounting requirements for resource accounting and budgeting and whole of Government accounts. We believe that our proposals to follow the generally accepted accounting practice gap, modified only as necessary to take account of the specific requirements of resource accounts and the requirement for accounts to present a true and fair view, provide a robust and professional framework for determining departmental accounting policies. All accounting policy issues are subject to the oversight of the Financial Reporting Advisory Board which provides an independent scrutiny and which can, and does, report to Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) made a good point about Conservative Members' failure to explain the difficulties of the new clause. The Treasury, unlike the proposed independent body, is accountable to Parliament. It is simply not feasible to put Parliament in charge of accounting policies. The Treasury is accountable to Parliament; obviously the independent body would not be. No one managed to address that point in the lengthy speeches in favour of the new clause and the amendments. The Government's policies—

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I am sorry; I am not giving way.

The Government's proposals will mean that the Treasury has little discretion in the setting of accounting policies. That is in contrast to the present system, in which the Treasury has almost total freedom to determine the policies to be followed. The proposed system does not require the designation of either an existing body, or a new body, to determine those policies.

A framework has already been put in place—indeed, it was established by the Conservative Government—to ensure that there are limits on the Treasury's discretion. That framework is working—unlike some of the other measures introduced by the Conservatives.

The Maastricht—*[Interruption.]*—The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) asks whether I am taking interventions. He has only just entered the Chamber—no

doubt, he has just come back from dinner. I took many interventions during my previous summing-up but given the quality of the debate on this group, I propose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Hon. Members must not enter the Chamber and shout remarks from sedentary positions.

Miss Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not proposing—

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You will have heard the Minister refer to her remarks as "summing-up". Is it in order for her to sum up? Should she not be replying to the debate?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The words that the Minister uses are entirely a matter for her.

Miss Melanie Johnson: In response to the points made by the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who is no longer in the Chamber, the Maastricht convergence criteria are measured on the basis of the European system of accounts definitions. The national accounts prepared by the Office for National Statistics are, and will continue to be, prepared according to those definitions. The problems that the hon. Gentleman foresees are non-existent.

Mr. Ruffley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I shall not give way.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Chichester, provision in the resource accounts will be determined in accordance with strict criteria laid down in financial reporting standard No. 12, issued by the Accounting Standards Board.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the place of judicial review. Clause 5 should not give rise to an action for judicial review. It covers only the preparation of resource accounts by Departments. It would be impossible for an individual to identify a decision taken by the Treasury in issuing directions in respect of departmental resource accounts affecting him or her personally that could give rise to such an action.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I am not giving way.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Miss Johnson: I have already pointed out to Opposition Members that I gave way many times earlier. Unfortunately, the quality of the debate does not merit my giving way during its conclusion.

The amendments also specify that the independent body should be given the duty of issuing accounts directions to Departments for resource accounts. That is unacceptable to the Government. Responsibility for the preparation of accounts must lie with the bodies preparing the accounts. In the case of Departments, that responsibility must lie with the Treasury to ensure consistency across Departments. Giving the responsibility to an independent body would lead to a confusion of responsibility. It might also result in conflicts between the requirements of budgeting and public expenditure control operated by the Treasury and the accounting requirements.

It was interesting that several Opposition Members were pushed into difficulties by my hon. Friends. My hon. Friends referred to the independence of the Bank of England and to the fact that the Monetary Policy Committee still operated under guidelines, and pointed out that Opposition Members could cite no parallels in their proposals.

In the "Foreword to Accounting Standards", the Accounting Standards Board acknowledges that prescription of accounting requirements for the public sector in the UK is a matter for the Government. Even the board accepts that.

The new clause and amendments have little to recommend them. I trust that, when they are put to a vote, hon. Members will oppose them.

10.45 pm

Mr. Flight: The Government are being what I would describe as extremely 18th century on this subject. It is extraordinary to move towards the greater complication of resource accounting without accepting what New Zealand accepted seven years ago and what the overwhelmingly body of opinion in this country accepts. It is in the country's and the Government's interests to move, at the same time, to an independent body to determine accounting principles.

The case made for the new clause and amendments, especially by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), was overwhelming. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) correctly pointed out that we would think it extremely strange if companies' accounting policies were determined by their directors. It was also said that we would not tolerate in local government the approach that is being argued for in respect of national Government. It will be strange if, as is likely, the Government end up using the Parliament Acts to enable the Treasury to continue to cook the books. That will not enhance their reputation.

The point that emerged above all others is that it is in the national interest to take party politics out of public policy on matters such as interest rates, the BBC and the subjects covered by the Bill. It is inevitable that Governments are motivated to cook the books just as they are motivated—if they can—to pursue an interest rate policy in the short term that is designed to help win elections. It is a compliment to this Chancellor of the Exchequer that he has made an art form of that.

New clause 1 is a compromise and would give the Government substantial choice as to how they might constitute an independent body. As the Minister has pointed out, they are halfway to the requirement with the Financial Reporting Advisory Board, although the central issue is that that body remains advisory, so that, without new clause 1, the Treasury will still have the power to do what it wants.

The onus is on the Government to tell us why it is not appropriate and in the national interest to have an independent body. They have not made any convincing arguments of principle either in Committee or in this debate. Their one argument was that there was concern that an independent body might not give proper attention to the public interest. Opposition Members have said that

[Mr. Flight]

we would accept a reasonable transparency of override by the Treasury. We have also said that it would be appropriate for an independent body to receive the scrutiny of the Public Accounts Committee.

An independent body would offer the proper resolution of the many accounting issues in the public sector which are increasingly difficult to resolve. As others have pointed out, the same logic applies to the new statistics commission, which has been widely welcomed across the nation. It is disappointing that the Prime Minister is now trying to restrict the independent scope of that commission. The Government appear to wish to limit its comments to topics that Ministers have requested it to examine, which means that key issues such as police numbers and hospital waiting lists, which are currently outside the scope of national statistics, will remain excluded.

It is clear that the public are utterly fed up with being given questionable data. They do not believe the data that they are fed. They want accurate, independent data on the Government's performance against their targets, and on the basis of national statistics.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): That is an extraordinary argument from a Front-Bench member of a party that fiddled unemployment statistics 21 times during its period in office.

Mr. Flight: If the hon. Gentleman had been in the Chamber longer, he would have noted the to and fro on both sides. It is generally conceded that the current Government have made that into an art form, as compared with the previous Government's attempts. The reason why we want an independent body is that there is an irresistible temptation for all Governments to endeavour to massage data and statistics in any problematical area. New clause 1 is essentially about preventing that from happening.

Democracies need the truth. The public are fed up. I participated in a TV debate on the subject a week ago and was pleased to note that one of the brightest rising members of the Labour party utterly supported the case for an independent body. The risk is that Governments will start misleading themselves, will believe data that are misrepresented and will take wrong policy decisions.

The House might give some thought to the massive new accounting issues that will arise as a result of resource accounting, which should be resolved in a transparent manner: it is in the interest of Governments that they be so resolved. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset drew attention to pension liabilities and growing PFI liabilities, as the volume of PFI activity increases. There are the difficult territories of contingent liabilities, Crown immunity and potential NHS liabilities—now running at close to 10 per cent. of budget. There is the issue of whether to account for welfare benefits on a gross or net basis. There are military depreciation and IT depreciation policies, and differences in depreciation policies as between different Government Departments. There is the growing territory of how we account for intellectual property or depreciate it as an asset.

As to tangible assets, there are the issues of valuation and revaluation. As current events demonstrate, there is a big accounting issue in relation to BNFL.

Mr. Wardle: If resource accounting takes the ultimate form of a consolidated balance sheet for the whole of Government, can my hon. Friend imagine what the notes to the balance sheet would look like with all the contingent liabilities that he has just described? Is it not vital that the CAG has access to every aspect of the spending of taxpayers' money—particularly in respect of contingent liabilities?

Mr. Flight: Absolutely right. We will come to that aspect later. It is essential not only that the CAG should have such access but that there should be independent accounting and depreciation policies under which vastly more complicated accounts can be kept. As system that simply relies on an advisory role, when the present system allows different Departments to have different depreciation policies, is non-operable.

Eventually, there will be consolidated resource accounts that are relatively meaningless. Therefore, I would argue that it is not only against the national interest but foolish for Governments not to see the advantages of having the many difficult decisions of principle that need to be taken resolved for them on a properly transparent and open basis. Governments have to take decisions in difficult areas, many of which involve self-evident conflicts of interest between what might be good for them and what might be correct, and a Government who keep them unto themselves will be accused of taking the wrong decisions—indeed, they could be blamed for decisions wrongly taken for wrong reasons, which may prove embarrassing subsequently.

The move to resource accounting will be completely untenable unless the new clause is accepted. Cash accounting has remained for nearly 140 years since being established by Gladstone, largely because it is much less complicated. It is much less difficult to cook the books under cash accounting than under resource accounting, which is why the Government sector is out of date in having reached the millennium with cash accounting—but we are moving to all the complications of resource accounting while leaving decisions to the 18th-century approach whereby the Treasury ultimately says what the accounting principles will be. It will have the power to change depreciation policies during the course of the year: to my mind, that simply does not stand up. In essence, it is absurd not to have the one without the other.

I repeat the point with which I started: the onus must surely be on the Government to put good arguments for not making both changes and for not following the rational route taken by New Zealand, but we have not heard any such arguments from them.

Mr. Tyrie: Not one.

Mr. Flight: Not one, as my hon. Friend says. We fully support the new clause, which has cross-party support and wide support outside the House. I suggest that it has wide support in the nation. The Government are misleading themselves if they believe that the considerable increase in the massaging and misrepresentation of figures has been accepted by the voters. I repeat, for the third time,

that people are fed up with data on which they cannot rely. In a democracy, they expect accurate data and good figures. We urge the House to support the new clause.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 152, Noes 311.

Division No. 91] **[10.58 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Peter Luff.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John

Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 2

PUBLIC SERVICE AGENCIES' ACCOUNTS: SCRUTINY

'.—(1) This section applies to any public service agency of the sort described in subsection (11), unless otherwise provided—

(a) by any order made under subsection (8), or

(b) in any enactment passed after this section comes into force.

(2) On the prescribed date for each public service agency to which this section applies subsections (3) to (6) shall apply to that agency.

(3) Every public service agency shall prepare accounts in respect of each financial year and shall send them to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

(4) The Comptroller and Auditor General shall examine accounts sent to him under this section with a view to satisfying himself—

(a) that the accounts present a true and fair view, and

(b) that any public money provided to the agency has been expended for the purposes intended by the body by which the money was paid.

(5) Where the Comptroller and Auditor General has conducted an examination of accounts under subsection (4) he shall—

(a) certify them and issue a report,

(b) send the certified accounts and the report to the Treasury, and

(c) if he is not satisfied of the matters set out in subsection (4)(a) and (b), he shall report to the House of Commons.

(6) The Treasury shall lay accounts and reports received under subsection (5)(b) before the House of Commons.

(7) Subsections (3) to (6) do not apply to any body to the extent (but only to the extent) that any of its accounts are or become subject to audit—

(i) by the Auditor General for Scotland, or

(ii) by the Auditor General for Wales.

(8) The appropriate Minister may by order designate a public service agency as one in relation to which this section does not apply for so long as the designation remains in force.

(9) An order under subsection (8) shall be made by statutory instrument, and shall not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of the House of Commons.

(10) "Appropriate Minister" means, as regards any public service agency to which a designation relates ("the designated agency"), a minister in the department responsible for that agency.

(11) "Public service agency" means a body—

(a) which is not a government department or comprised within a government department,

(b) which exercises public functions of a governmental nature which might otherwise fall to be exercised by central government, and

(c) as respects which an accounting officer has been designated,

but does not include a public service agency which is a company registered under the Companies Act 1985.

(12) In this section "prescribed date" means, as regards each public service agency, the first day of the first full financial year of that agency commencing after the expiry of the term of appointment of the person who is the auditor of the agency when this section comes into force.'.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. David Davis: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 32 and 33.

Mr. Davis: New clause 2 deals with the audit of executive non-departmental public bodies. I am sorry to inflict such an ungainly phrase on the House, but it is a term of art in government; it means quangos. It has no statutory definition, and that is why the term does not appear in the new clause. Its practical definition is contained in the annual Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Would hon. Members who do not intend to participate in or listen to the debate please leave the Chamber and allow us to hear the hon. Gentleman who is addressing the House?

Mr. Davis: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The practical definition in "Public Bodies" is:

The set of bodies which exercise public functions of a governmental nature which might otherwise fall to be exercised by Government.

They are more familiarly known as quangos. The new clause uses the definition in "Public Bodies".

Audit arrangements for executive non-departmental public bodies are arbitrary and illogical. A substantial minority are audited by auditors other than the Comptroller and Auditor General. The decision about who will audit each newly established body is made by the individual sponsoring Department when the body is established. Consequently, there is a lack of consistency in the information that is provided to Parliament, and unnecessary waste and duplication of audit effort.

That contrasts with what happens when the Government of the day choose to reorganise or create a new Department. The Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866 currently provides automatically for the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit the new Department. The Bill would maintain that principle.

11.15 pm

The new clause is the first step in obtaining for public bodies the same systematic audit coverage as has been in place for Departments for over 130 years. I say that it is the first step, because it does not deal with those executive non-departmental public bodies established as companies. The Companies Acts prevent the Comptroller and Auditor General from auditing a company, even where it has been established by central Government and is responsible for the stewardship of public funds. I have been advised that it would be outside the scope of the Bill to seek to amend the Companies Acts, but I shall be pursuing that matter in the context of the Government's review of companies legislation.

Leaving aside the issue of companies, I would point out that the new clause would provide a single accountability structure, appointing the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of all executive non-departmental public bodies already in existence and of any new bodies of this nature created in the future.

I should make it clear that I am talking about non-devolved bodies. I do not seek to reverse the clear—

Mr. Bermingham: May I ask the right hon. Gentleman, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a simple question? He is an experienced Member of this House, as indeed I am. Does he need to read his speech?

Mr. Davis: In fact, on this occasion I need to stay close to the notes, and there is a good reason for that. These amendments have been drafted by the National Audit Office, and it is important that the issues that I put before the House reflect accurately both the report that the Public Accounts Committee put to the House and the drafting. For that reason, I am staying close to the notes, just as the Minister will stay close to the notes. That is the reason, and I make no apology for it. I would not seek to comment on the motivation behind the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

I do not seek to reverse the clear decision of Parliament in placing accountability of certain bodies within the audit committees of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The new clause specifically excludes those bodies.

At this point, I should like to take the opportunity to congratulate the Government on their record to date in appointing the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit nearly all the non-executive departmental bodies that they have created—19 out of the 21 so far, I think. They have a good record, and I hope that it will continue.

The new clause would make that pattern systematic, rather than the subject of myriad individual decisions, and would deal with the legacy of existing anomalies. I have developed a new clause that I tabled in Committee specifically to address concerns that the Government expressed there. The Chief Secretary told the Public Accounts Committee that the Government would need a period of consultation before changing statutory arrangements that affected other bodies. I have allowed for that by deleting from the proposal that I tabled in Committee the provision that would have brought the new clause into effect immediately the Bill took effect. As a result, the Treasury can delay the implementation of the new clause to a time of its own choosing. That reflects the discussions that the Chief Secretary had with the

[Mr. Davis]

Committee, because he was concerned to be able to consult and seek the opinions of Departments up and down Whitehall and of the other bodies involved.

Such a statutory approach is not only right in principle but essential in practice. The Chief Secretary gave the Committee a commitment to explore the possibility of appointing the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor when appointments came up for renewal. Such appointment would be impossible in all but a handful of cases, because statutory provisions restrict the Comptroller and Auditor General from doing just that.

The Government now appear to have acknowledged the problem. They have tabled an amendment which allows the Treasury, if it chooses at some future date, to remove the statutory bars and provide for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be appointed as auditor. The decisions would still be in the hands of Government. My amendment seeks to establish the general principle that all such bodies, both those already established and those to be established in the future, should be audited by the Parliament's own auditor, and that these decisions should not be at the whim of Government—whether the present Government or any future Government.

My new clause also allows the Government a right of veto in regard to anyone whom they identify as not appropriate for audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. I cannot imagine what such a body would be, but the reassurance is there for the Government. Hon. Members may ask what is the point of the new clause if it allows such a veto. The point is that it would establish in statute the principle that the CAG should be the auditor, except when the Government can show that he should not be. It reverses the burden of proof. That is why I prefer my new clause to the Government's proposal.

We had a useful debate in Committee until, I believe, 9.45 pm on the occasion of the final sitting. Detailed amendments covering a representative selection of individual bodies, tabled by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) on behalf of the PAC, gave the Economic Secretary an opportunity to explain the Government's concerns by reference to specific cases. That helped to clarify my understanding, and showed me how to draft a new clause dealing with reservations that had hitherto been difficult to pin down.

In explaining why the new clause is important, I want to alert hon. Members to the large amounts of money involved, the illogicality of the present position, and the problems that have arisen in bodies not subject to audit by the CAG. I do not want to repeat what has already been said; rather, I want to develop it. I intend to summarise some facts that show why there is a point at issue, and then deal with what I now understand more fully to be the Government's concerns.

Let me deal first with the question of money. The Housing Corporation—one of the bodies about which I am talking—receives nearly £1 billion of public money every year, while English Heritage and the Environment Agency receive about £100 million each. Those are just three of the biggest spenders outside the CAG's remit; many others escape his audit. The total comes to some £3 billion a year.

Secondly, the illogicality involved means that some bodies escape. The CAG audits the Countryside Agency and English Nature, but not the Environment Agency. He audits the British Council and the Arts Council, but not English Heritage. As we have seen, some of the exceptions are big spenders.

Thirdly, in Committee I gave examples of bodies outside the remit of the CAG, to which he was alerted by leads from whistleblowers and others. For example, events leading to the resignation of the chief executive of English Heritage following conflicts of interest were brought to Parliament's attention by the CAG. Serious failures in management by the then National Rivers Authority, including a badly managed relocation project that cost the taxpayer millions, were also thus brought to Parliament's attention. The Merseyside development corporation lost £700,000 on the grand regatta Columbus and the fanfare for a new world concert. The chief executive of the Student Loans Company—not, unfortunately, covered by my new clause, because it is a company—was cleared of malpractice by internal and departmental investigations, but was sacked following a subsequent investigation by the CAG.

Those matters were not discovered by the private and other auditors that covered the bodies concerned; they were revealed by whistleblowers and others, followed up by the CAG and, as a result, brought to the attention of Parliament. I hope that my observations convince hon. Members that the fact that some non-departmental public bodies escape audit by the CAG gives cause for serious concern.

Let me now deal with the Government's arguments about why the current uneven situation should continue to exist, and their concern, as expressed, about changing it. I shall begin by analysing explanations given in debate about specific bodies, before turning to more general concerns that have been raised.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government cannot have much confidence in the arguments that they have advanced? If they did, they would accept his reversal of the burden of proof, and would be willing to demonstrate, case by case, why particular bodies should not be audited by the CAG.

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is right. That was the logic behind the analysis. What I had in mind was that the Government would come to the House with an affirmative resolution procedure to demonstrate whatever good reason there was. That struck me as a perfectly good filter.

In Committee, the Economic Secretary referred to 22 specific bodies. She identified three categories into which they fell: those which no logical reason prevents the CAG from auditing; those that he "probably should not audit"—her words—because they are levy funded; and those that he should not audit because they are subject to competitive pressures.

I thank the Economic Secretary for her frankness in identifying the first category and for agreeing that, in some cases at least, there is no logical reason why the CAG does not audit certain bodies. I counted eight entries in that category, more than a third of the sample, including two large bodies that I have already mentioned: English Heritage and the Environment Agency.

Of those two, the Minister said:

> I cannot say why the Comptroller and Auditor General does not audit those NDPBs . . . We accept that there is no apparent rationale to some of the anomalies.

The other bodies in the category were the Football Licensing Authority, the Gas Consumers Council, the British Hallmarking Council, the Museum of London, the Oil and Pipelines Agency and Food from Britain. It is clear that progress must be made to bring at least those eight executive non-departmental public bodies under the CAG's remit.

I turn to the second category: levy-funded bodies, which had nine entries, according to my count. Six related to agriculture and fisheries: the Meat and Livestock Commission, the Sea Fish Industry Authority, the British Potato Council, the Horticultural Development Council, the Milk Development Council and the Home-Grown Cereals Authority. The other three were the Construction Industry Training Board, the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board and the Policyholders Protection Board.

On that category, the Minister was equivocal. She said:

> We can debate whether it would be right to appoint the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of such bodies.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 288.]

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), who is my colleague on the PAC, took up the offer of debate. I can do no better than to quote him:

> A case has already been made for saying that although some bodies may be funded by levy, it is nevertheless money from the public and it is Parliament's job to decide on the amount. It is a good reason for supposing that it is also Parliament's job to ensure that that money is being properly used; how do we know at what level the levy should be set in the following year if we are not sure that the levy set in the previous year was properly used?—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 309.]

That is an insuperable argument. Those who pay statutory levies have no choice about whether and how much to pay. In those cases, levies are raised not in a commercial environment, subject to competitive pressures, but under the authority of Parliament. The CAG audits Departments' expenditure of money that is raised under Parliament's authority through the taxation system. It is clearly appropriate for him to audit the expenditure of money raised under Parliament's authority through levy.

In any event, the CAG already audits several levy-funded bodies—the Data Protection Registrar, the Land Registry, the Pensions Compensation Board and the Trinity House Lighthouse Board—as well as the gas levy account and the industrial organisation levy account.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the right hon. Gentleman understand the term "levy" to cover the television licence fee? According to his argument, should the BBC fall under the NAO's jurisdiction?

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman is ingenious in returning to the point that was ruled out of order. I recognise that in those terms. There are special considerations about maintaining the BBC's independence. The NAO has been effective at maintaining the independence of, for example, universities and academic freedom, where precisely the same pressures are involved, but he is right.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the independence that is treasured is independence of the Executive and that the CAG is not an arm of the Executive and does not compromise independence?

Mr. Davis: That is right. That is one of the reasons. The CAG is in a peculiar position. He is incapable of being dismissed by the Executive because he is appointed, effectively, by the PAC Chairman, in conjunction with the Prime Minister. He is funded separately. All the protections that he has mean that he cannot be influenced by the Executive. As such, he is appropriate to do the job that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) suggested.

11.30 pm

The House may have noted that many of the bodies that I mentioned were Ministry of Agriculture bodies. Recently, we had in front of the PAC Richard Packer, who was having his valedictory meeting with us. We asked him whether he thought that the National Audit Office should audit all of those agricultural bodies. He not only thought that there was no argument whatever against doing so, but was entirely in favour of them being audited.

I started my comments on this category by saying that the Economic Secretary was equivocal about whether the Comptroller and Auditor General should audit levy-funded bodies. I hope that she, or at least the Financial Secretary, has now heard enough evidence to conclude that, without doubt, the Comptroller and Auditor General should audit them. Those further nine executive non-departmental bodies must be brought under the Comptroller and Auditor General's remit.

The Minister's third category comprised bodies that operate in a competitive or commercial environment. She identified five bodies in the category: Remploy, the Student Loans Company, the Housing Corporation, housing action trusts and English Partnerships. The first two were not the subject of tabled amendments, because they are companies and, therefore, are excluded. However, it was helpful for the Minister to mention them, as it enabled us to debate more thoroughly the Government's concerns about the third category.

The Minister stated that the first two bodies operate "in a competitive environment". My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) challenged the idea that those two bodies were subject to competitive pressures in the sense that most of us understand them. The Student Loans Company has the characteristics of a monopoly, being organised in such a way that it is the only body in England that is able to offer subsidised loans to students. Remploy would not be sustained by public money if its market niche was well occupied by competitors. Therefore, it, too, must be close to being a monopoly.

The arguments about the absence of true competitive pressure apply also to the other bodies that the Minister placed in the third category. To be fair to her, she did not claim competition in relation to them, referring to the Housing Corporation simply as "a commercially focused organisation" and to English Partnerships as operating "in a commercial environment".

Those bodies are not normal commercial organisations that are subject to regulation by the demands of a competitive market, and the Minister, to be fair to her, did not claim that they were.

Mr. Letwin: Is not my right hon. Friend slightly understating the case on the Housing Corporation? Is it

[Mr. Letwin]

not true that no aspect of its activities bears the remotest resemblance to anything commercial, as it is essentially a regulatory body for housing associations?

Mr. Davis: It is more than regulatory, as it handles quite a lot of funds, too, but I am trying not to overstate the case. To make the point rather more directly, all those bodies are public bodies delivering against a serious public social policy objective and using public funds to do so.

Why is it not only appropriate but essential for the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit those bodies?

Mr. Wardle: I have been listening carefully to my right hon. Friend's comments. He has been talking very persuasively about extending the CAG's audit responsibilities, but, these days, does not the CAG also have a wider responsibility in value for money assessments? Is not that role of growing importance in ensuring accountability of taxpayers' money?

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend, who is a colleague on the Public Accounts Committee, is exactly right. To put it crudely, the audit function very often serves as an intelligence-gathering function in much of the value for money work that is done, and also carries with it a function that commercial auditors often do not test: the function of regularity, which is concerned with the proper expenditure of public money. The function deals not only with whether the sums add up and money is not stolen, but with whether the money is spent on the right things.

That brings me to why it is essential for the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit those bodies. If a body is funded by money provided by Parliament to deliver on behalf of a sponsoring Department public policies approved by Parliament, the question of regularity comes to the fore. If the money has been used other than to pursue the policy objectives laid down for it, its use is irregular. Regularity is an issue on which the CAG frequently reports to Parliament, but it is a concern with which commercial auditors are less familiar.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The right hon. Gentleman is dealing with a serious new clause at 11.35 pm. It should have been properly debated earlier. We have spent six hours playing around in the Chamber on nonsense amendments that did not mean anything. Is it not incredible that Parliament has been abused in this way—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of Parliament. He knows that we do not play around with amendments that mean nothing.

Mr. Davis: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman. I am glad that he recognises that the new clause deals with a serious matter. Unfortunately, I do not choose the time at which my amendments are called. I hope that all hon. Members recognise how serious the issue is. I agree with at least that point that the hon. Gentleman made.

The CAG reports regularly to Parliament on regularity, but commercial auditors are less familiar with the issue. In some cases, they are entirely unfamiliar with it. We have some examples of that. The examples that I quoted earlier of the serious failures in bodies not audited by the CAG included the Housing Corporation and the Student Loans Company. It is clear that those bodies need to be subject to his audit.

The Minister suggested that the Comptroller and Auditor General might not audit bodies operating in a commercial environment

> as well as auditors who deal regularly with commercial organisations.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 289.]

Leaving aside the fact that the bodies in question do not operate in a commercial environment in the way in which one would normally interpret the expression, the contention that the CAG is not competent to audit them has no substance in fact. As the hon. Member for Newbury put it:

> there is little argument to suggest that some special expertise is hidden away in the private sector that is not available to the Comptroller and Auditor General.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 310.]

There are three reasons for that. First, the Comptroller and Auditor General is free to use private sector auditors with specialist expertise if necessary, and he does. Secondly, his staff have undergone the same training process and earned the same qualifications as those in the private sector. Indeed, some of the senior staff are drawn from partners in the major firms. Thirdly, the evidence that we have seen in the PAC shows that private sector auditors are not invulnerable. In some cases, fraud or impropriety have come to light only when the Comptroller and Auditor General has become involved. The examples that I gave earlier show that. I hope that the Minister accepts that the bodies placed in the third quasi-commercial category must be audited by the CAG and that he is perfectly capable of doing that job.

There are good reasons why the Comptroller and Auditor General should audit bodies that fall within each of the categories. I should like to deal briefly, given the time, with four further matters that the Minister raised in Committee. She said:

> We do not have a one-size-fits-all policy—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 288.]

and later added, confusingly:

> The Government do not view it as sensible to tackle the issue piecemeal.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 300.]

I think that I understand what the Minister meant and I have developed my new clause in a way that I believe is consistent with her wishes. It is manifestly not piecemeal. It defines a consistent structure under which the CAG would audit every executive non-departmental public body, just as he audits every Department. In recognition of the Minister's concerns, I have included a veto clause that would allow the Government, by order, to specify any body to which they believed that the standard arrangement should not apply. That allows for the possibility of appointing an auditor other than the CAG if the Government identify that such an alternative would be appropriate. The veto addresses the one-size-fits-all issue.

Secondly, the Minister may have given the impression that she considered that an appropriate alternative to appointing the CAG by statute might be for him to bid for audits put out to tender. That would not be ideal. The CAG's audit should not be allowed only where the price

is right or at the whim of the Departments and bodies that should be subject to scrutiny. The CAG must audit on behalf of Parliament by statutory right.

Thirdly, the Minister pointed out in the context of one body that

there is already an auditor, who has been appointed for five years.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 299.]

I accept that that circumstance probably applies in respect of a number of other bodies, although with differing numbers of years of appointment remaining. I developed the new clause to allow appointed auditors currently serving to complete their full terms, so no damages or costs would be incurred in that respect, and the CAG could take over after that. I hope that the Minister accepts that there is no longer an issue here in respect of my revised new clause.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): My right hon. Friend will be aware that one of the dodges used by companies that perpetrate fraud is to change their auditors quite frequently. Is it not important, therefore, that there is consistency of audit? The CAG would provide that consistency.

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is entirely right. However, I do not think that it has been a problem in the public sector. More of a problem has been the varying standard of audit and sometimes too cheap an audit, as occurred in respect of further education colleges where there was significant serial weakness of auditing, which allowed certain problems to arise. I am sure that Treasury Ministers are aware of that, as the Public Accounts Committee reported on the sector. I take my hon. Friend's point that that is a potential risk, but not one that is very material in the public sector.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): As one who has served under three Chairmen of the Public Accounts Committee, may I ask the right hon. Gentleman whether, as a fair-minded man, he thinks that at 11.40 pm any of us should be asked to take in his speech, which instinct tells us is extremely consequential and important? Would it not be better that we should at least be allowed to see it in print before making any contributions?

Mr. Davis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his implicit compliment, but I have to tell him that I have no such opportunity. The Government must choose the timetable on this matter. It is only for me to present the amendments and I am seeking to make the best argument. However, the Bill was debated at length in Committee and many of my points, although not all of them, have been touched on. The debates are available in the Committee *Hansard*.

Mr. Rendel: The right hon. Gentleman may wish to point out that there are now more Labour Members present in the Chamber than there were for the earlier debates. Perhaps this is a rather better time for the debate.

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman is right, but I shall not pursue his point as I am almost at the end of my speech and I do not want to be accused of filibustering.

Finally, the Minister said:

if the Comptroller and Auditor General is concerned about what is happening in an NDPB, he can investigate and make a report."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 289.]

He does indeed have access to all executive NDPBs by virtue of administrative agreement struck only after years of pressure from the Public Accounts Committee. However, access is a poor substitute for audit, for reasons that I touched on in answer to my hon. Friend some moments ago.

The Minister's point also begs the following question: how does the CAG know whether to be concerned if he is not the auditor? It is a matter of information flow and intelligence. Where he is not the auditor he relies on tip-offs from whistleblowers and others and that is an intrinsically haphazard method of gathering information. Surely we cannot rely for the probity of our civil service and our public service on the luck of having a whistleblower in the appropriate organisation.

The alternative is to increase the CAG's regular presence, but that is an avoidable duplication of audit, which the Minister quite properly dislikes. The reliable and best-value solution is to appoint the CAG to audit all executive NDPBs.

I conclude by expressing the hope that my explanations and clarifications, and my development of the new clause from the version tabled in Committee, will cause the Government to agree that it should be incorporated in the Bill. I should be very pleased if the Government offered to discuss my proposals further, with a view to tabling a further version in the House of Lords. However, I hope that I have dealt with all the issues that arose in Committee systematically, and that I have eradicated all of them.

11.45 pm

Mr. Letwin: Before I try to amplify some of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), I shall respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). If he thinks that our debates about setting independent standards for the public accounts were footling, his understanding of the relationship between Parliament and the Executive is more lacking than I had thought. It is a matter of the utmost importance. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Regardless of the time, the debate will not be helped by sedentary interventions from hon. Members.

Mr. Letwin: In our prolonged Committee discussion of the matter incorporated in new clause 2, the Financial Secretary and the Economic Secretary objected to the previous versions of the new clause. Their objections included the proposition that the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General could not be extended to a wide range of non-departmental public bodies because those bodies were governed by statutes that barred the CAG.

It is with some surprise, therefore, that we find that the Government have come forward with their own amendment allowing them to circumvent a problem that they claimed in Committee to be insuperable. The amendment would permit the operation of what is in effect a Henry VIII clause by order. There is nothing wrong with that mechanism—there never was, apart from some constitutional implications. However, there was certainly something wrong with the Government's argument that the statutory consideration rendered it impossible to extend the remit.

[Mr. Letwin]

That much was clear—to Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members, and to members of the Public Accounts Committee, at least. We were passing a piece of primary legislation that would undo previous legislation. Our view was that that could be better done by positive enactment, but we joined my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden in welcoming the Government's conversion to the evident truth that the CAG's remit could be extended.

That is important. In Committee, the problem was that the Government's objections were based on arguments rather than real reasons. They have now admitted that those arguments were specious, so I hope that Ministers will tell the House the real reason why the Government persist in their objections to the gist of new clause 2. The problem cannot be technical, as I am sure that Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members would all accept that the new clause could be revised and tabled in an amended version, without technical deficiency, in another place.

What is the difference between the Government's amendment and my right hon. Friend's new clause? As my right hon. Friend identified, it is a difference in the position of the burden of proof. The Government's amendment allows the Government to decide to introduce the Comptroller and Auditor General. The new clause would allow the Government to come forward with reasons why, in a particular case, the Comptroller and Auditor General should not be introduced. The presumption in the new clause is that the Comptroller and Auditor General will have general oversight. We must therefore ask what is the real reason for the Government's belief that it is advantageous for the burden of proof to rest on Parliament. Why do the Government believe that Parliament ought to show the Government the need to extend the remit of the CAG case by case? Why is it not clear to the Government that there is a presumption, a prima facie case, for having the CAG oversee the whole of government, non-departmental public bodies and the rest? Why are the Government resisting the reversal of the burden of proof?

In Committee, hon. Members from all parties, including members of the Public Accounts Committee, were involved in the common endeavour of identifying the advantages—I think that they came into clearer focus in my mind—of having the CAG as an auditor. We identified in particular the great advantage that the CAG is the platonic ideal of an auditor. He does not suffer from the problem that all auditors in the private sector suffer from necessarily, because they are employed by the people whose accounts they are auditing. While many auditors in the private sector struggle heroically with that problem and overcome it, offering honest and sometimes damning verdicts on their own clients, it is asking a lot of them to rat on the company that employs them. It is remarkable, in fact, that so often the system works. It is an inevitable feature of private sector auditing. One cannot think of anyone who would employ the auditors rather than the directors, but it is the directors that the auditors are ultimately auditing.

The CAG has the inestimable advantage of not being in that position. My right hon. Friend exposed, in very great detail, the huge array of measures that the previous Government had the wisdom to implement which protect the CAG from any accusation that he is an employee of the Executive that he is auditing. Nor is he employed by the particular Department or non-departmental public body that he is auditing in a particular case, by the Treasury or by the Government—he is employed by Parliament. He is employed by Parliament in a real sense because the parliamentary body, the Public Accounts Committee, which has put forward the amendment is, in effect, his employer. The CAG is in the unique position, not available in the private sector, of carrying out the auditing without there being the slightest conflict of interest.

Mr. Wardle: I hesitate to correct my hon. Friend, so knowledgeable is he. But surely in the private sector the shareholders appoint the auditor. Are not the shareholders in exactly the same position as Parliament? Is it not Parliament that is calling for the CAG to play that role so far as public sector enterprises are concerned?

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend amusingly describes me as the expert, whereas, through his long service on the PAC and in other respects, he is the expert. Technically, he is right—the shareholders appoint the auditors. However, he will know as well as I do that de facto in the private sector, the directors act for the shareholders. *[Interruption.]* As my hon. Friend says from a sedentary position, they stand in the position of the Executive or the Government. The difference is that in the public sector we have the great luck—not available in the private sector—that the shareholders meet constantly in Parliament. They are thus genuinely able to act—through the PAC—in a capacity that is not available to shareholders in a normal private company. Of course, those shareholders have the right to approve or disapprove the auditor, but they will almost always act on the recommendation of the directors.

However, in the case of the PAC and Parliament, the Comptroller and Auditor General is genuinely distanced from the Executive. I believe that my right hon. Friend—or whoever holds his office as Chairman of the PAC—and the Prime Minister share the appointment. It is unique that the Executive should consciously have given a veto power to an agent of Parliament—by convention, an Opposition Member.

We have a perfect system for avoiding conflict of interest in audit. I return to the question: why, in the light of that, should the burden of proof lie with those who want to extend the remit of the CAG to additional agencies?

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Before my hon. Friend moves away from the relationship between the CAG and the House, as opposed to the relationship between that person and the Government, may I refer him to the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866, which established that relationship? It states that every relevant account shall be examined by the Comptroller and Auditor General on behalf of the House of Commons.

It is clear that the relationship was direct, as my hon. Friend points out, and that we must not breach it by extending the ability of the Government to interfere in it and sully it.

Mr. Letwin: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He is right to take us back to Gladstone. Part of the essence

of the Gladstonian reforms, which have so entranced the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and others, was that they created an indestructible relationship between Parliament, conceived as something apart from the Executive, and the CAG. He is correct to point out that there is a severe danger that the Government's amendment—reversing the burden of proof and making it the case that the Executive have to be persuaded of the need to extend the CAG's remit—might paradoxically introduce the precedent that the Executive should determine the remit.

If that were to be read as the precedent, it is possible that the Government amendment—as opposed to the new clause proposed by my right hon. Friend—would be deleterious. I do not think that is the Government's intention. They have tried to make a move towards the PAC and both the Opposition parties, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) acutely points out, they may have succeeded in making matters slightly worse.

However, why should the Government prefer their amendment? What is the real reason that they do not want Parliament to have the presumption that the CAG has a universal remit in the public sector? After all, the CAG does not have the problem that he is barred by statute, because the Government have accepted that they can alter that at the whim of an order. Furthermore, we established in Committee—I have tried to re-expose the matter during the debate—that the CAG has a unique position as a perfect audit system, without the inherent conflicts of interest in such systems.

The argument is stronger than that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden pointed out. I emphasise his comments. There is a real reason why the House of Commons, as the guardian of taxpayers' money, should want as a presumption, or even as an absolute rule—if I have a quibble with my right hon. Friend's amendment, it is that he has gone too far in the Government's direction—that the CAG should be the auditor of each public sector body. Why? Because of my right hon. Friend's point about regularity.

It is not merely that private sector auditors, if they are employed directly by the institutions being audited, do not have familiarity with the concept of regularity. Their whole culture is necessarily different. They are not concerned with questioning whether money has been applied to a particular use allocated by some shareholders. To take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle). In a private sector company, shareholders never try to tell directors how to allocate their money. They tell directors to maximise profit. Auditors seek to discover whether the profits reported by directors have been reported on a true and fair basis. They are very good at that and, sometimes, they are brilliant. However, they do not attend to the concept of regularity. If someone talks to the best private sector auditors and asks them to check up on regularity, they would, by and large, look at him as if he had asked them to go on a fishing expedition in Norway. They have not the slightest idea where that person expects them to go or what they should do when they get there.

12 midnight

The person and the body who know about regularity are the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office. When they employ private sector auditors—we pointed out in Committee that they often do—they give the auditors a specific remit to investigate not just the propriety of the accounts, but their regularity. Therefore, we have another reason for the presumption that the CAG should have a universal remit. Again I ask the question: why do the Government want to reverse the burden of proof? Why do they not want to accept the most basic presumption that in all but the most exceptional cases the CAG should have a universal remit?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden went through and demolished a series of arguments that were made in Committee. I do not want to bore the House by reiterating them in detail, but he demolished the arguments on levies, on competition and on commercialism. Without wishing to cast aspersions on his speech, those arguments were already demolished in Committee. He had already torn them limb from limb and anything that remained that remotely resembled a body was torn apart by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), who is also a member of the Public Accounts Committee. If any shreds of the body remained, the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel)—the Liberal Democrats' representative on the PAC—finished the game off.

There is not even the beginning of an argument to suppose that we should not have the CAG as the presumed auditor of the public sector. Why are we having this debate? Why did the Government not accede immediately to the perfectly sensible—perhaps even too reasonable—new clause tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden?

I understand why the Government resisted the strong arguments that many of us made, and that will be made in the other place, for an independent body to set the standards for accounts. I accept that new clause 1 dealt with a centrepiece of government—the ability or inability of the Treasury to present things in a way that is convenient to Ministers of the day. I do not applaud that; in fact, I decry it. I understand that view, but I genuinely do not understand why the Government should resist this new clause. I cannot see why, in the short, medium or long terms, Ministers or their officials have any interest in excluding the CAG. In fact, the Government do not think that they have an interest in excluding the CAG. If they thought that they had that interest, they would not have tabled their own amendment.

I fear that we must be dealing with the Government's pride. They do not want to be seen to be conceding to my right hon. Friend's new clause. They want to be seen doing something of their own making that is a bit different. When the Financial Secretary speaks, he may persuade me and the House that I am wrong, and I am more than willing to change my analysis if it does not fit the facts. However, if he has no good arguments and we are dealing with pride, I should have thought that there must be some means by which the Government's face can be saved. Somebody who is sufficiently close to the Government to make them comfortable could table in the other place a new clause that has exactly the same effect.

Conservative Members would have no objection to such a manoeuvre; we do not want to rub the Government's nose in it or cause unnecessary embarrassment. At the end of the Bill's progress, we want a result that will go along with what I am certain will be the institution of an independent body to set standards.

[Mr. Letwin]

Together with that reform and the rest of the resource accounting process, it will offer the prospect of a robust, sustainable, transparent and decent set of accounts—and an accounting system that will last as long as the Gladstonian system.

Mr. Sayeed: Perhaps I can suggest a face-saving formula that the Government may care to adopt. I have read six press releases from the Government in the past week about value for money. Commercial auditors are good at auditing but not at determining value for money. The CAG is well practised at doing so over many years. Perhaps the Government would adopt my right hon. Friend's new clause on the basis that it will save taxpayers' money and make it go further.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Private sector auditors are not particularly experienced in value-for-money audits. They do not need to be because in the competitive private sector, value for money is forced on companies by the marketplace. The auditor merely needs to check that shareholders are given an accurate representation of the company's responses to market pressures and challenges.

The people experienced in value-for-money audit are the Audit Commission, which deals with it in local government, and the National Audit Office and CAG, who deal with it in central Government. When private sector auditors have become familiar with the concept and have applied it, that is because they have been employed by those bodies to act on their behalf sometimes, but not immensely regularly.

The problem with the public sector is that it has neither a marketplace nor the pressures that force value for money. As the relative inefficiencies of public sectors worldwide have shown, auditors are an inefficient and incomplete replacement for the marketplace. Nevertheless, they are the best we have. Whatever ought to be done by the public sector needs to be done at best value. The only people who will make best value—or a failure to achieve it—come to light are auditors. The CAG is the best body in central Government, so my hon. Friend's argument is robust.

I accept the further implication that the Government could build on that thesis a face-saving device. They could argue that taking everything together and having considered my right hon. Friend's amendment, together with any technical changes they may wish to introduce, the proposal presents such an opportunity for value for money that it makes sense to adopt it. If the Government want to adopt that rhetoric or any other rhetoric or device—here or in the other place—to achieve that result, we will gladly conspire in it.

I doubt that anyone is listening. Notwithstanding the remarks made about the nation by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), I doubt that anyone in the nation has the slightest idea that we are doing this or ever will. The Government can rest easy that this is a pleasant and secretive process, well publicised in *Hansard*, and that nobody will embarrass them for acceding to so reasonable a request from my right hon. Friend.

There is at stake here something far beyond party politicking and embarrassing governments.

Mr. Brady: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the public were aware that the Government had acceded to a reasonable new clause, they would be impressed by the Government's good sense and honesty in accepting greater openness in public accounting?

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is right. To add to the Christmas stocking that we can offer Ministers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden and other members of the PAC will congratulate the Government in the media without accusing them of having dragged their feet. It is no part of our purpose to make trouble. We want to achieve the right result. We need to do so because we all have an interest in the result being right. We all have an interest in having a set of accounts that have been audited in the best way possible and presented most responsibly to the House of Commons and the Department. That will be achieved by extending the remit of the CAG universally in government, which is the point at which all the anomalies will cease to exist and the clarity will set in.

As long as the accounting standards against which the CAG audits have been independently set, we shall have true, fair and regular accounts that genuinely represent the position as best human beings can represent it. That is the goal and I hope that the Financial Secretary, however he wants to do it, will tell us that he has been persuaded at last that he needs to come round and agree to my right hon. Friend's eminently sensible proposition.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I hope that I may be the living proof that the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) was wrong to suggest that this is the wrong hour at which to debate this important issue. Had the new clause been considered earlier, I might not have been present.

At this important hour in our proceedings, I was drawn to the Chamber—I notice that several of my hon. Friends have also been so drawn—and the hon. Gentleman would do well to scurry round the various corners of this place, find perhaps hundreds of his colleagues who are lurking in the recesses of Parliament and encourage them to come here to listen to the vital words of wisdom on the new clause. I am much persuaded by my hon. Friends that we have come to the kernel of the argument. I might admit that I have followed the case from a distance but with great keenness because, as a member of the Education and Employment Committee, I have been aware of the arguments about resource accounting from the moment at which this Parliament was elected.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: This is not the new clause.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Indeed, but I shall come on to why it is not and why resource accounting is so important. It affects education as much as anything else.

In Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who moved the new clause, said:

> The Chief Secretary to the Treasury said to the Public Accounts Committee that he was willing to examine the question of amending the legislation to enable the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit those limited companies within the Government's purview.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 20 January 2000; c. 301.]

It is a matter of regret to me—and, I suspect, to many others who will consider this—that the Student Loans Company and the accounting for student loans are not within the purview of the new clause. Were I tempted to vote against it, I should do so because it is not all-encompassing and does not include the provision of student loans. I shall explain in due course why they are so important, but we must acknowledge that after passing the Bill it would be open to the Government to decide that it would be to their convenience that student loans, instead of being governed by a loan company, should be returned to the Department's remit. Nothing in the Bill would stop them doing so and, without the new clause, there would be nothing to deter them from doing so.

Let me give an example of the morass into which we are likely to lead ourselves if the Bill is passed unamended and explain why that is so significant. The system of student loans was developed under the previous Government, but, in fairness, that was done on a very small scale. When this Government came to power, the value of the student loan book was probably not more than a couple of billion pounds, but under the new student loans system, which they introduced against our advice and that of the Dearing commission, it is increasing by nearly £2 billion a year.

12.15 am

My point is that one could choose, under one's accounting principles, to account for that extra £2 billion a year entirely as expenditure, partly as expenditure and partly as an addition to assets, or entirely as an addition to assets. In other words, a cumulative figure of £2 billion a year of putative Government expenditure, and certainly of cash outlay, may at the Government's whim be accounted for as expenditure or as part of capital. The scale of that means that even by the end of the Parliament, when the new scheme is barely up and running, the amount of the new student loan book will be nearly £7 billion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman is speaking in great detail about the student loan scheme. He may mention that the scheme could be better scrutinised if the new clause were adopted or rejected, and he has made the point that the scheme could be scrutinised by the auditors if the new clause were passed, but I cannot allow him to talk about the scheme at such length and in such detail.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I very grateful for your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I will take it to heart.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It was not so much advice as an instruction.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Indeed. You will appreciate more than anyone, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that in a Government Budget of over £300 billion a year, £6 billion is 2 per cent. of expenditure and a significant figure. Hon. Members are making the point that sums of that magnitude should be subject to external scrutiny. The Government should not be able to magic such sums out of thin air, perhaps in the run-up to a general election, and say that it is extra money that they have discovered through their ingenuity—or rather their creative accounting—and which they may spend in areas that are helpful to them in that election.

We seek to resist that insidious process, but there is another issue. It is a fact of life that when people can hide their problems, they tend to ignore them. The great virtue of the admittedly old-fashioned system of cash accounting is that no one could hide the fact of where cash was coming from or going to. Under resource accounting, without independent judgment on the fairness of the accounting methods being used, it will be possible to hide problems.

Without wishing to test your patience too far, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will simply say that the example of the student loan book is a good one because the Government have developed a thoroughly bad system for that, and they should reform it. If they could not hide those problems under the guise of resource accounting, they would be forced to address the anomalies, the inefficiencies and the cost to students, which will result from their carrying on such a poor, Mickey Mouse system for funding students, which is unlike that adopted by any other country in the advanced world.

As a long-standing member of the Education and Employment Committee, I am now familiar with that system, and if what I have said is true of that, how true must it be of other areas of Government expenditure, about which I am the first to admit that I have very little knowledge? I know, however, from my business experience and my time as a banker and a student of the principles of accounting, that false accounting can go on for several years before it is discovered. False accounting can certainly tide a Government over a critical election period, and it could change the way in which we are governed.

That is why I believe that my hon. Friends are absolutely right, even at this late hour, to raise this arcane issue. It may not attract a leader column in *The Sun* tomorrow, but sadly, in irresponsible hands—I am afraid that sometimes the Government have proved themselves to be irresponsible—it could have as much influence on an election result as a leader in the national press, if not a great deal more influence.

As I said, I am struck by the fact that the purview of the new clause is limited. I hope that before the end of the debate, someone will explain to me and other hon. Members why it is so limited.

The case of Remploy was mentioned earlier. I am familiar with that company, having been a customer many years ago. It supplied me with excellent products for incorporation in a product that I was selling on the market. Given the subsidies and the special circumstances of Remploy, I am aware that it needs careful accounting and scrutiny to ensure that its accounts are fully in order.

I have no quarrel with the framework proposed by my hon. Friends and have heard nothing from the Government to suggest that it is defective. I therefore add my voice to those who ask why the Government are being so unreasonable. This is not the first time, even this week, that we have witnessed pigheadedness, if they will forgive me for the phrase, in the response from those on the Government Benches to suggestions from the Opposition.

We are not always trying to be partisan. Earlier in the week, I put forward a proposal backed by the teaching unions—not a group that usually supports the Conservative party—but the Government would not give the proposal a minute of the House's time, which we are using up tonight on the new clause. If they wished,

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

Ministers could intervene to explain that while their purpose is honourable, they cannot accept amendments that were tabled in good faith and that are fully supported by those outside the House who understand the issue.

Mr. Rendel: In speaking to the amendment, I am tempted to go back through a number of the arguments made in Committee, but you will be pleased, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to hear that I shall try my best to resist the temptation, partly because the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, has already repeated some of my arguments on that occasion, very flatteringly quoting from my remarks.

It seemed to me on that occasion that the argument was won for greater powers for the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General, except in one particular. One argument produced by the Government struck me as being a strong one to which attention had to be paid.

For a number of bodies, an auditor had already been appointed and a contract had been set up for a significant period—five years, perhaps. To break that contract might involve considerable expense for Government or a duplication of resources, which was a silly way to proceed. I took that argument on board and I did not immediately see what the reply to it was.

However, the new clause tabled by three of us who are members of the PAC answers that point. The new clause gives the Government the right to choose not to go ahead straight away with appointing the Comptroller and Auditor General as the auditor for all those bodies, but to move to that system when the current contracts come to their natural end. That demolishes the last argument that the Government had for carrying on, at least temporarily, with the current way in which the bodies are audited.

It seems to me that the Government have given no good reason yet—and the issues were debated for a long time in Committee—for not accepting the new clause. The Government's amendments are not nearly strong enough to answer the points that were made in Committee and on Second Reading.

As has frequently been said, the National Audit Office was established as Parliament's watchdog. One of the delights of taking part in the proceedings from the Liberal Democrat Benches is that so many complimentary comments have been made about one of our predecessors, William Ewart Gladstone, and his work on behalf of Parliament almost a century and a half ago. We are proud of his work and pleased that it has been so widely acknowledged.

Gladstone established the important principle that the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General should be responsible to Parliament, and that Parliament should have an external aid to keep a check on the Executive. People often say how great it is that we live in a democracy. I reply that it is not a strong form of democracy because we are ruled constantly by a minority. However, one of the strengths of our democracy is that Parliament has the opportunity to have some control over the Executive. That opportunity is not shared by many societies in our world. It is good news for us that we live in such a society.

The strength of the system is that Parliament has an external aid to enable it to keep good control over the Executive. That principle held for more than 100 years before it was gradually diminished. Sadly, it lost some ground as Parliament established bodies that were not under the control or audit authority of the Comptroller and Auditor General. That is a pity.

The Bill gives us an opportunity to repair the damage and to return to the audit authority of the Comptroller and Auditor General all those bodies whose affairs he had lost the right to audit and report on to Parliament. The current opportunity may have come to us by chance because the Government did not originally intend the Bill to amend the fault that had arisen. Nevertheless, that opportunity should have been grasped, and I hope that it will be grasped tonight.

The important principle that we are considering was reasserted in the Public Accounts Committee's latest report. Some of its words are worth repeating. It states:

> the Committee believes that Parliamentary accountability will be enhanced if the Comptroller and Auditor General is able to audit on behalf of Parliament all public bodies carrying out central Government functions, and has statutory access to bodies and contractors delivering services on behalf of Government departments . . . We believe in the principle that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have full access to all Government expenditure.

I hope that I do not reveal any state secrets when I say that those phrases were discussed at some length when we discussed that report in the Public Accounts Committee. It is clear that the Committee wished to reiterate clearly in its unanimous report that it believes in the principle that we are discussing. It is important and strengthens Parliament enormously against the Executive.

If the new clause is resisted by the Government tonight hon. Members on all sides should not see it as a battle between Government and Opposition, because it is not. If the Government resist it, the battle will be between the Executive and Parliament, a battle that Parliament has to win.

12.30 am

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): The new clause is in effect in the name of the Public Accounts Committee, and it is just that; it is not one side of the House against the other.

We are not talking about accounts. We are talking about a process—a process of control, a process of accountability. We live in an illusory democracy, and democracy is only as effective as the House is. The Executive have to be subject to continuous scrutiny. This is the only place where it can occur. Many people think that we achieve it through our great debates, Question Times and so on. That is nonsense. Anyone who thinks that oratorical wizardry will sway a Government is living in the world of fiction. Mr. Speaker Weatherill made the point that he could remember in his 10 years as Speaker just three speeches that swayed a debate. They may have swayed a debate, but I doubt whether they swayed a Government.

As for parliamentary questions, anyone who has been a Minister knows very well that they are largely ritualistic. By the time one has dealt with half the planted questions from one's own side and the three other supplementary questions from the other side, that particular subject is over and done with for the next month, and one can go away and forget the House of Commons again.

In so far as there is continuous accountability or accountability anywhere in this democratic system, it is in the Select Committees. I give credit to Opposition Members and to Lord St. John of Fawsley, who introduced the departmental Select Committees, which were, in the democratic sense, one of the great innovations of the last century.

One of the most fundamental rights of Parliament, established as far back as 1866, is the right to monitor the money. The money is where the power is. If one monitors the money, one discovers whether there is waste, misuse or corruption. The importance of this control was reflected in the fact that, more than a century ago, the precursor of the NAO and the Public Accounts Committee was set up, at a time of corruption and waste, to play this role on behalf of the public and Parliament.

Underlining the difference involved in monetary control is the fact that we have set up a unique institution, the NAO. It has become unique over time, because in recent years it has been given the absolute independence from Government that it now has, so that it is not subject to any pressure or appointment by Government. We have this organisation with 750 staff and a budget of £55 million a year. That is different from any of the other bodies. Why? It is because controlling and monitoring the money is so fundamental to monitoring the Executive.

I wish to tell Ministers that I am pleased. I thought that we had wasted our time in Committee, in that we had so little response. Today there has been a bit of a response, and I am grateful for that. Their amendment is a step in our direction and at least justifies the efforts that we made in our meetings. Its weakness is that it still leaves the rights of Parliament's watchdog dependent on the whim of the Executive. The extension of any of the powers to the NDPBs, about which our Committee's Chairman spoke, is utterly dependent on the arbitrary whim of one Department of Government.

We are told that we should rely on the good will of the Treasury. We have been through these arguments before, and I am sure that officials will welcome the fact that I will not go through them all again. However, I will remind the House of something, and draw it to the attention of some hon. Members who may not be aware of it.

One of the reasons that we are debating this issue at this silly time—it should have been sorted out by now—is that more than seven months ago a catch-all amendment was submitted to the Treasury by the NAO, on its behalf and that of the PAC, and for seven months the Treasury did not respond. It then produced a Bill that should have had a pre-legislative stage in the PAC but never did. The Bill was produced out of a hat, and the amendment was not there. All that we were given instead of an amendment—after several Committee sittings and a lot of moaning—was one apology for the fact that we had never had an answer. The good will of the Treasury is therefore not something that the PAC entirely takes for granted.

When we wanted to ensure that Camelot was paying the correct amount to Parliament, and we were depending on the support of the Treasury—which one would have thought would be on our side in that respect—it took us five years to establish that right for the PAC.

In Committee, when we presented a version of the catch-all amendment that had originally been submitted seven months earlier, the Minister said, "We are all in favour of this; we want to do the right thing; but each proposal must be dealt with on its merits." So, obliging as I am, I tabled 19 amendments just to test the market—market testing being "in", although it may have been more "in" during the past 15 years than it is now. Anyway, I tested the market, and the market was found wanting. Having tested the depth of the Government's commitment to judging proposals on their individual merits, I was told by the Minister, "Yes, but we must not deal with them piecemeal."

I concluded that perhaps the Government were opposed to doing anything at all, and that is why I am still worried about leaving ultimate control in their hands. They—not as individuals, but as Ministers and officials—are the Executive; we are the House of Commons. We should not have to go to them and beg to be allowed one more crumb on our national audit table as one more quango is thrown to us. They should have to come to us—to Parliament—to justify, on any occasion, a deviation from our right to monitor and audit the finances of the whole of Government. If Ministers want to curtail the power of Parliament in any way, they should not throw us crumbs; they should move a motion for an order at the Dispatch Box and justify their wishes in debate.

Let me say sincerely to Ministers that I welcome their attempt to join us on our route. Just one more step, and we shall have unanimity—so will they, even at this late stage, reconsider the PAC amendments?

Mr. Hayes: I want to discuss three issues: discretion, trust and missed opportunity.

We should see the debate in two contexts. The first is the obvious one of the Government's somewhat tarnished reputation with figures. Few would now doubt that their reputation in that regard has been damaged by hospital waiting lists, police numbers and a number of other issues. I say nothing about the integrity of the Financial Secretary—he is a man of the greatest integrity—but that is bound to be the context in which people outside this place will see the debate and, indeed, the Bill.

The second context is the history of these matters. I spoke earlier about the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1856, and that brings me to the first of my three key points—discretion. There is no doubt that, although the 1866 Act did not explicitly define the CAG's role in the terms that my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the PAC, has used, giving the CAG a power of general competence, that was the intention of those who introduced the Bill. I do not want to be too kind to Gladstone. I am not a great fan of his, but every swallow has its summer, or is it that one swallow doth not a summer make? I am not quite sure about that, but certainly, it was one aspect of Gladstonian influence that was desirable.

The architects of that Act doubtless saw the CAG's brief as a broad one. That is clearly reflected not only in the debate at that time, but in the Act itself. It states:

> the Comptroller and Auditor General shall have free Access, at all convenient Times, to the Books of Account and other Documents relating to the Accounts of such Departments, and may require the several Departments concerned to furnish him, from Time to Time, or at regular Periods, with Accounts of the Cash Transactions of such Departments respectively . . .

Therefore, those who introduced the Act and the Act itself assumed that the discretion would be wide.

[Mr. Hayes]

People who have considered these matters carefully will immediately think of the changes that were made to the original Act by the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921. Although the 1921 Act in some ways limited what the CAG did, it did so on the basis of giving him extra discretion. The irony is that, although that Act narrowed the CAG's activities, making it explicit that he should not have to examine every detail in every case in every Department to come to conclusions about the overall probity of Government activities, it extended his discretion to make such judgments, following the recommendations of the PAC of the day.

The point is made clearly in the Second Reading debate in 1921. Members talked about the Public Accounts Committee considering the matter and the pronouncement of the Committee in the report that had been issued to the House and was appended to the Bill. They said that the Bill as laid before the House followed the recommendations of the Committee. There is no question but that the report from the PAC which explicitly recommended extending the CAG's discretion was "bought" by the then Government and formed the basis of the Bill, which in itself was a significant addition to the history of these matters in that it built on the Gladstonian foundations of the 1866 Act.

We spoke earlier about the balance of proof. I should like to speak about the balance of discretion. Does discretion lie with the Executive, or with that independent person who is explicitly given the role of holding the Government to account—or at least of holding the Government's financial probity to account in the way that the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) suggested? This lies at the heart of our consideration of the new clause and the Bill. The Government are in the business of changing that balance, to the detriment of Parliament and against the spirit that pervades much of the earlier legislation.

The second issue that I want to discuss is trust. I do not go so far as Chesterton, who said:

it seems easier to die in battle than to tell the truth in politics.

I would hardly admit to that.

However, there is a good deal of sense in the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden, who—in Standing Committee—said with incredulity that the basis of the Government's argument could be summed up in two words: "Trust us." Ministers expect us to trust them to do the right thing in all circumstances. My right hon. Friend went on to say—very much in the spirit of the comments of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West—that Parliaments cannot trust Governments.

12.45 am

My point is nothing to do with party, but has to do with the relationship between Parliament and Government. It is simply not acceptable for the Government to say, "Trust us, you can be assured that we will always act with appropriateness and integrity." The structures that we create must allow for the fact that Governments occasionally do not act either appropriately or with integrity. As I said, that is no reflection on the Financial Secretary, or even on the Economic Secretary—although I do not know much about her. Perhaps she went to Cheltenham Ladies college, which would prejudice her to those of us who have made our own way in the world. However, I do not wish to be unkind or discourteous. Nevertheless, I might say something similar about the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel)—but perhaps I might not.

The issue of trust is fundamental. It has been already been highlighted by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West and lies at the very heart of our consideration of this part of the Bill. I simply do not trust any Government sufficiently to allow them to extend their discretion at the expense both of Parliament and of the independent scrutiny that I have described.

Mr. St. Aubyn: On the issue of trust, has my hon. Friend studied the recent speech of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said that our understanding of politics and of public life should be rooted in our grasp of the weakness of the human condition, implying that one really should not trust too much anyone in public life? Does not that go to the heart of the point that my hon. Friend is making?

Mr. Hayes: I shall make only two comments in reply to that. First, I do not intend to stretch your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, beyond its extremely generous limits by responding to a theological point. Secondly, I remind my hon. Friend that Chesterton also said:

he who has the impatience to interrupt the words of another seldom has the patience rationally to select his own.

The third issue on which I should like to alight is that of missed opportunity, which was referred to earlier by the hon. Member for Newbury. He said that, for all the good things that are embodied in the 1866 Act, the 1921 Act and the Finance Act 1975, those Acts could not reasonably have anticipated the growth in the extent of Government. The 1866 Act, which was passed long before the advent of quangos, of course makes no reference to the type of bodies that are now well outside the competence of the Comptroller and Auditor General, but that, none the less, are very substantial bodies in relation to the amount of public money that they spend.

We may be more critical of the 1975 Act and of more recent legislation. At that stage, we could have anticipated that the problem of bodies that were not Government Departments, but which absorbed a great deal of Government money and did important things on behalf of the Government, Parliament and people, should have been drawn into the orbit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. We should therefore be more critical of modern legislators than we can reasonably be of politicians in 1866 or 1921.

Surely we must be most critical of the Government of the day. The Bill was a golden opportunity to extend the scope of the Comptroller and Auditor General's scrutiny. Three arguments have been advanced against doing so. The first is that many of the bodies are too small to be worthy of the Comptroller and Auditor General's attention. That suggestion was made by the Economic Secretary when she was speaking on the subject in Standing Committee.

The second argument is that the Comptroller and Auditor General would require some specialist understanding or knowledge, because some of the

activities dealt with by the bodies that we are discussing are commercial or specialist in nature. That is a specious argument, given that the Comptroller and Auditor General has particular powers to take on any additional commercial skills and resources that he might need to deal with such bodies. The third argument, which is self-fulfilling, is that some bodies are statutorily excluded from the Comptroller and Auditor General's competence by the terms under which they were established or by subsequent legislation.

None of those arguments is persuasive or forceful. The Bill was a golden opportunity to strengthen rather than weaken the power of independent scrutiny by changing the balance of discretion and to extend its scope. Both the depth and the breadth of the Comptroller and Auditor General's remit could have been addressed, but the Government have chosen to address neither.

That takes me back to the first point that I made. There is an issue of image. If the Government wish to be regarded as fair, reasonable and honourable, they must be seen to be all those things. If they wish to publish information that is not just useful to the House and to the wider public but scrupulously fair, they must go the extra mile by putting in place arrangements that prove them to be of the greatest integrity and the utmost honesty. In contrast, the image that will be broadcast from the House as a result of the Government's failure to take advantage of this opportunity will worsen the tarnished reputation that they have developed in a very short time for fiddling figures.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I shall intervene briefly. I spoke on Second Reading and, if this debate were taking place at a reasonable hour, I would have delivered the speech that I spent some time working out, which I have now had to discard. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] The answer is simple: I have no desire at 12.52 am to keep 300 Members of Parliament here. I think that what is going on this evening is an abuse.

Mr. St. Aubyn *rose—*

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I have no intention of giving way.

National Audit Office officials, who have spent a lot of time working on the issue, should know what has happened this evening. A series of amendments—amendments that we are not discussing now—were debated at great length. They were debated at such length because the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) was having a dinner—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to go over a previous group of amendments. The reason why earlier amendments were debated has nothing to do with us at the moment. We must deal with the group before us.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I shall not refer to those amendments, Mr. Deputy Speaker—simply to the reason why we are debating the new clause at this late hour. An arrangement was made that Conservative Members would debate the previous group until 11 pm, when there would be a Division.

Mr. Hayes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: It is an abuse—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is a point of order before us.

Mr. Hayes: I seek your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) is talking about arrangements that were made for Members to debate matters until 11 pm. No arrangements were made with me. I am sure that I speak for my hon. Friends. What is the hon. Gentleman referring to?

Mr. Campbell-Savours *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I called the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) to speak to the new clause before us. He must not refer to any arrangements that were made, because that has nothing to do with the Chair or with the business before us.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On the new clause that we are now considering, Mr. Deputy Speaker, National Audit Office officials should know that many of my hon. Friends who wished to speak have been prevented from doing so by Conservative Members' conduct tonight. That is all I have to say.

Mr. David Heath: I share the hon. Gentleman's disappointment that we should be debating an extremely serious issue at this hour in the morning. Having said that, I feel that the new clause deals with a matter of principle that is worthy of a substantial debate irrespective of the hour, because there are issues that need to be addressed. Having listened to the speeches of the three members of the Public Accounts Committee who have spoken, I think that the arguments that they have adduced are almost unanswerable.

I hasten to add that I am not an accountant; indeed, I suspect that I am almost the antithesis of an accountant. However, I have some experience of public audit, having been an audit commissioner before being elected to the House. I take an old-fashioned and perhaps simple view of the proper control of public funds. Where Parliament has granted moneys from the public purse for public purposes, that should be subject to checks for probity and regularity to ensure that there is accountability to the House and not simply to the Executive. There should be no gap between the province of the National Audit Office and that of the Audit Commission or the territorial bodies that carry out identical functions in respect of various parts of the United Kingdom. If there are gaps in the present arrangements—and my strong suspicion is that there are—they should be filled. The new clause goes a long way towards that.

I have been pursuing this matter ever since I was elected to the House. As hon. Members can see in the *Official Report*, I have put a series of questions to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I am sorry that he cannot be here this evening because of his recent

[Mr. David Heath]

illness and I very much hope that he will soon be restored to health. I am advised by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) that he has received a letter from him saying that he wishes to be back even sooner than the doctors, the Whips or Madam Speaker wish him to be.

I put a series of questions to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne about the resources that might be necessary to enable the National Audit Office to plug some of the gaps in the arrangements for non-departmental public bodies and about the extent to which he has been able to promote a dialogue with the Chancellor of the Exchequer or other Treasury Ministers on the subject. In a way, there has been a conspiracy between us, as I know perfectly well that the view that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed in private and in public is very much along the same lines as mine, which is that we should find a mechanism to bring some of those bodies within the province of the National Audit Office.

I do not particularly like quangos. I have long argued that they proliferated under the previous Government and that it would have been a good thing had the present Government reversed the trend. Sadly, I do not believe that sufficient progress has been made in that direction. I do not like quangos because of the democratic deficit. That is a serious matter, but in some circumstances I can live with it: we can perhaps deal with the deficit in accountability through Ministers who are accountable to the House. However, I will not put up with a deficit in probity or regularity, and that danger exists under the present arrangements, particularly in respect of NDPBs that deal with substantial amounts of public money. The non-municipal public housing sector has already been mentioned. It seems essential that the Housing Corporation, which performs an audit function yet is not directly open to scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General, should be brought within the province of the National Audit Office.

1 am

I have some concerns about the wording of the new clause. I am concerned about the definitions; I always worry about the definitions of non-departmental public bodies and the extent to which it is possible to devise new government structures that still manage to fall outside any definition that is provided. I am indebted to Lord Falconer, who suggested in another place that there was no difference in terms of definition between an NDPB and a taskforce and that it was simply a matter of the temporary nature or otherwise of the body that had been formed. If that is the case, there is a potential problem with taskforces that perform an executive function. I hope that they will be covered by the fact that they are absorbed within the departmental accounts, but it is a potential problem that may need to be better defined under proposed subsection (11). Proposed subsection (8) is over-helpful to the Government in accommodating their objections before they have even been raised in the debate.

This is a very important new clause for Parliament. As the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) said, if the Government choose not to accept the new clause, it is not a case of their resisting the Opposition, because the new clause does not come from the Opposition Benches: it was drafted by those right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber who are most intimately acquainted with the need for proper scrutiny—those who serve on the Public Accounts Committee. They have put their finger on a very important issue and it is right that the House should debate it. The Government would be wrong to display obstinacy. They have already yielded the principle in amendments that they have tabled. It is only the matter of form that they are resisting. I believe that the form of our proposal is much more acceptable for Parliament than the alternative, and that the Government would be well advised to accept it.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Having been only seven months in the House, I am perhaps closest to those outside who have expectations of accountability. It is not a claim that I would seek to advance, but others might suggest it.

In looking at the provisions, I have been particularly concerned about the separation of powers, which, as a principle, should run through this, of all pieces of legislation, between Parliament and the Executive. I have looked in vain and with great disappointment for that principle to be applied with consistency and clarity. It has therefore been of the utmost seriousness for me, fresh from the outside world, to find that hon. Members from all parties represented on the most important of Committees—the Public Accounts Committee—have tabled a new clause to address the perception of accountability, the trust that is implicit in the requirement that the Government be transparent in their stewardship of public money and, above all, the confidence of the public that that is being done with the greatest integrity.

I have looked at the PAC's recommendations and have listened with great care to all the members of that Committee who have spoken this evening, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the PAC. It seems that the Bill misses the opportunity to remedy the steady erosion of the central role of the Comptroller and Auditor General that has taken place as a result of the introduction of new public spending institutions.

Many examples of that have already been cited this evening, so I shall not try your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by going into as much detail as I had originally intended. There is no provision to give the National Audit Office full access for the examination of new service providers. The number of such providers is increasing—as is the amount of public money involved. They include private contractors who handle Government pay and the management of some prisons. They even handle one of the Government's own flagships—for which the Government want complete accountability and transparency—the new deal training opportunities, even though some of us might regard those opportunities as a smokescreen.

Under the Bill, the detailed auditing of such providers would be off-limits. They should have been included. What are the Government afraid of? Subject to the Minister's comments, which we shall welcome, what makes the Government resist the approach taken by my right hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee? He wants to reverse the burden of proof required by the Bill, and to make it a presumption that all such bodies should be open to audit. There should be a requirement that they are audited, rather than that the Treasury determines which ones should be included.

Ever since the Government came into office, they have advanced the principle of inclusivity. That sits ill with the measure, because it does not promote inclusivity. However, new clause 2 would be in line with that principle.

Quangos are another example. The Housing Corporation has been mentioned. It is critical that there is trust in such bodies. People outside this place perceive organisations such as the Housing Corporation to be instruments of Government, so they expect the same standards of transparency and accountability to be applied to them as to Departments. However, the Housing Corporation is not included.

The situation of limited companies set up by the Government has been extensively and eruditely explained by my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn)—a fellow member of the Select Committee on Education and Employment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden also referred to the matter. Tomorrow, my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford may be somewhat surprised by a reference in the leader column of *The Sun* to his impressive contribution to the debate. However, I shall not dwell on that matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because, even as a recently elected Member, I would strain your patience too far.

As I pick up some of the threads made in contributions this evening—not least that of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—I find that I am speaking to a former university colleague, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. Indeed, he and I shared not only a university but a college. I know him to be a man of great intelligence, and a reasonable man of great integrity. It would not be in his character to resist an eminently reasonable proposition, objectively put. The proposal is not partisan, because of its provenance in the PAC.

Perhaps I am wrong about the Government's resistance to the proposal. Perhaps they will accede to a reasoned and informative debate and will be pleased to accept our fine parliamentary tradition of trying to improve Government proposals. Like many other hon. Members, I have experience of international manufacturing industry in a private enterprise, albeit a public company in the FTSE 100. For many years, I have had responsibility for compiling annual reports and I look behind the Government's proposals to try to understand what motivates them not to want to extend the audit to so many governmental organisations.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I have listened to my hon. Friend with interest, because I have great respect for his experience of handling the accounts of public companies. Has he considered the words of George Bernard Shaw? He said:

> There is nothing so bad or so good that you will not find Englishmen doing it; but you will never find an Englishman in the wrong.

Does that not encapsulate why we need the new clause and why the Government are not prepared to admit that they need to accept it?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point through his literary allusion. Of course, when George Bernard Shaw was given a book, he said that he would lose no time in reading it. I shall lose no time taking that intervention any further; it was so ably put.

Anything that is audited in annual reports receives proper and objective treatments that are certified. Accountants, in the case of public companies, and auditors must present their reports fully and make them public. The Government's policies have often been misplaced. The Government have sought to do down our enterprises and public companies by treating all those who may be in the top teams of such companies as fat cats.

[Mr. O'Brien]

Therefore, they would be the first to expect full transparency and accountability, and for a full audit of all aspects of an enterprise to be covered in an annual report.

I hope that I am wrong—I do not think that it is in the Financial Secretary's character to defend something on the ground of pride alone—but I wonder whether the Government are anxious to prejudge the contents of annual reports. Perhaps the raft of organisations that have been identified so ably by so many Members are a little less predictable and would fall a little less out of the Government's direct control, even though they involve the expenditure of taxpayers' money. Therefore, there is the risk that an annual report might not say what the Government predicted or wanted it to say. That may be the true reason for the Government's objection to allowing all organisations to be audited and for them wanting, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) pointed out, a veto or the discretion not to allow an audit to be applied. I look forward to the Financial Secretary's reply in the hope that the doubts that I share with the House are proved wrong.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I was not going to speak in the debate, but I have listened to the arguments made in the Chamber and beyond the Bar. I am disturbed by several incidents that have been mentioned in the debate. I suspect that we need new clause 2 because there is a feeling in the nation that the Government have contempt for Parliament. Did we not witness that earlier when an hon. Member—I shall not name him—said that he had prepared a detailed argument as to why the new clause should be adopted, but then added that he would not read it? He would not read it because there are 300 or more Labour Members who want to go to sleep. All the arguments that he had prepared to make the Bill better were not expressed. The hon. Gentleman has now left the Chamber, which is why the arguments need to be emphasised and re-emphasised.

1.15 am

My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) described in considerable detail the history of the Bill, starting with the 1866 Act under William Ewart Gladstone. I argue that its true genesis is November 1993, when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), then Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced a White Paper on the introduction of this form of accounting. He said:

> This will put departments on to a similar accounting basis not only to commercial organisations but to many other parts of the public sector.—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 931.]

Surely that is the point of new clause 2. Subsection (4) states:

> The Comptroller and Auditor General shall examine accounts sent to him under this section with a view to satisfying himself—
>
> (a) that the accounts present a true and fair view, and
>
> (b) that any public money provided to the agency has been expended for the purposes intended by the body by which the money was paid.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) eloquently said, that is a mirror of what happens in commercial organisations when they are audited by chartered and certified accountants. It is important to audit not only the funds flow but—as my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) pointed out—the difference between expenditure on capital amounts and revenue amounts, because investments in capital amounts accrue value and are not amortised. If one confuses the two, it is all too easy to confuse the general public in persuading them that the state of the economy is better or worse than it is.

Many of my hon. Friends and Government Members have said that it is a question of trust and accountability. Why have auditors in the commercial sector? They are there to safeguard shareholders and the broader public interest, to ensure that taxes are paid to the benefit of society. It is right that the Executive should accept auditing of all its aspects. It is extraordinary that the Executive should be able to say, "We shall choose what will be audited and what will not." That is like a large public corporation or conglomerate—I will not name an example but one can use one's imagination—saying "We will not have our ice cream side audited, but we don't mind having our soap powder side audited.

Mr. Brady: Sunshine Desserts.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend said something from a sedentary position that was not too far from the truth, but which I hope will not be recorded in *Hansard*.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: The equivalent is even more serious—where a company would resist allowing any kind of audit treatment of a joint venture or some form of minority participation. That is clearly laid down under "general accounting principles"—a phrase that, interestingly, appears in the Explanatory Notes and the Bill, and is therefore directly to be applied. My hon. Friend's point is well made.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend makes a marvellous point. It is particularly apposite, given that the Government talk about private-public partnerships and building on the private finance initiative, which was introduced by the previous, Conservative Government. Is not that a joint venture and does it not therefore warrant independent audit? However, the Government say, "No, we will not allow an independent auditor to investigate for the benefit of the state and society as a whole."

We are going through a period in which there is mistrust of the Government's motives. We hear about financial initiatives that are merely launches of relaunches of previous launches involving fresh money that turns out not to be fresh. *[Interruption.]* We read about that not only in *The Times*, but in *The Guardian*, which is read by the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner). We realise that there is disquiet in society as a whole. The Government could easily allay that by saying, "We will allow independent auditors into all aspects of government. They can report to the Public Accounts Committee and lay reports before Parliament." The Treasury could also lay before Parliament information that would make all audit reports open and file it in the Library of the House of Commons. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman laughs,

but his seat is marginal. Would not it be to his benefit and that of society as a whole for the Government to be seen as open and honest? Is not it dishonest for any Government to introduce an incomplete Bill that does not consider the universal practice of auditing, but says that audits will not be permitted in certain barred areas?

The Executive should not be allowed to choose which areas may be audited and which may not. If I may coin a phrase, this should be the people's audit. Is not any audit the people's audit? The people's audit concerns the welfare of the people as a whole. Are they not the people's Government? Perhaps no longer.

Mr. Hayes: To firm up some of my hon. Friend's slightly vague remarks, may I refer him to the Second Reading debate on the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921? This was stated explicitly:

> The general trend of the changes proposed—

to the 1866 Act—

> is to give greater discretion to the Comptroller and Auditor General as to the extent of his audit, and to make his measures more elastic.—[*Official Report*, 5 August 1921; Vol. 145, c. 1883-84.]

Is not my hon. Friend saying that this should be an opportunity to extend the scope—the elasticity—of the CAG's remit, not to give more power to the Government to decide precisely where, how and when he goes and how that information is published?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend, with his customary charm and politeness, makes a powerful point. The discretion should lie in the hands of the auditor, not those of the Government.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fabricant: Oh, the hon. Gentleman awakes. I am delighted to give way.

Mr. Gardiner: I have been in the Chamber for considerably longer than the hon. Gentleman. If he can recall the remarks he has just made, can he justify them against the new clause in favour of which he purports to be arguing? It allows the Executive precisely that power of veto, which he has spoken against.

Mr. Fabricant: Not at all. If the hon. Gentleman reads the new clause, he will see that that is up to the CAG. Although he is in the Chamber, I can assume only that he has allowed his attention to lapse.

Mr. Gardiner *rose—*

Mr. Fabricant: I shall not give way again; the hon. Gentleman is wasting my time and that of the House. He sits there either not listening or giggling. Either way, he is not concentrating. This is a complicated Bill, and the hon. Gentleman should listen, and then his interventions would be pertinent rather than irrelevant.

Mr. Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman should read the new clause.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman tells me, from a sedentary position, to read the new clause. I am doing so—*[Interruption.]* I will not accept sedentary interventions. The new clause makes it clear that the CAG will examine accounts, and the Government will not tell the CAG which accounts to examine.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings said, the discretion should lie with the CAG, precisely as it does with an auditor who investigates any commercial operation and has independence in doing so. The point of new clause 2 is to give the CAG independence. He will have no independence if the Government tell him that there are areas that he may investigate and areas that he may not investigate.

Mr. Brady: It is a point of fact, which should be put on the record, that the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) is entirely mistaken, as the Minister can lay an order to exclude a given public body with the approval of Parliament. We have been debating precisely the point that those powers should reside with Parliament and the CAG as an agent of Parliament, rather than with the Executive.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is up to Parliament and the Public Accounts Committee to determine, through the CAG, those areas that ought to be audited. It would be wrong for the Executive to determine that because the CAG would not be independent. I hope that the Minister can satisfy me that if I am wrong, the Public Accounts Committee and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have been arguing for new clause 2 are also wrong. However, I do not think that I am wrong. Surely the whole point of an auditor is that he should be independent. I hope that the Minister will address that point in his reply.

Mr. Brady: It is a privilege to participate in what has been an excellent debate, albeit at this late hour. I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), because I was looking forward to one more in a series of excellent and incisive speeches when the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) trailed the fact that he had prepared a speech and given great thought to it. I am sure that it would have been a speech of great consequence. We have had several excellent contributions to the debate.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does not my hon. Friend think that it is a bit rich for the hon. Member for Workington to criticise—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We shall forget about the hon. Member for Workington and get on with the new clause.

Mr. Brady: I had forgotten about him already, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We have heard from many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House how important the provisions are. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, said that in discussing the amendment we are dealing with matters of public expenditure amounting to some £3 billion a year. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) suggested that the figure might be greater if we included companies in the new clause as well as non-departmental public bodies.

[Mr. Brady]

Even though we have not included companies, we are dealing with a large sum of public expenditure, and it is a serious matter that is appropriate for debate by the House, whatever the hour. I wonder whether Liberal Democrat Members agree that it would have been a great tragedy if Gladstone had decided in 1866 that, because it had got rather late in the day, he would not bother introducing the vital legislation that allows Parliament to hold the Executive to account and which introduced the proper audit and control of public expenditure that we have today.

It is essential that we extend the powers of proper audit and scrutiny of expenditure throughout the public sector. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden suggested, that should be done in a way that takes proper allocation of the burden of proof and puts the onus on the Government to prove the case that something should not be subject to public audit as suggested by the new clause.

1.30 am

The hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) was wrong to suggest that the new clause gives Ministers unfettered discretion. It does not. It gives some powers to Ministers, subject to approval by Parliament, which is entirely right.

We have heard important contributions. I do not want to speak for long in this short debate, but I want to comment on the remarks of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) who, I thought, made the most telling contribution, albeit a brief one. It was a devastating account of the way in which the Treasury has dealt with the progress of the Bill. It did not accept at an early stage, as it could have done, important recommendations from Members of all parties with proper independent backing. That was a great tragedy.

The right hon. Member called for one more step from the Government. He argued that the Government had conceded the point in their amendment, but that they fell short of what they could achieve if they bowed to the wishes of the Public Accounts Committee by accepting new clause 2. I entirely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said.

The Government should come to Parliament to explain why we should not have the right to scrutinise public expenditure in particular areas. It is fundamental to the rights and privileges of the House, and to the duty that we owe to the British people, that we should have the power to scrutinise and audit public expenditure.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I have been listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and I agree with what he says about those fundamental rights. Is not the problem the fact that the Treasury, having discovered the dark arts of stealth taxes, is now practising to perfection the art of stealth accounting?

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend puts it well. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin) wish to intervene?

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): I certainly do not.

Mr. Brady: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought that the hon. Gentleman was seeking to intervene, but he was not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford makes an important point. The Government are clearly seeking to avoid proper scrutiny of public expenditure and of the way in which public funds—taxpayers' money—are pushed out through the public sector in various guises. Like my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), one must ask why. Why do the Government refuse to accept an eminently sensible new clause, which has support on both sides of the House and from distinguished members of the Public Accounts Committee?

The Government have accepted the new clause in principle in their amendment, yet, for their own reasons, which the Minister will no doubt try to explain, they seek to avoid the discipline that new clause 2 would impose on them. There would be a presumption that there was a right to proper public audit unless the Government could demonstrate a compelling reason why that should not be the case.

I shall not detain the House, but, in the light of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West, and given that we are debating the most fundamental role of Parliament and the most fundamental duty that we must discharge by calling the Government to account, it is supremely ironic that if the motion is pressed to a Division, the Government will whip Labour Members to support their stance, and to oppose a new clause that would extend the right of Parliament to scrutinise what the Executive does. That is at least an irony and possibly a perversion of the purpose of Parliament. That is unfortunate.

The Government have an opportunity to show that they have nothing to hide and that they wish to be open and allow proper scrutiny of all aspects of public expenditure and the public sector. They have an opportunity to demonstrate that, contrary to recent criticism, they are not arrogant. They have an opportunity to show that they are not interested in grubby fixes or withholding information and to move towards proper openness and accountability. They have an opportunity to strengthen the role of Parliament and to show, as good Governments have done in the past, that the Executive can recognise that their activities should properly be limited.

The Minister should accept that tonight. I hope that he will bow to the arguments of senior colleagues on both sides of the House. I cannot understand how the Government can devise a cogent, reasonable argument for not accepting the new clause.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I had not intended to speak in the debate, but I have been stung by the attitude of Labour Members. As a Shropshire Member

of Parliament, I am deeply conscious that the first Parliament was called at Acton Burnell and then in Shrewsbury to hold the King to account for the moneys that he levied on the people. The Minister laughs, but we are sent here and paid by the general public to hold the Executive to account. One of the biggest surprises to me as a new Member of Parliament was that we do not sit terribly long hours. We frequently go home at 10 o'clock.

It was outrageous that the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) had prepared a speech on new clause 2—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should confine his comments to the new clause.

Mr. Paterson: The hon. Member for Workington had prepared on new clause 2 and did not make it out of pique. Nothing could have been more interesting than his comments on new clause 2, which goes to the heart of our role as Members of Parliament who hold the Government to account on the way in which they spend moneys that do not belong to them in their temporary executive role, but to the people.

After listening to the debate, I feel naive. I honestly believed that the Comptroller and Auditor General audited all Departments, as established in the 1866 Act. I had not realised until I heard my hon. Friends' speeches that there were extraordinary gaps in auditing public expenditure and holding the Executive to account. It is astonishing that 200 bodies, which deliver public services and are funded by Departments from money that Parliament provides, are not fully audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr. Fabricant: It is even more surprising that it is not up to the Comptroller and Auditor General whether he audits those 200 companies. The Government tell him that he cannot audit those companies and organisations.

Mr. Paterson: With his usual prescience, my hon. Friend has made my next point. According to the Public Accounts Committee's fourth report, my hon. Friend is right. Eighty bodies spent £3 billion, but their auditors are appointed by Ministers and they report to Ministers. That is extraordinary. I almost feel guilty that, as a Member of Parliament, I did not know about that.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the previous Conservative Government established bodies without accountability and that this Government ensured that 19 out of the 21 bodies that might not have been audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General are so audited?

Mr. Paterson: I find that a bizarre intervention. Numerous Opposition Members have made it clear that they are not happy with the status quo. I am making it clear that I am not happy with the status quo, that I am astonished by the status quo, and I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman's comments that a new regime should be introduced. Surely the Bill gives the very opportunity. This is the time and place to debate it. This is a clause that he should support, because it would bring in every body:

> Every public service agency shall prepare accounts in respect of each financial year and shall send them to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

That is in new clause 2(3). How can the hon. Gentleman not support that? He apparently is not happy with the regime left by the previous Government. It is quite clear that several of us are astonished by the lacunae. So why does he not support it?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend will recognise that it is a tradition in this House that the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee is always drawn from the Opposition party. He will also be aware that the Public Accounts Committee is an all-party Committee. Is it not extraordinary in the history of the House that the Committee is putting forward a new clause which is being opposed by the Executive? Is not this a major constitutional conflict between Parliament and the Executive?

Mr. Paterson: That point is forcefully put and quite correct. I am reading evidence from reports from an all-party Committee which is led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) specifically to hold the Government's expenditure to account. We have the new clause proposed by three leading Members of the House, and the Government oppose it. They will have to come up with some very good reasons.

How can it be that the Housing Corporation, spending £1 billion pounds a year, and the Environment Agency, spending £150 million, are outside the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General?

Mr. Hayes: I do not want to put my hon. Friend off, but I would like him to return to the issue of the relationship between the Bill and the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee. I spoke earlier of the 1921 Bill, which was based on the recommendations of that Committee. I do not want to go as far as the hyperbole of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), but it is true that this Bill is quite different from those of 1866, 1921 or 1975, in that it does not simply ignore the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee; it frustrates them.

Mr. Paterson: That is an excellent point. With similar foresight to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield, my hon. Friend has also moved on to the next point that I was about to make.

In its fourth report, the Public Accounts Committee said quite clearly, in recommendation (vi), in paragraph 7:

> We urge the Government to extend this [audit] to all existing executive non-departmental public bodies.

It could not be a clearer recommendation from an all-party Committee, which goes on to say, in recommendation (vii):

> We consider that it is questionable, in principle, whether those whose accountability is being examined should appoint the external auditor of non-departmental public bodies. We recommend that the Bill should address this issue by specifying that all such bodies established in the future will be audited on behalf of Parliament by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Also the Bill should amend existing legislation to appoint the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor to those bodies for which he is not already statutorily appointed.

It could not be clearer.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has my hon. Friend been following the Committee stage of the Utilities Bill,

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

on which I am sitting? It is surprising to me that Ministers very often do not know what bodies are spending. I wonder whether my hon. Friend is being a bit unkind to the Government, because this would allow Ministers to know what the civil servants are hiding from them in many cases. He is on an extremely good point—that we should make sure that these reports are produced to Parliament, and then Ministers will have to read them and know what is being spent on their behalf.

Mr. Paterson: That is also an excellent point. It gets right back to the 13th century, when the role of Parliament was to try to get a grip on royal patronage. If the bodies in question are not audited properly, and effectively are allowed to appoint their own auditors, there will be a cosy inner circle, which inevitably leads to the evils of patronage outside Parliament's control. That is a real danger.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the gaps and anomalies. There are some extraordinary facts and figures in the Public Accounts Committee's ninth report. I must admit that I would not have read them if it had not been for this debate, which shows the value of these lengthy sittings. On housing associations, the report says:

> Despite many years of negotiation since 1991 with the Department and the Housing Corporation, the Comptroller and Auditor General can still only examine housing associations that volunteer to submit to his scrutiny although these are unlikely to be the bodies where problems arise.

That is bizarre, in view of the amounts involved.

1.45 am

As for Camelot, four years apparently elapsed before the CAG was able

> to provide assurance to the Committee that public funds raised through the national lottery were being handled properly and correctly passed on to Government by Camelot. Its auditors refused to pass on the information he needed.

That, too, is an extraordinary lacuna in public accounts.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend suppose that, under these rules, Bob Maxwell would allow auditors to audit him, or does he think that Maxwell might decide that, in this instance, the pensions scheme ought not to be audited? [HON. MEMBERS: "He is dead."] I know that.

Mr. Paterson: I think we all know that. I think we should try to confine our discussions to public bodies spending public funds.

Mr. Fabricant: Or dead bodies.

Mr. Paterson: No, not dead bodies. We are talking about public bodies spending other people's funds that are not properly accounted for. That is a perfectly fair point.

Let me give another couple of examples—briefly, because time is moving on. Apparently, it took several years of negotiation for the CAG to be allowed access to training and enterprise councils, and the report clearly states that there was poor financial management in some of those bodies.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: One of the most extraordinary omissions is that of the Environment Agency, which spends about £150 million a year. In this day and age, when there is such public concern about the environment—when, rightly, all Members of Parliament are keen to give due consideration to all environmental issues—the actions of the agency, involving the use of public money, are of prime importance. If new clause 2 were accepted, the agency would, by presumption, be included.

Mr. Paterson: That is very well put.

One would think that prisons would have been properly audited by the Government, but the CAG had to negotiate access to prisons run by private contractors. Surely there is a prima facie case for believing that new clause 2 would end that anomaly.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Workington has returned to the Chamber. Perhaps we shall have an opportunity to hear his penetrating comments on the new clause. As far as I am concerned, however, this is fundamental. We are sent here by the public to control public expenditure—to see how taxes levied from the benighted citizenry are spent, and spent properly. *[Interruption.]* Members laugh. I find that extraordinary, for I can think of no more important role for an MP. That is why we are here, and that is why every one of us should support new clause 2.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I shall speak to amendments Nos. 32 and 33.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has said, it is regrettable that such a serious debate has been left until so late as a result of time-wasting earlier.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If there had been time-wasting, would the Chair not have called the House to order? In that case, there cannot have been time-wasting.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I think that all such matters can be safely left to the Chair.

Mr. Timms: These are important matters, which warranted more serious consideration.

In his evidence to the Committee on 12 January, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said that he recognised the force of the argument for extending audit by the NAO, at least in some cases. As the Committee has recognised, he noted that the Government had appointed the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit every non-departmental public body that we had set up since May 1997. We might argue about whether one or two institutions count as NDPBs, but that is the position. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who chairs the Committee, has made the point that that is in stark contrast with the record of the previous Government.

The Chief Secretary acknowledged that the present arrangements for the audit of executive NDPBs were something of a hotch-potch and not easy to justify. The Economic Secretary made the same point in Standing Committee. There seems to be no clear reason for the CAG being auditor of some bodies and not of others in the same sector.

I had hoped that we might have some justification from Conservative Members for the practice of the previous Government, who put most of those arrangements in place. Former Ministers in the previous Government have contributed to the debate. I had hoped that they might shed some light on the rationale behind what the previous Government did: whether it was a Thatcherite aberration, which all right-minded people now abhor, or whether there was a more substantial basis for their decisions.

Many Conservatives Members have spoken in the debate. Not one has sought to defend the previous Government's decisions. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant)—who was here until a moment ago—as perhaps a defender of the true faith, might have explained, or given some justification for their actions. None was forthcoming.

Mr. Brady: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: No, I will not.

No attempt was made to justify what the previous Government did. In fact, it was quite the opposite. All the Conservative Members piled in to condemn what was their regular practice. It is interesting how hard it is to find anyone to defend that practice.

Mr. Brady: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: I will and then I will move on rapidly.

Mr. Brady: In a spirit of generosity, perhaps the Minister will care to note that not a single Labour Back Bencher has defended the Government's refusal to accept the eminently sensible new clause?

Mr. Timms: We are moving on to resolve these issues, as the House should have done earlier in the day.

The Chief Secretary said that he believed that some reform could be accomplished administratively. For example, where current statute for a particular NDPB provides for the Minister to appoint the auditors, the Minister could appoint the CAG at the next opportunity. That is possible as things stand. At the same time, he did not rule out amendments, where they would be sensible, but said that he wanted to reflect further as part of the dialogue that he had invited the Committee to join him in.

Mr. Paterson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: No, I will not.

It is clear from both the evidence that the Chief Secretary gave the PAC and the Economic Secretary's words in Standing Committee that any approach must provide for circumstances that make it sensible to appoint an auditor other than the CAG. In our view, a blanket one-size-fits-all approach is not right.

In Government amendment No. 33, subsections (6) and (7) provide an order-making power to enable the Treasury to appoint the CAG to audit an NDPB that he does not audit at present, even if he is barred by statute from auditing the NDPB concerned. That is a big step in the direction that PAC members have been urging us to take.

The order-making power will allow amendment of the statute setting up the NDPB by, for example, removing the requirement that the auditor has to be a Companies Act auditor, thus freeing the way for the CAG to be appointed. The amendment would not apply in respect of NDPBs that are companies. That issue needs to be addressed separately, as the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden said in his very good speech. The Treasury would be able to propose such an order only after consulting the CAG. The order would need to be approved by affirmative resolution in both Houses of Parliament.

The Government's amendment goes hand in hand with the proposal by the Chief Secretary to set up a study of all aspects of central Government audit. That was announced in his answer to a parliamentary question on Monday. He has also invited the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee to join the steering group, and I very much hope that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden will feel able to accept that invitation.

The study would cover not only issues of concern to the PAC—such as the audit of NDPBs, rights of access and validation of performance information—but issues such as how central Government audit should participate in modernising government, and particularly the issue of how audit impacts on risk taking and innovation, which is a topic that has occasionally cropped up in our debates on the Bill. The study would also have to examine other important issues, such as the quality of audit, links with other auditors, duplication of the work of inspectors and regulators, and experience overseas.

The amendment will leave open the possibility of appointing at some stage in the future the CAG as the auditor of an NDPB, which he is currently prevented from auditing by statute, if it is agreed on the basis of a recommendation in the study that the CAG should be so appointed.

Mr. Rendel: Will the Minister confirm that the Comptroller and Auditor General is there to audit on behalf of Parliament and not on behalf of the Government? Is the study a study into what audit should be done on behalf of Government or on behalf of Parliament?

Mr. Timms: The position is absolutely clear: the audit is on behalf of Parliament. Our amendments make that very clear, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to put that on the record.

Mr. David Davis: I welcome the study. Although the Minister will understand that we would prefer the approach of putting the provision into statute now, and that I am a little disappointed that the amendment does not apply also to the other two spheres—performance validation and access—I welcome the study and am minded to take part in it. I shall have to talk to the Chief Secretary about several matters, such as remit, membership and the types of issues that have just

[Mr. David Davis]

been raised, but I shall do all that as quickly as possible. I hope that we shall be able to resolve a way forward on the matter.

Mr. Timms: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and am glad that I took his intervention. It has taken us significantly forward.

The amendment meets a concern expressed in Committee that, unless action were taken in the Bill, it might not be possible for many years to introduce any changes to the audit of NDPBs, even if the dialogue proposed by the Chief Secretary recommended that that change would be sensible. The key action that we are taking in the amendment is to remove the statutory obstacle to what the PAC Chairman and other Committee members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), are seeking to achieve. I was grateful to my right hon. Friend for acknowledging that point in his speech.

New subsection (3) in the amendment makes it clear that examinations conducted by the CAG under clauses 5, 7 and 11 are conducted on behalf of the House of Commons. I reiterated that point in replying to the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) a moment ago. In Committee, we debated a similar amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, and we undertook further to consider the point. The amendment is the result of those considerations, after further discussions between the Treasury and National Audit Office officials.

We think that it is sensible to include the amendment now, as the CAG does not conduct some of his audits, mainly of international bodies, on behalf of the House. We therefore have to make it clear that all his audits under the Bill are indeed on behalf of the House.

New subsections (4) and (5) give the CAG the same rights of access when he acts as the auditor of other bodies, mainly NDPBs, as he has under clause 8(1) when he audits Departments. That replaces section 9(2) of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921, about which we have heard a certain amount in the debate.

2 am

On the new clause tabled by members of the PAC, I said earlier that any approach must provide for circumstances that would make it sensible to appoint an auditor other than the Comptroller and Auditor General. In our view, a blanket, one-size-fits-all approach is not the right way to proceed.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden proposed a blanket approach with his new clause 2 in Committee, but, after lengthy exchanges, he withdrew it and promised to bring forward an amended version on Report. The new clause that we now have would provide for the CAG to be the auditor at the expiry of the term of the existing auditor of all NDPBs except those designated by the relevant Minister. Ministerial designations would be subject to the approval of the House by affirmative resolution.

Our view is that the revised new clause would go too far in the direction of making the CAG automatically the auditor of all NDPBs. Before reaching a conclusion we need to have regard to a range of issues, not least the particular concerns of the Departments responsible to Parliament for overseeing the bodies in question. Some Departments take the view that the competitive tension secured by the periodic tendering of audit appointments brings a better service. Some believe that the NAO may not have the specialist expertise necessary to handle a particular audit. All those issues need to be considered carefully before decisions are made about a number of the NDPBs that we have been talking about.

Let us not forget, too, that, under the Government amendment, Treasury designations will reflect the concerns not only of Departments, but of the CAG, as the Treasury is expressly required to consult him before proposing a designation to Parliament.

All the issues need to be addressed as a whole.

Mr. David Davis *rose—*

Mr. Timms: I ought to conclude now, but I shall take a final intervention from the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Davis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his patience. The reason for putting in a timetable was to enable those consultations to take place. If it was decided at the end of the period that the situation was inappropriate, for whatever reason, it would be possible for the Minister to come back to the House and, by affirmative resolution, exempt the body in question from the CAG's audit. That was the purpose of the structure of the new clause.

Mr. Timms: Our amendment deals with that. I accept that the right hon. Gentleman has done some work since he drew up his original proposals, as have we.

The study that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has proposed is very important. I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is minded to take part in it. Once that study has been completed, we can consider what further changes might be appropriate.

I urge the House to accept the Government amendments and to reject the new clause.

Mr. Davis: I shall press the new clause to a Division.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 27, Noes 253.

Division No. 92] **[2.4 am**

AYES

Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Brady, Graham	Öpik, Lembit
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*	Rendel, David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*	Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*	St Aubyn, Nick
Fabricant, Michael	Sanders, Adrian
Flight, Howard	Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Foster, Don *(Bath)*	Swayne, Desmond
Gray, James	Tyler, Paul
Hayes, John	Wardle, Charles
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*	Webb, Steve
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*	
Laing, Mrs Eleanor	
Letwin, Oliver	**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*	**Sir Robert Smith and**
McLoughlin, Patrick	**Mr. Owen Paterson.**

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you give us some guidance as to what will happen if, as a result of tonight's debate, we lose tomorrow's business? That has already happened once before in this Session. Perhaps we could do without Prime Minister's Question Time, but more important, at 3.30 pm tomorrow, there is to be a debate on the report of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges on the hon. Member for Billericay

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

(Mrs. Gorman). She is accused of lying and of deceiving the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] We can see— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. MacShane *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must take his seat when I am on my feet. He asks a hypothetical question; it is not a matter for the Chair at this time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. MacShane *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will remain in his seat.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would it be in order for anyone who has any association with any of the companies referred to in the report that is scheduled for debate tomorrow—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a matter for the Chair, or for debate at this time. The hon. Gentleman should know better.

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The integrity, probity and good conduct of Members are important, and, as a relatively new Member of the House, I seek your advice as to whether it is important for us to be kept up through the night, with the possibility of delaying—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman may be a new Member, but the first thing that he needs to learn is that when I am on my feet, he must sit down. I have already dealt with that point of order.

New Clause 3

COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL: ACCESS TO INFORMATION

'.(1) This section applies in connection with the examination by the Comptroller and Auditor General of the accounts of any government department or other body under or by virtue of—

(a) any enactment, including this Act, or

(b) in the case of a body other than a government department, any arrangement which provides for the accounts of that body to be subject to examination by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

(2) Subsection (3) applies only to the following records, that is to say—

(a) records which are in the custody or under the control of the department or body to which the examination relates, or to which that department or body has or can obtain access;

(b) records of a receiving body to which any paying body has or can obtain access.

(3) In connection with such an examination as is mentioned in subsection (1), the Comptroller and Auditor General shall, subject to subsections (2), (4) and (5), have a right of access at all reasonable times to any record relating to—

(a) the accounts of the department or body to which the examination relates,

(b) any money originating in the Consolidated Fund,

(c) any liability or contingent liability that will or may be met out of monies originating in the Consolidated Fund, or

(d) tax credit under the Tax Credits Act 1999.

(4) The right of access conferred by subsection (3) shall not be exercisable in relation to any record relating to accounts which—

(a) are subject to audit by the Auditor General for Scotland or the Auditor General for Wales, and

(b) are not also subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

(5) In such cases and to such extent as the Treasury may by order designate, the right of access conferred by subsection (3) shall not be exercisable in relation to any record which is not held by or under the control of the body to which the examination in question relates.

(6) An order under subsection (5) shall be made by statutory instrument, and shall not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of the House of Commons.

(7) A person who holds or has control of any record to which the Comptroller and Auditor General has a right of access under subsection (3) shall give the Comptroller and Auditor General any assistance, information or explanation which he requires in relation to the matters recorded in it.

(8) In this section "paying body" means any body which pays to a receiving body money originating in the Consolidated Fund, and a "receiving body" means any body which receives from a paying body money originating in the Consolidated Fund, but does not include in either case a body the accounts of which are subject to audit under section 2 of the Audit Commission Act 1988 or section 97 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 unless it is a body specified in section 98(I) of the National Health Service Act 1977.'.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.15 am

Mr. David Davis: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 21.

Amendment No. 17, in clause 11, page 6, line 19, leave out from "(5)" to "shall" and insert—

'The Treasury, a body which is designated for the purposes of section 10 and a person who acts as auditor for the purposes of section 10(2)(c) or (7)(c),'.

Government amendment No. 25.

Mr. Davis: The amendment tabled in the names of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and myself is about protecting the rights of Parliaments and, thereby, taxpayers to have independent information about the way in which public money is spent. I have raised the matter before during discussions on the measure, and have listened closely to the Government's concerns.

I have reworked the new clause to address those concerns and to ensure that there are none of the undesirable or unintended consequences identified by Ministers in Committee. I travelled that extra mile willingly because I want to find a formula that is in the interests of Parliament, the Government and the taxpayer.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A fundamental point, which has not been well understood, is that the new clause does not provide a right for the CAG to roam at will. It is not a right for him to follow public money wherever it goes—desirable as that might be. It simply provides that, where the Government or funding bodies secure for themselves, through statute, contract or other means, access to a recipient of public money, the CAG's independent right of access will follow automatically.

The revised provision is even more limited than the version that I tabled in Committee. It includes restrictions on access in order to address specific concerns raised by the Government. It includes an additional subsection to make it perfectly clear that devolved matters are excluded. It even allows the Government a right of veto by order. That gives them a mechanism to deal with any case they identify—although I cannot imagine any—in which the CAG should have less access than the Government, or where his access should be subject to some proviso. I am in earnest about the new clause and want to find a way of framing it that will leave the Government content. In addition to the provisions that I have included specifically to help them, the interaction of my new clause with the commencement provisions in clause 27 would provide further flexibility.

The core difference between my access proposals and those of the Government lies in subsection (2) of my new clause. Access applies first to documents controlled by a Department; secondly, when a Department itself has access; and thirdly, when funding bodies further down the spending chain have access. Clause 27 will allow the Treasury to bring the Bill's provisions into force piecemeal. It could choose to bring in initially only the first part of my access provision, which is in line with its own, activating the rest after further consultation. The Financial Secretary raised the prospect of consultation, and I hope that that will take place and will be constructive.

The Government provision, which I shall discuss shortly, will close the possibility of addressing weaknesses in the Comptroller and Auditor General's access right until the next time that legislation on these matters is before the House. That may be many decades in the future. My provision would create the framework for the weaknesses to be addressed without further primary legislation.

We had a useful debate in Committee about what is now clause 8 and the Comptroller and Auditor General's right of access to information. It ran over two sittings and lasted for more than four hours, so hon. Members will be relieved to learn that I do not intend to repeat it here. I want to move the debate on, setting out specific concerns that the Government raised in Committee and demonstrating that my new clause would give no grounds for any of those concerns.

I shall start by briefly summarising events in Committee before I progress. I explained in Committee that the access clause is unsatisfactory for three reasons. First, it will make Departments the gateway through which the Comptroller and Auditor General must gain access to information whereas the original Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866 invested the powers of access directly in him. Secondly, it will repeal, without equivalent provision, a section in the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921 that is the only statutory basis for the Comptroller and Auditor General's rights to information on the many other accounts that he audits.

I am pleased that the Government have addressed those points in amendments to clauses 8 and 22, but they have failed yet to address the third and most important point that I raised in Committee. The clause will fail to update the Comptroller and Auditor General's access. It will leave him to face public audit in the 21st century with access rights developed to meet the needs of public administration in the middle of the 19th century. That is the fundamental flaw that my new clause is designed to correct.

I want to remind the House why we need the Comptroller and Auditor General to have access rights that extend outside Departments. My examples are those that I described in Committee, but I shall only summarise them here. Many functions of Government are now delivered outside the traditional public sector. Two main categories are particularly important. First, private sector companies deliver contracted-out activities—for example, PFI contractors to whom Departments are already committed to pay more than £70 billion in the next 25 years. Secondly, bodies in the independent and voluntary sectors provide public services funded by Government. For example, housing associations deliver on behalf of the Housing Corporation social housing programmes that are worth more than £1 billion each year.

Parliament has the right to expect the same standards of probity and regularity in the use of public funds however they are spent. Departments are still responsible for the way that the money is spent and they rightly insist on automatic access for their staff. The Comptroller and Auditor General can examine Departments' own checks on service deliverers, but that may not provide him with adequate evidence to reach an independent view. His professional view is that he needs access to audit Departments. Departments often agree, but the solution is piecemeal. The CAG must ensure that Departments secure access by contractual means. That is administratively burdensome; it diminishes the CAG's independence by making him dependent on Departments; and, where access is resisted, it impedes scrutiny by the PAC on behalf of the House.

I summarised in Committee some of the most notable examples of frustration experienced by the CAG and the PAC, caused by depending on arrangements granted at the behest of Departments and the Treasury. It took five years of negotiation before the CAG obtained access to the Housing Corporation and other executive non-departmental public bodies. The CAG was unable to provide the PAC with an assurance that Camelot had correctly handed over national proceeds from the lottery for four years because the company and its auditors refused to provide the evidence.

It took several years of negotiation before Government provided the CAG with access to training and enterprise councils, and Government refused the CAG access to private train operators despite the fact that the PAC considers that necessary to verify on behalf of Parliament that public subsidies have been earned. The Government fail to provide the CAG with powers to visit farmers, to check their claims—even though staff of the European Court of Auditors can visit UK farmers to check on EU money.

[Mr. Davis]

The CAG can examine only those registered social landlords—housing associations, in modern parlance—that volunteer access. In one case where an hon. Member brought irregularities to the attention of the CAG, it took six months for access to be arranged. The case is not the subject of a criminal investigation. That is an example of a lack of statutory access rights impeding the CAG's ability to respond to hon. Members who have concerns about the use of public funds in their constituencies.

There are related concerns about whistleblowers. Recent legislation named the CAG as a person to whom whistleblowers may disclose information and remain protected, yet the CAG does not have powers to examine allegations made against private contractors accused of misappropriating public funds—a case of fragmented rather than joined-up government.

Those examples show that the CAG needs access rights that extend beyond Departments and that it is not enough to rely on administrative means. I refer hon. Members who want more detail to the reports of the sixth and seventh sittings of the Standing Committee.

The relatively minor change to access rights that the Government appear to have conceded as part of their agreement to remove Departments as the gateway through which the CAG must gain access returns to the previous legislation, which vested powers of access directly in the CAG. Government amendment No. 21 refers to documents controlled by Government Departments or pursuant to arrangements made by a Government Department for compiling or handling its records. I would appreciate the Minister's clarification. Is that intended to provide access to any contractor undertaking finance-related services on behalf of Departments, such as EDS which works for the Inland Revenue, and Chessington Computer Centre, which processes many billions of pounds of Government payroll?

The amendment falls far short of the current administrative arrangements for CAG access that currently operate with the Government's blessing. The Government's general guidance on contracting states that access shall be provided where a contractor processes or handles records relating to the operational activities of the authority. Further Government guidance, specifically on PFI, states that contracts should ensure that the CAG is entitled to examine the contractor's records. How far does the amendment go? It certainly fails to reflect their own acknowledgement of the extent to which contractors deliver services and public programmes and to whom the CAG will require access. Nor does it acknowledge the need for the CAG to have access to a range of bodies in the voluntary, independent and public sectors. In such cases, the CAG will have to continue to negotiate his way in with the relevant body to obtain access, so it therefore falls far short of the recommendation in the ninth report of the Public Accounts Committee.

2.30 am

I want to progress the debate by considering the Government's concerns about granting the CAG the type of access rights that we seek through the new clause. I have studied the Committee *Hansard* as before, and it reveals five issues that are of serious concern to the Government. First, they are anxious that the new clause would allow the CAG a right of access to anywhere that public money was spent, down to the last paper clip, and that anybody entering a contractual relationship with the Government would be subject to that inspection. Quite simply, that would not be the effect of the new clause. It would grant the CAG access only where the Government or funding bodies considered that they themselves needed access. In those terms, we might call it a piggyback provision.

The logic of that approach is that the CAG would need access for the same reason that the Government need it—that is, when the only way to ascertain that a service is being delivered is to examine it at the service deliverer's site. Thus, contracts under the new deal give the Employment Service access to bodies that provide training and employment opportunities funded by the initiative. The Employment Service quite properly needs access to ensure that claims are bona fide. The CAG also needs access to satisfy himself on behalf of Parliament that payments under the new deal are regularly made for services that have been delivered. The Government accept that the CAG needs access and secured that through administrative means. That is welcome and essential, but, as I said when we debated a previous amendment, the administrative approach is inherently deficient. I shall return to that.

In contrast with the new deal example, I doubt whether the Employment Service has secured rights of access to its stationery supplier. It can monitor the quality and price of supplies without going into the supplier's manufacturing process, can test the price in an open market and, most important, can see that it is getting what it pays for as the goods are delivered to its premises. For exactly the same reasons, the CAG does not need access there. The new clause would not give him such access and the provision, therefore, is in no way an unfettered right to roam.

Secondly, the Government are concerned about the potential constraining effect on others of widening the CAG's access. They consider that wider access in general may stifle innovation and risk taking, and that access specifically in respect of tax credit payments made by employers on behalf of the Government may be a burden on business. The Minister said in his comment on the review that those matters would be taken up.

On the PFI and in the context of the "Modernising Government" agenda, the CAG has already said publicly that he supports

well thought through risk taking and experimentation,

the emphasis being on well thought through. The Government have welcomed that comment and have stated that they recognise that

people will no longer be able to use audit as an excuse for not delivering more co-ordinated and efficient services.

A statutory right of access for the CAG will not impact on risk taking in any case. The CAG already has full access to Departments, which might be risk averse. The purpose of the new clause is to extend his access beyond Whitehall to, for example, the private sector bodies delivering public services. Such bodies have innovation and risk taking at their core and will not be inhibited by the CAG, but public sector standards and expectations may be less familiar to them, and there may be a correspondingly greater need for the CAG to have access.

The proof is provided by experience. The CAG has negotiated access to the private sector in many cases, and the arrangements have worked well. The very changes encouraged under the "Modernising Government" agenda show the need for more flexible arrangements for the CAG. Cross-departmental initiatives and public-private partnerships require civil servants to work outside the traditional rigidities of Departments, and defining the CAG's access in terms of those Departments is out of kilter with such modernisation.

Mr. Rendel: Does the right hon. Gentleman know, or has he heard from any Government source, of any occasion when the Government have felt that the CAG's access has proved in any way oppressive?

Mr. Davis: That is an extraordinarily interesting question because we often hear the general argument that such access suppresses risk taking but we have never been given an example, so the answer is no. If there has been such an occurrence, I would be interested to hear about it. Perhaps the review will pick up some of those points.

On tax credits, access is necessary because they replace benefits that are currently delivered through Government agencies that are already subject to the CAG's inspection. Those credits are, in effect, payments from the state. In recognition of the concern about the burden on business, I have made the new clause clearer, to show that it allows access only for examining tax credits, which involve payments, and does not apply to the tax system as a whole because that is largely about receipts rather than payments.

I can assure, and reassure, the Government that the CAG's access would impose no burden beyond that already inherent in the tax credits system. The CAG has informed me that his staff would conduct examinations of tax credits by accompanying Inland Revenue staff on the visits that they make to check compliance, so the new clause will not, in any event, add any new burden.

The CAG estimates that, unless specific weaknesses become apparent and require further work, his staff would need to attend 0.5 per cent. of the Inland Revenue's visits. Based on the Revenue's latest figures, that would mean attendance by the CAG's staff at about 200 out of just under 40,000 visits. Access for the CAG would mean no additional visits to employers, but simply one or two extra people on a tiny proportion of visits that would take place in any case, so the additional burden argument does not stand up.

Thirdly, the Government have said that the existing arrangements to provide access work well and are preferable to a statutory provision. However, the Chief Secretary, in giving evidence to the Committee, recognised that the arrangements that stem from that approach are

a bit of a hotch-potch.

They have often required lengthy and costly negotiations, illustrated by the examples that I cited earlier.

The existing arrangements raise the further constitutional issue that the Government, and in practice the civil service, decide what Parliament may scrutinise. A statutory approach would bring administrative savings in negotiating access, avoid accidental omissions and ensure that Departments do not dictate the extent of parliamentary scrutiny. My reassurance to the Government in this matter, as with the previous point, is that wider access is not new—it is already in place in many parts of the public sector. We merely want the mechanism for securing wider access to be more consistent and robust. As an additional benefit, the statutory approach will be cheaper to operate.

Fourthly, the Government are concerned about duplication of audit. That stems from a misunderstanding about audit. There will never be more than one auditor who audits the accounts, and the CAG will not conduct a duplicate audit of the accounts of bodies in question. To continue with an earlier example, the CAG would examine the records of the new deal provider organisations, not to audit their accounts but to audit those of the Employment Service and ensure that the training and employment opportunities for which the service has paid have been delivered.

The Government are keen for the CAG to place reliance on work that other auditors have undertaken in auditing the accounts of bodies in which he has an interest. Sometimes that is appropriate and it is for the CAG to judge when it is. Unless specifically contracted to do so, other auditors will not examine whether funds provided to the body have been used as Parliament intended, because their responsibility is to the body itself, not to Parliament. Two cases illustrate the different remit and the role of auditors working on behalf of the bodies that they audit, rather than on behalf of Parliament, as in the case of the CAG.

Halton college claimed £6.4 million from the Further Education Funding Council, with no support from college records. That happened over several years, despite the fact that the college's auditors had been required to certify funding claims. The funding council subsequently reviewed the quality of work undertaken by private firms auditing colleges, and identified concerns in 11 of the 26 cases reviewed.

In the second case, Gwent tertiary college was taken to the brink of collapse by incurring a deficit of £6.8 million through significant weaknesses in the controls of claims for European funding. The college's auditors had repeatedly certified that all grants and income had been used for the purpose for which they were received, but had not taken any detailed testing of expenditure to primary records to support their audit opinion. Neither of the matters is new to the Minister, as both have been related in Public Accounts Committee reports, which the Treasury has received.

There is no risk of audit duplication. We are discussing different and complementary functions on the part of the auditors.

Fifthly, the Government said that the Bill is about resource accounts, not about audit. However, analysis of the Bill shows that it covers far more than is necessary to bring in resource accounts and resource-based supply, and that audit is indeed at its core. The Bill repeals 16 sections covering audit in the Exchequer and Audit Department Acts 1866 and 1921. Seven of its 28 clauses deal with audit. It is hard to imagine a Bill that is more about audit. The opinion that the Bill is only about resource accounts and resource-based supply and not about audit is simply not supported by the facts.

Mr. Timms: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Before he concludes, I wanted to ask him

[Mr. Timms]

about a point that he made earlier in his speech. He said that the new clause would not give the NAO further access than the Government have, but, as I understand subsection (8), it sets up an endless chain of paying bodies and receiving bodies, which could allow the NAO to go further than the Government can go. Where in the new clause does the right hon. Gentleman believe there is a restraint on that?

Mr. Davis: I shall make two points to the Minister. As with the previous new clause, if he says that the problem is simply one of drafting, I am happy to accept his undertaking that he will come back to it in the Lords and correct it accordingly. However, I was referring to subsection (2), which lays down the categories that were intended. As the Minister will imagine, we took parliamentary counsel's advice on the matter. If he is correct in his description, I am happy for the new clause to be corrected at a later stage.

In conclusion, the resistance to the new clause is misplaced on all counts. I have tried hard, as has the National Audit Office's counsel on my behalf, to find a form of words that removes unintended consequences. It is simply a matter of accountability to the taxpayer for the way in which public money is spent.

We all want public services to evolve in the modern world. As I said in the Committee—the Minister smiled at the time—I am that strange thing, a right-wing Tory who believes in public services. We all want them to evolve. We want the taxpayer to get a good deal, and we want to be able to prove it. We do that by setting in statute the principle that Parliament and the taxpayer's auditor has the access necessary to do its job.

Amendment No. 17 deals with whole of Government accounts and access in that respect. I shall not go into great detail. The arguments are similar to those that I made to the Minister in Committee. It is the Comptroller and Auditor General's opinion that, under the accounting standards under which he is required to work, he has access to the subordinate accounts and the right to intervene or to require intervention from the subordinate auditors of the components of whole of Government accounts. If he is not able to have that access, he may have to qualify whole of Government accounts on those grounds. That is in nobody's interest. The new clause is designed not as a right to roam but for a specific purpose. If the Economic Secretary has a problem with it but says that the Treasury will table an amendment on the issue in another place, I will be happy to accept that.

The new clause aims to provide a good quality audit on behalf of Parliament and the public. That will benefit Government.

2.45 am

Mr. Flight: I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), especially on new clause 3. We are considering complex and difficult territory, which will become more difficult still. Government amendment No. 21 does not tackle the problems with sufficient subtlety.

If we take as a starting point the obvious desire to protect and modernise Parliament's monitoring of the way in which public money is spent, we must face the fact that auditing by the Comptroller and Auditor General will be inappropriate in many cases. Private finance initiative organisation means that public money will increasingly be spent on a subcontractor basis. Simply requiring audit or full access to follow all public money is not practical.

I repeat that it is clear from experience that it is unsatisfactory for Departments to act as gatekeepers to control the Comptroller and Auditor General's ability to monitor public money and unearth nasties. In many cases, too much time has been spent and too much difficulty encountered in gaining the necessary access.

The delicate question is where the line will be drawn. The Comptroller and Auditor General needs to be empowered with statutory rights in a way that is sufficiently flexible to permit some evolution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden argued that access is not appropriate when we are simply considering the Government's buying of supplies. Doubtless the new Government procurement office is intended to deal in a commercial fashion with value for money in buying supplies.

It is difficult to decide where to draw the line. For example, some services are contracted out to the private sector. If I were running a business and providing to other parts of the private sector services similar to those that I provided to Government, I might believe that it was inappropriate for the Comptroller and Auditor General to redo the work that my auditor had undertaken. If I had done a deal with the Government to provide a service at a specific price, why should the matter go further, as long as I delivered the service? That gives rise to a question about checking whether the service has been provided. However, drawing the line about what merits access will prove increasingly difficult.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden suggested the guideline that right of access is clearly required when the Government reserve any rights of investigation. A right of access is clearly required when funds are collected and paid in a form that is analogous to the arrangements for the lottery. There is clearly a right of access where there is any form of public subsidy.

Despite being capitalist in the way in which I think, I understand that the more that is devolved and subcontracted to the private sector, the more scope there is in some senses for corruption, and that one must therefore err on the side of permitting more rather than less access. The whole debate—going back to the central PFI subcontracting issue—about access and PFI provisioning is not complete and will require a good bit more consideration.

Let me return to the very beginning. We are talking about public money. Ideally, Parliament, through the CAG, should be doing the monitoring and should have the necessary rights of access to follow up all such expenditure. At present, there are many areas, as we all know, where there is nowhere near sufficient access and where even the obtaining of access has taken far too long.

As methods of delivering public services change, the needs involved in handling such matters will change. It seems to me that the new clause goes a long way towards providing the necessary flexibility for the future, as well as the correct basis of a statutory right, and that it will permit, in the public interest, the weighting to be on the right side in terms of not impeding the Comptroller and Auditor General as present arrangements tend to do.

My understanding of the Government's alternative proposal, in amendment no. 21, is that it is much more limited and retains Government Departments as the gatekeeper: it would present great difficulties in the chain of potential subcontracting of the provision of services out of the public purse, whether involving PFI contracts or others.

I am not a lawyer technically qualified to know whether the drafting of the new clause fully ties up the considerable complications, but it has taken account of a great deal more than Government amendment No. 21, and deserves support in principle, if not in its present form. It represents rather more than Government amendment No. 21 embodies.

Mr. Edward Davey: The House must choose tonight between new clause 3 and Government amendment No. 21, which seems to deal with only one of the original weaknesses in the Bill: the fact that clause 8 would have given access to the Comptroller and Auditor General only through the Departments acting as gatekeepers.

The Government heard our complaints in the Committee and have responded. We welcome the fact that amendment No. 21 shows that they listened and responded appropriately. However, the amendment does not deal with the second issue, which the new clause picks up—the need to extend the statutory right of access for the National Audit Office not only to departmental accounts and documents related to them but to other bodies which one would expect the National Audit Office to be able to audit. Therefore, the new clause is clearly preferable, and we shall support it.

I do not, however, believe that the new clause is perfect. The Minister pointed out in an exchange with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) that it might not restrict access sufficiently, and that it might open up a situation in which the National Audit Office could follow the supply of services from the private sector to the public sector far too far, so that it would have to go into far too much detail.

My problem with new clause 3 is slightly different, however. Again, it relates to subsection (8), in which the draftsmen have tried to introduce the concept of a "paying body" whose money originates from the Consolidated Fund. When I first read the new clause, I thought that a fairly ingenious device, but, on reflection, I see that it means that some bodies to which hon. Members have said they would like the NAO to have access rights would not be covered. That applies in particular to public bodies that obtain their revenue from levies, which were mentioned earlier. They would not be covered because the levies do not count against the Consolidated Fund. Bodies that are effectively public corporations, such as the BBC, would not be covered either.

While, as the Minister said, one aspect of the new clause may need to be restricted, another aspect probably does not go far enough. There is room for improvement; but, given that new clause 3 is the best that we have at the moment, I give it my preference.

Mr. David Davis: I think that we are getting too tangled up in the wording of subsection (8). I talked it over with the draftsmen in the first instance, and it appears that the form of words is not unique to the new clause; but I am not too fussed about that. Let me ask the hon. Gentleman's opinion about something else.

The last group of proposals that we discussed included a permissive clause tabled by the Government—commendably, I think—to allow the Treasury to intervene to provide access where it is not currently available. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be sensible for the Government to table a similar permissive clause—not drafted in the same way, but intended to cover the problems that we are discussing—to give some power to the review to which the Minister has referred? One of the concerns that the Minister creditably mentioned was that there would not be another primary-legislation opportunity in the foreseeable future.

Mr. Davey: That is a good point. If a permissive clause is the only way in which we can secure the changes that we seek on a piecemeal basis through the review, we need such a measure. I hope that the Government will listen to our suggestions, and table such a clause in another place. As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman agrees, however, that is a secondary solution; what we really want is a provision in the Bill that would deal with the issues universally.

The right hon. Gentleman brings me to my next point, which concerns the review that has been referred to—in fairly loose terms so far: we have read press reports, and engaged in conversations outside the Chamber. Perhaps the Minister or the Chief Secretary will be able to tell us a little more, because I think the review is relevant to a number of the groups of new clauses and amendments that we are discussing.

Will the review just involve the right hon. Gentleman and some of his colleagues from the PAC, or will it seek to secure a wider consensus in this place? As the right hon. Gentleman rightly said in his exchange with the Minister, it is important for the review to be led by Parliament. It is about the accountability of public bodies to Parliament, and Parliament should therefore be represented in it, in as many ways as are appropriate. The PAC will obviously have a role in that regard, but I should have thought that representatives from the main parties should at least be consulted, and possibly invited on to any review panel that the Government may consider establishing. Then hon. Members on both sides of the House would have an input into the review.

3 am

As the right hon. Gentleman said, what is the remit of the review? Will it cover the things in the Bill and some of the wider issues that we have read about in today's *Financial Times*—problems of accountability if there are cross-departmental reviews and budgets in future? Will it cover other matters such as supply and procedure for estimates in this place, which we touched on earlier?

All those matters are germane to the issue of parliamentary accountability on the budget. As we know so little about the review, all I can do at this juncture is to urge the Minister to discuss its remit with all parties to ensure that Parliament has an input at the first stage. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson), a Labour Member, agreed that we needed to reform the

[Mr. Davey]

procedures for supply, so, again, we can get cross-party consensus on a fairly radical approach to improving financial accountability.

In dealing with some of the problems that the Minister raised in Committee concerning the extension of CAG's institutional jurisdiction, the right hon. Gentleman talked about one of the favoured Government solutions to the problem: using administrative means to extend the CAG's access rights where appropriate. However, study of the administrative methods that the Government employ in respect of the auditing of various bodies suggests that the administrative regime goes against the NAO becoming an auditor.

I refer, for example, to the Treasury's central unit on procurement, which issues guidance on model form contracts. Apparently, a standard term in the contract says that the incorporation of a clause on access rights for the NAO is explicitly at the discretion of the parent purchaser. Therefore, the administrative regime on which the Economic Secretary puts such reliance works against a solution to the problem.

Mr. David Davis: I am speaking from memory here. As the hon. Gentleman will remember, I had dozens of examples in Committee, but, if I remember correctly, access to the training and enterprise councils was held up not by the Department, but by Treasury intervention preventing access.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman may be right. I do not know the details, but it follows from what I have said that the administrative regime—whether from the Treasury, or the Treasury's central unit on procurement—is not pushing on the issue in the way in which the Government sometimes suggest it is.

I hope that the Government will look to other independent bodies and commentators for their views on that crucial matter and for solutions. In Committee, I had occasion to quote, sometimes extensively, from the latest academic work on the issue, entitled "Audit, Accountability and Government" by Fidelma White and Kathryn Hollingsworth. It is great seller—at least it should be.

Chapter 4, entitled "The jurisdictions of the C&AG", reviews all the various areas that we discussed in Committee. Having looked at how the NAO is able to audit public money that is spent through private contractors and local spending bodies such as voluntary agencies, it concludes that there is a need for statutory legislation to ensure that there are automatic access rights. I quote from page 89 of the book:

> the C&AG could be given guaranteed rights of access to the records of all local spending bodies and private contractors providing public services and functions. Until such legislation is forthcoming, the C&AG will remain the poor relative of other public sector auditors, such as the Audit Commission and the European Court of Auditors.

The quotation reiterates many of the points made by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, and emphasises the fact that it really is time that reform on access was made. We have waited far too long for it.

We have been told that the Government have quite a good record on access. When the Economic and Chief Secretaries appeared before the Public Accounts Committee, they said that they were minded to move further in that direction. They probably do not want to hear this repeated, but we want to encourage them to have the strength of their convictions and quickly to follow them through. This matter has waited far too long to be tackled.

The Bill is the first legislation for many decades to deal at all comprehensively with the access issue. The Government should seize this opportunity to ensure that Parliament's auditors, who are accountable to Parliament, have the access rights that they need and should have.

Mr. Fabricant: In the debate on the previous new clause and amendments, we heard that the Comptroller and Auditor General was not allowed to investigate whole swathes of the economy. Now, we hear that there are other spheres in which the CAG is allowed to investigate, but to which he has no access. That is not auditing, it is impotency.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said that, in many cases, the CAG is able to gain access only at the discretion of the body that is to be audited. Such an arrangement cannot be right. In extreme circumstances, in cases in which there might be a misappropriation of funds, such discretion would not be exercised in favour of allowing access. Therefore, we are talking not only about impotency, but about responsibility without authority. Such an arrangement also cannot be right.

It is quite extraordinary that officers of the European Court of Auditors are able to go tramping over British farms, whereas the CAG cannot send his officers on to British farms should it be appropriate to do so. Clearly, when it comes to the CAG, there is no independence.

Government amendment No. 21 does not go far enough. New subsection (2) states that new subsection (1) applies only

> in relation to documents which are held or controlled—
>
> (a) by a government department, or
>
> (b) in pursuance of arrangements made by a government department for the compiling or handling of any of its financial records.

That considerably restricts the CAG's activities.

We have heard of cases in which the CAG was seeking information—from Camelot, for example—but it took four years to obtain that information. The issue of whether Camelot has been making excessive profits is, rightly or wrongly, contentious. Nevertheless, it would have served the interests of Parliament—and certainly the interests of the people, whom Parliament serves—for the CAG to gain access to the relevant figures. Provision on access must be tightened up. It certainly should not be loosened or slackened, but that is what is happening.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) said, there is a difference between the actions of a commercial auditor—a chartered accountant, certified accountant or any auditor certified by the Department of Trade and Industry—and those of the CAG. The CAG has the additional duty of investigating and determining whether funds are being spent in the spirit intended by Parliament. The Companies Acts do not impose such a duty on commercial auditors, but the CAG must perform that duty. He can do so only if he has access. That access must be quick, because in extremis, where there might be fraud or misappropriation

of funds, there is a possibility that delay might enable the organisation being audited to conceal information that the CAG needed to see.

Customs and Excise has great powers to investigate certain issues, particularly inputs and outputs for VAT calculations. It is very strange that such powers are not available to the CAG, who is empowered by Parliament on behalf of the people to see whether funds are applied in the way in which Parliament intended.

I welcome Government amendment No. 21 to some extent, but it does not go far enough. New clause 3, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden and the Public Accounts Committee, is comprehensive. It would not damage the organisations that might be subjected to audit.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), who has only just entered Parliament, I was in business back in the 1980s. My company has been subjected to audit and even dawn raids by Customs and Excise to look at my VAT inputs and outputs. I claimed VAT back because my company was mainly an exporter. Disruptive though such audits can be, if a company keeps its books in a professional manner, it is not a difficult process to undergo. When I started the company in the 1980s, the records were kept manually. These days, almost all companies, from FTSE 100 companies to small sweet shops, keep their accounts on computer. It is not right to say that such audits can be difficult and that the Government are trying to protect companies from them.

I was shocked to hear—perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden will correct me if I am wrong—that the BBC is also protected from such audit. That is a problem. The BBC has its own auditors, but whether the corporation is operating in what is called a fair trade environment is a contentious issue. I do not want to go too far off the point, because you would rightly call me to order if I did, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it is worth explaining. I said that it was in the spirit of Parliament's legislation that the CAG has to investigate.

The BBC gets most of its income from the licence fee, but a relatively small amount comes from the operation of BBC World, which is its commercial arm, selling radio and television programmes overseas, producing publications and entering into joint ventures with commercial operations. It competes with other organisations that are funded not by a licence fee, but by shareholders and trade in a normal environment.

Parliament has rightly said that the BBC should not have a commercial advantage. None of its operations should be funded, directly or indirectly, by money from the licence fee. Nevertheless, we all understand that the BBC has a large structure. After all, it is a £2 billion organisation and it is sometimes difficult to separate the overheads that are paid for by the licence fee from the overheads that should be funded by its commercial arm.

3.15 am

Strictly speaking, it is not the duty of the BBC's auditors to look into that particular aspect of the BBC's operations, although they do so. I am quite sure that if the Chairman of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), were here now, he would say that one of the first duties of the CAG should be to ensure that the spirit of Parliament is carried out with regard to the BBC to ensure that there is fair trading and that none of the BBC's commercial operations are funded, directly or indirectly, by the licence payer. It is yet another area where the BBC is being protected—another area to which the CAG does not have access. Indeed, I believe that not only does he not have access, but he is not even empowered to investigate those operations.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, the CAG is made impotent by the fact that he cannot gain access without permission, of his own volition and quickly. Consequently, I fear that this has become an impotent Bill.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Every Bill contains signs as to its true intent. Access has to be one test of any Bill dealing with auditing. In a public company, if one were considering entering into a contract, particularly an equity arrangement for a joint venture, one of the first things one would do is insist in the contract terms on a right of audit and a right of access to the records that enabled an audit to be carried out.

Many of the issues that lay behind the previous group of amendments also relate to this group, particularly in relation to matters over which there is no immediate presumption that the Comptroller and Auditor General will have a right of audit and the bodies involved in public expenditure will have a right to enter and inspect.

Therefore, there are huge missed opportunities in the Bill. For example, there is no provision for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have the necessary statutory access to examine the large sums of public money spent by new service providers, including private contractors and voluntary bodies, such as the private contractors who handle the £4 billion of central Government pay, manage six prisons, including Doncaster and the Wolds, and spend £5.2 billion of public money providing new deal training opportunities. I cited those examples in relation to the previous group of amendments and they are equally applicable to the provisions relating to access. Voluntary sector registered social landlords receive £1 billion annually to provide local services on behalf of central Government.

There is also no provision for the CAG to have access to the body to be established to carry on public-private partnership business, which is very much the equivalent of what I was alluding to earlier. A public company could never get away with the shareholders criticising the board of directors, which in business terms, as we have heard during this somewhat prolonged debate, is the equivalent to the Executive in Parliament.

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend is presumably making the point that as government and the relationship across Departments become increasingly complex, and as the relationship between private and public bodies becomes a more common feature of the exercise of political power, so that they are more likely to act in unison to deliver a

[Mr. Hayes]

particular aspect of public policy, a more sophisticated solution for auditing their affairs needs to be introduced to match those changes.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for that fine intervention.

Mr. Caplin: It was long enough to be a speech.

Mr. O'Brien: Given the quality of Conservative Members' interventions, they could often be taken for speeches. In my brief time as a Member of this House, that is not a criticism that could be made of Labour Members.

As government becomes increasingly complex, a more subtle solution is required. I shall leave an attempted, partial solution to some of the issues raised until later in my short contribution on this group of amendments. I want to move from a point about new clause 3 to the inadequacies on amendment No. 21, which alludes partially to what my hon. Friend spoke about.

As I was saying before my hon. Friend's intervention, there is no provision for the CAG to have access to any body to be established to carry on public-private partnership business, despite the fact that it will receive substantial public sector funds—£200 million in the first year in the form of cash and guarantees. Audit is required whenever cash is involved; it advises on even larger amounts of public expenditure. That is a further example of the erosion of the CAG's scrutiny, as he currently has access to the Treasury's private finance initiative taskforce, which the new body will replace. That is a surprising example of the Government appearing to resile from access and accountability, let alone seeking, through the Bill, to underpin or improve what already exists. The failure to provide access puts the CAG's programme of work on the PFI at risk. I hope that when the Ministers finish their discussion, they will take that point on board.

Neither is there provision for the CAG to have access to bodies whose accounts will be consolidated into whole of Government accounts. Instead, there is the inadequate alternative of access to the auditors of such bodies, which is entirely out of step with equivalent arrangements for company consolidated accounts—with which, I freely confess, I am far more familiar than I am with whole of Government accounts—where auditors have access to all companies in a consolidation.

I have listened to the contributions on amendment No. 21 and have tried to understand why it has been drafted in the way that it has and the change that it encompasses. Although I give credit to the Government for having listened and for tabling the amendment, it makes a slightly finer point than the broad purpose that was intended. I shall leave it to other hon. Members to decide whether it goes far enough. However, given that, under the amendment, the Government—the Treasury—are judge and jury in their own case of accountability to the public for the public's money, I seek clarification of the phrase:

> Subsection (1) applies only in relation to documents which are held or controlled—

that phrase appears with some regularity—

> by a government department, or . . .

The provision then refers to other matters.

Those of us who have not had experience of Government could well imagine that the words

> held or controlled . . . by a government department

might imply that, in this increasingly complex world of public-private partnerships, information that could be relevant to a Department and which it would be important for auditors to see, because of the exercise, within parliamentary sanction, of proper judgment of expenditure, was not held or controlled by that Department. That relates to the complexity to which my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) referred.

I am not just making a semantic argument. That is how the words appear and we are here to scrutinise the Bill and the amendments proposed to it by the Government. If my suspicion is correct and the amendment relates only to documents that are

> held or controlled . . . by a government department,

what if the Government decided to avoid the danger—in a controversial matter—of an audit trail with which they did not feel comfortable? What if they decided never to allow a Department to have a particular document, but held it in the Treasury? The Treasury could decide to keep the document so that it was never held or controlled by the Department. It would thus not be accessible in the audit trail.

That point needs to be addressed, so it is not heartening that Ministers have been conferring with one another during the whole of my speech. Perhaps they can listen and talk at the same time. I have made an important point, on which I would like to receive an answer.

Mr. Fabricant: Has my hon. Friend noticed that, even when the CAG does have access, it should be only at "reasonable times"? My hon. Friend has only recently come from business, so he will know that when the officers of the Customs and Excise VAT department want to carry out a detailed audit, they arrive at the most unreasonable times to make sure that the figures are right.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention, although I do not necessarily accept that we would want to be unreasonable. Access at reasonable times is reasonable. However, I note the contrast between that provision and what the Government did recently when they implemented European legislation in relation to the new competition regulations. Those give the power for dawn raids and other inspections at times that could never be considered reasonable. Surprise is the whole point. These days, effective audit means that there must be an element of surprise. That is to prevent documents being shredded—to prevent discs being wiped and the destruction of mother boards in computer hard drives.

There are no grounds for suspicion that such activity would take place in Departments. I should be alarmed if that were the case. The whole point of the Bill is that we should give the public trust and confidence that the stewardship of their money is at all times thoroughly accountable and that, above all, those who are responsible for that accountability will have free and full access without impediment.

3.30 am

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend has touched on a larger issue. The problem with the Bill is that large elements of the public accounts are not covered by it. However, what he has picked up is that there are ways and means of hiding information from the Comptroller and Auditor General even in those areas that are specified as being within the Bill's remit.

Mr. O'Brien: To return to rather primitive mathematics, we could paint a series of Venn diagrams in which there are a number of overlapping circles. We might have an audit right in certain respects and a right of access in other respects, but we would be very lucky if the two rights happened to meet. We have tried to identify where some of them do not meet.

However, more importantly, amendment No. 21 contains the phrase

> documents which are held or controlled . . . by a government department.

There is a possibility that the Treasury might decide to keep all documents relating to expenditure by a Government Department in the Treasury itself and would be the judge and jury in the process. Given that we must consider all sorts of possibilities, under amendment No. 21, the Comptroller and Auditor General would not have the access to the information that he needs in those circumstances.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that his point about Government Departments is especially damaging given that there is a trend in government generally to contract out to private corporations or agencies, such as the Benefits Agency, that would not be regarded directly as Government Departments under the terms of the Bill?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In vain, I sought clarification in the definitions contained in the Bill. It may be a sign of my own shortcomings, but I was unable to find such clarification. I very much hope that we shall receive clarification and that may mean that the Government's amendment requires emendation.

I thought that we were making significant progress on the last group of amendments. I had high hopes that the Government would accept new clause 2 given the reasoned, non-partisan and uncontroversial basis on which it was introduced. That acceptance was not forthcoming, which was a surprise and disappointment. Therefore, I am less optimistic that the Government will be prepared to accept new clause 3 and that is why I focused on amendment No. 21. That will be one of the realities with which we may have to deal. My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I am glad that he intervened when he did, because I was about to conclude my remarks.

Mr. Hayes: I will not attempt to emulate the erudition of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) or the verbosity of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). However, I wish to shed a little light on the matter.

The Bill will give the Comptroller and Auditor General a new duty to report on whole of Government accounts, so clearly his role must be credible. To be credible, he must have access to good-quality, accurate and thorough information. That is consistent with the description of him in the debates in 1921 that were referred to earlier. I am mindful of the contribution made by the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), because in 1921 a Member, simply referred to as Mr. A. Williams, described the Comptroller and Auditor General as

> the watch-dog of the House of Commons in all these matters of economy and regularity.—[*Official Report*, 11 August 1921; Vol. 146, c. 820.]

If he is to be a watchdog in that spirit, the information he collects must be thorough and accurate. That seems to accord with the Government's definition of what is good and right. A White Paper published in July 1998 said that Departments should be capable of withstanding audit and that, to justify an unqualified opinion, they would need to be free of material error as defined by the standards of the auditing profession.

The Bill's first fundamental inconsistency is with private practice and existing statute. Generally accepted accounting practice among auditors provides substantial powers to auditors of consolidated accounts. The Companies Act 1985 states that where a company has a subsidiary undertaking that is a body corporate incorporated in Great Britain, its auditors

> shall give to the auditors of any parent company such information and explanation as they may reasonably require for the purposes of their duties as auditors of the company.

The Bill is inconsistent not only with private practice, private auditors and statute but with the only comparable example of a consolidated audit in the public sector. With the National Health Service, there are already statutory powers for the CAG to collect not only data about bodies for which he has direct responsibility, but relevant information from a range of bodies that he does not directly audit—health authorities and trusts. The CAG's responsibility in that respect is supported by substantial powers that are not repeated in the Bill for the rest of government—which is a much bigger affair than the NHS.

The debate is not, therefore, just about the Bill's failure to extend the CAG's powers in respect of quangos and other outside bodies but about inconsistency with existing practice in the private and public sectors.

The Minister may say that the CAG might rely on information supplied by the primary auditors of those bodies consolidated in the accounts. He can rely on that information only if it is collected. The Bill gives no authority to the CAG to insist that information is collected by primary auditors on aspects of Government affairs for which he does not have responsibility. There is a real chance that the CAG will be obliged, in the absence of that information, to give a qualified opinion on the conduct of Government affairs, Government probity and the accuracy of Government accounts.

Mr. Paterson: The CAG audits the general accounts of the NHS but not the individual accounts of trusts and authorities, which have their own auditors. Is that relevant to my hon. Friend's point?

Mr. Hayes: The hour is late, but my hon. Friend is clearly not paying sufficient attention to the detail of my remarks. Perhaps that is because of my lack of clarity rather than his lack of diligence. Although the CAG does not audit the trusts and authorities that make up the NHS, he has a responsibility—a statutory power—for collecting information from those auditors, which allows him to take

[Mr. Hayes]

a view about the consolidated NHS accounts. That is not replicated in the Bill in respect of other Departments. Essentially, I said that the precedent established by practice in the NHS is not being used in the Bill as a foundation for good practice.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am pleased that my hon. Friend has given way because, as a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I am very aware that the CAG is unable to carry out value for money reports when he does not have proper access for auditing Departments. Is my hon. Friend aware that for every £1 spent those reports recover £8 of public money?

Mr. Hayes: I am, and that reinforces the importance of my point. The sums involved are substantial and my hon. Friend encourages me to return to the 1921 Act, which will cause some excitement.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: It is a relief to us all.

Mr. Hayes: There is more excitement than relief for Members across the Chamber. When the 1921 Act was introduced to the House, it was noted that the need to reform the 1866 Act was born of the fact that Government expenditure had increased about twentyfold. Heaven knows how today's expenditure compares with that of 1921, but, in my judgment, the multiplication of Government spending necessitates precisely the diligence implied by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown). Given that enormous increase in the nature and breadth of public expenditure, not to extend the scope of the CAG's discretion would be extremely remiss.

Before I digressed, I was saying that the CAG works closely with the Audit Commission in auditing the summarised NHS accounts and has powers to collect summarised accounts from the auditors who work in the individual trusts and authorities, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) referred. However, he can do that only because he has been given statutory powers by the House. I find it extraordinary that the Government have set aside that example and have not extended the scope for the CAG in other areas of Government affairs.

I said earlier that the CAG was described as a watchdog in 1921, but I shall return briefly to the 1866 Act, which I happen to have to hand. The failure that I have described is not in character and does not follow the spirit of Gladstone's Act, which makes it clear that

> the Comptroller and Auditor General shall have free Access, at all convenient Times, to the Books of Account and other Documents relating to the Accounts of such Departments, and may require the several Departments concerned to furnish him, from Time to Time, or at regular Periods, with Accounts of the Cash Transactions.

The spirit of that Act was one of free access—

Mr. Fabricant: Open government.

3.45 am

Mr. Hayes: I was going to say freedom of information, but, in Blairite Britain, those are dirty words. However, that Act certainly aimed, in the interests of probity, to open up the affairs of Government to the CAG as the watchdog of the House.

We have strayed a little from our earlier discussions about the nature of the relationship between the CAG and the House, as opposed to the nature of the relationship between him and the Government, but it is absolutely clear that, on the particular issue of access, the CAG is very much the representative of the House. He is given free access, as he should be, to the affairs of Departments and outside bodies.

Mr. Paterson: On open government, my hon. Friend could have quoted a great name in the other place, the Lord Chancellor himself, who, when discussing the CAG's appointment to audit the new Legal Services Commission, said:

> The Government are committed to increasing transparency and openness to Parliament. For that reason, we believe that the auditor of public bodies should be the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr. Hayes: My wife did a course on interior design, and she is about to do a degree in that subject.

The failure to give the CAG appropriate access certainly contradicts the spirit of the Gladstonian tradition, which is at the heart of our discussions. The Government's willingness to extend the CAG's power, at least in principle, to report on whole of Government accounts necessitates an entirely different approach to access. It is disappointing that the Government have been at best timid, and at worst something unparliamentary.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, said when the matter was discussed in the Standing Committee, this is not an academic matter. The Treasury will inevitably take a rosy view of the state of its own project. The Treasury and the Government will also take a rosy view of the scope of the CAG's powers in respect of access to information.

I am not by nature cynical or suspicious, but I am suspicious about the concentration of political power, and the further the exercise of political power is from the people, who are represented by the House, the more suspicious I become. The Bill makes me very suspicious indeed.

Mr. Rendel: I want to make a few remarks about amendment No. 17, whole of Government accounts, and what access the CAG needs to perform his duties successfully. Most hon. Members who have talked about amendment No. 17 have concentrated on the fact that if the CAG does not have full access to all the accounts that make up whole of Government accounts, he may have to qualify WAG, which will embarrass the Government.

I want to concentrate on a slightly different aspect of that question. As somebody who did much work in internal audit in Esso, I am aware that an auditor who discovers by looking at high-level accounts that there may be a problem will often be able to discover precisely how that problem arises only by considering in much greater detail the accounts much further down the tree.

It was perhaps instructive that at a meeting not so long ago, the Public Accounts Committee considered a case of fraud in the high commission in Calcutta. From looking at fairly high-level accounts, it was obvious, at least with hindsight, that money was going missing. Some £80,000 went missing over three or four years.

What was not obvious was how the money was going missing. That did not become apparent until the people looking into the matter looked at the lowest level, by inspecting till slips that had been fraudulently altered on the front counter at the high commission. That illustrates the fact that one may have to look a long way down the tree to work out the basis of a problem that has been detected in an account.

If the Comptroller and Auditor General is to examine whole of Government accounts successfully in future, as the Government rightly intend, it is important—not just because he may have to qualify the accounts, but for the purpose of investigating any problems that he may find—that he has access right the way down the tree.

I shall add a further point, by way of a challenge to the Minister who responds to the debate. On the previous group of amendments, I pointed out an interesting sentence in our most recent report, which reads:

> We believe in the principle that the Comptroller and Auditor General should have full access to all Government expenditure.

The agreed PAC report states that important principle, which is perhaps even more relevant to this group of amendments. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government also accept that principle?

Mr. Syms: I shall make a brief contribution, as I am sure that we are all anxious to make progress. The debate has raised concerns about how the system will operate. As we know, the Bill places on the Comptroller and Auditor General a new duty to audit and report to Parliament on whole of Government accounts. It is vital that he has full access to records.

As the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and others said, it is extremely important that the new system sets out with confidence and transparency and that there is a culture of proper audit of whole of Government accounts. I have been in business, and I recognise that auditing is not a one-off job. Often, a business man has an on-going relationship with the auditor who inspects the company. Sometimes, information systems are set up and the business is run in accordance with the way in which the auditors intend to perform their task.

If, through new clause 3, we give the CAG the fullest powers to examine whole of Government accounts, we will set up the right culture for the new accounting system. We have heard that many areas will not be covered, and that in some areas the CAG will have to take evidence and audit outside bodies. Unless the fullest power is available to him to double-check where necessary and to go back over the audit trail, I am worried that mistakes will be made because we have not placed our full confidence in the CAG, who, after all, is working on behalf of Parliament.

We hear a great deal about modernisation. A decent audit of whole of Government accounts would be a valuable step in that direction, which hon. Members in all parts of the House would support. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) pointed out, that would represent value for money in these times of limited resources.

New clause 3 is a good clause. I believe that it is worthy of support and a step in the right direction. I hope that the Government will accept it. I am sure that their silence means that they do not disagree with our arguments. If they did, they would doubtless try to contribute to the debate.

In the private sector, the powers of auditors of consolidated accounts are governed by statute. Section 389A(1) of the Companies Act 1985 provides for auditors to have access to the bodies in the consolidation. Unless there is full access to all the companies, bank accounts and information that pertain to consolidated accounts, a true and whole picture cannot be obtained. Ninety per cent. or 95 per cent. is not enough; full access is required.

Generally accepted accounting practice recognises that, in some circumstances, the auditors of consolidated accounts will need access to undertake their tests in the consolidated bodies. New clause 3 provides for that. Accounting standard 510 states that the principal auditors of a consolidated account may decide that supplementary tests of the records or the financial statements of the component parts are necessary. Depending on the circumstances, such tests may be performed by the principal auditors or other auditors.

It is important for the CAG to have full access. He does not necessarily have to audit all the accounts himself, but if the bodies who may undertake the audit know that the Government auditor can gain full access to information and double-check that they are doing their job properly, it will ensure that their work is up to standard. If we do not do that, many bodies, which perhaps pay their staff large salaries, may not have the incentive to do the job as well as they would perform it if they believed that the Government expected accountability for spending Government money.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is intolerable that the Comptroller and Auditor General could not gain access to the Camelot accounts or to the organisation for four years?

Mr. Syms: I am not sure whether that is intolerable, but it is worth considering. Doubtless there will be many anomalies.

New clause 3 should be supported. It has been tabled by well-respected hon. Members across the political divide. It clearly establishes a regime, which would be more transparent and would mean that the new accounting system began with the right culture, which is vital. Granting the widest possible access to information and organisations to the auditor who is responsible to the Public Accounts Committee and to the House would mean that we could all be proud of the manner of the new system's start.

Mr. Paterson: It is a great pleasure to follow the sensible contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). I shall not detain the House for too long, but I want to follow up my earlier comments on another group of amendments. Our fundamental duty as Members of Parliament is to hold the Government to account for the way in which they raise money from the public by enforced confiscation through taxation, and to ensure that that money is spent correctly.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's job is meaningless if he does not have strong powers of access in law. He had those powers under the 1866 Act. My hon.

[Mr. Paterson]

Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) made a telling contribution. He said that £1 invested in the sphere of Government activity that we are considering recoups £8. Gladstone would have approved of that wholeheartedly. According to the biography by Philip Magnus, Gladstone took such a detailed interest in public expenditure that he complained when his servants used new luggage labels. He went into such detail to save public money. He so respected taxpayers that he believed that not one penny should be wasted.

Since that time, government has sadly grown like Topsy. The current framework is totally inadequate, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) said—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is making general points. He must confine his remarks to the amendment that we are considering, especially as many of his hon. Friends have made contributions on the new clause. He should get straight to the point.

4 am

Mr. Paterson: I am most grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for keeping me on the straight and narrow. I will return to the question of access, which is the heart of the new clause.

I repeat that the CAG cannot do his job unless he has strong powers of access written into the Bill. I shall not repeat the exact examples that have been given, because I do not want you to be cross with me again, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But we have heard about housing associations, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) mentioned the case of Camelot, and earlier we talked about the training and enterprise councils in prisons, where access—which I repeat is the heart of new clause 3—was restricted. In one particularly bad case quoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden, it was restricted for up to five years. I think that it was a case brought by a Member of this House. It took five years for that case to be investigated.

If the new clause goes through, the CAG will have legal powers to get real access. All that that does is to follow the advice in the ninth report of the Public Accounts Committee, which said that the powers of access must be direct. The Committee made the very good point, in paragraph 29, that currently the CAG

> has to negotiate the terms of access on an individual basis with the bodies and their sponsoring departments. This is administratively burdensome and diminishes his independence.

The Committee noted that other public auditors have very strong independent legal rights. It says in paragraph 31:

> Auditors working for the Audit Commission in England and Wales and the Accounts Commission for Scotland have a right of access to every document which they consider necessary relating to a body they audit.

Even the European Court of Auditors

> has powers of access to both private and public sector bodies within Great Britain in receipt of European funds.

So it seems anomalous that the auditor for England and Wales does not have these powers in law.

It is sad that Labour Members are laughing, because this is a report by an all-party Committee, and the clause is promoted by Members from the three main parties represented in the House. All that it does is to follow up the conclusion, in paragraph 38, that

> it is unacceptable that the Comptroller and Auditor General must negotiate with the relevant body to obtain access to the new types of service deliverer.

The Committee made it quite clear when it said, in conclusion (xi), contained in paragraph 6:

> In order to examine the accountability of departments, he needs matching statutory rights of access so he can give Parliament independent assurance that public funds have been spent properly.

Mr. Syms: Is there not a danger that the audit may well have to be qualified if there is not proper access for the Comptroller and Auditor General?

Mr. Paterson: That is certainly true. That is why we need stronger powers written into the Bill. That is the nub of the matter.

Amendment No. 21 is quite inadequate. I do not need to go into the detail that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield did. Of the two, there is no question which is better. New clause 3 follows the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee. I am trying to outline for the benefit of Ministers, in case they have not had time to read the report properly, that the recommendations were extremely clear and they have not taken them up.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden said that Ministers were using the excuse that the Bill does not concern audit. The Public Accounts Committee made the very clear point, in paragraph 41, that

> At least a third of the Bill covers audit scrutiny and other parts cover new initiatives such as Partnerships UK and Whole of Government Accounts.

It clearly considered that the Bill could and should be used to modernise the CAG's audit and access arrangements. Its conclusion is stated in paragraph 42:

> The Committee stands by the principle that robust powers of access should be written into law.

On that basis, the Government will have to come up with a very good reason for not supporting the new clause.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is an insult to the House that the European Court of Auditors can have access, should the European Parliament wish it, whereas if the British Parliament should wish the CAG to have access to agencies or non-governmental bodies he would be unable to get it?

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend is right: the current proposal is ludicrous. The PAC points out that local authorities are under stronger powers of audit than central Government, and he made the valid point that the European auditors also have stronger powers.

Now is the time to change, and this is the first piece of legislation since 1921 that has given any Government a real opportunity to make this major change. As I have

said, the PAC makes absolutely clear, in black and white, the principle that robust powers should be written into law.

Miss Melanie Johnson: I am sorry to have disturbed the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) from his slumbers.

Let me run through the main points as quickly as I can. I shall not attempt to respond to a number of the contributions that have been made. It would probably have distressed Gladstone to hear some of what has been said here at 4 am; moreover, only two members of the PAC are present, and the last vote was won by 257 to 27. That does us no good in the House.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Will the Minister give way?

Miss Johnson: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman has been present for some time, but has made no contribution to this part of the debate.

Mr. Gray: I want to do so now.

Miss Johnson: But I am denying the hon. Gentleman the opportunity.

Amendment No. 21 is framed to give the CAG a right of access rather than imposing a duty on Departments to provide access, as the current clause does. In Committee, a number of Members expressed concern that the "duty to provide access" formulation would in some way constrain the CAG, and perhaps even reduce the access that he currently has. The Government did not agree with that argument then, and do not now.

The "rights of access" and "duty to provide access" formulations are, in legal terms, two sides of the same coin.

However, I promised in Committee to consider the matter further. Having done so, we have decided to revert to the original "right of access" formulation, on the ground that it is what hon. Members preferred. It would also bring the Bill into line with other statutes concerning audit access. I hope that that reassures hon. Members that the CAG will enjoy the same access under resource accounting as he does under the current system, and proves that the Government never had any intention of compromising the CAG's ability to do his work.

The Government recognise that access to contractors who are handling a Department's financial records is essential if the CAG is to be able to audit its accounts properly. Currently, such access is secured through the contract terms, and that has proved satisfactory; but the Government agree that putting such access on a statutory basis will give additional reassurance both to Parliament and the CAG that in such circumstances access will always be available.

Let me now deal with amendment No. 25. As we made clear at length in Committee, the CAG does not audit or, indeed, have direct access to all the bodies that are likely to be included in whole of Government accounts. The main types of body falling into that category are those in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the local authorities in England and Wales. Strong audit frameworks are either in place or being put in place in all those areas. That picture contrasts with the inadequate or non-existent audit arrangements that private-sector group auditors sometimes encounter in individual subsidiary companies, and which the reserve powers of access in the Companies Act were intended to address. Accordingly, we see no need to cut across the post-devolution and local government audit frameworks by giving the CAG the same reserve powers of access as Companies Act group auditors.

The Government believe that new clause 4, tabled by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), should be rejected. It would give the NAO "matching" rights of access—that is, the same rights of access to the records of a body receiving public money as are enjoyed by a body paying public money. I see the right hon. Gentleman nodding. From what he was saying, I thought that there was perhaps some disagreement about the effect of the new clause, but we believe that it would give the CAG quite far-reaching access. An order-making power enables the Treasury to deny the NAO access to certain records that would otherwise be open to its scrutiny.

At a technical level, two points are worth noting. First, the proposal to give the NAO "matching" rights of access goes significantly further than simply giving the NAO the same rights of access as Departments. There should be no confusion about that. It gives the NAO the same rights to the records of a body receiving public money as those enjoyed by a body paying public money.

Therefore, in a case that has exercised several hon. Members in the debate and earlier, if the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions paid money to the Housing Corporation, which paid money to registered social landlords, who paid money to others, such as construction firms and, possibly, sub-contractors, the NAO would have access to all the bodies in the chain—providing that each body in the chain has its own rights of access to the next body in the chain—even though the NAO audited only one body in the chain: the Department. That represents a major increase in statutory rights of access.

Secondly, the new clause gives the NAO access to the books and records of private sector firms on the same basis as that enjoyed by the Inland Revenue for the purposes of examining whether tax credits have been properly calculated. The right hon. Gentleman went into how he saw that working in some detail. In Committee, several Members expressed concern about that. I, too, am unhappy about it. We still believe that it provides the NAO with powers to investigate the tax affairs of individual firms. We do not think that that is appropriate.

The new clause needs to be viewed alongside the Government amendment to clause 8. The question for the House is whether it would be right to enhance significantly the CAG's statutory rights of access on the basis set out in the new clause, or whether we should choose instead the formulation in our amendment, which seeks broadly to preserve the NAO's rights of access as set out in the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866, which has been referred to extensively.

It would not be right to enhance significantly the CAG's statutory rights of access. The Government accept that the NAO sometimes needs access to books and records of Government contractors to complete the audit of the Department concerned, but we believe that, where it is required, access can be secured satisfactorily by

[Miss Johnson]

clauses in contracts. Government guidance already provides that contracts with suppliers should include provisions allowing NAO access to the books and records of contractors where that is necessary for the audit of the Department concerned.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the Camelot issue. I do not propose to go through that or other issues at great length at 4.13 am, but the criticisms have been wildly misplaced. Four years are under issue. About two and a half were under the previous Government. It is purely for that Government and their Ministers to comment on that period, not the present Government. When we came to power, we took steps as quickly as we could to ensure that access was available through the first legislation that made it possible.

Mr. David Davis: I do not want to detain the Minister for long. When I was nodding earlier, I was indicating that I was not nodding off, rather than encouraging her. At this time in the morning, that is an important communication to make sometimes.

The general issues that she is going through are all technical issues that are in dispute between us. The dispute is about whether her interpretation is correct. Frankly, if that, rather than the matter of principle, were the issue, as I said earlier, I would be happy to hear her say that she would bring the measure back corrected later on. The intention is not to allow the CAG to pursue money wherever it goes. It is to give him powers that match those that exist, where that is necessary.

The Minister mentioned the lottery. As she knows, throughout the debate and Committee stage, I have never sought to attribute blame on a political basis one way or the other. Frankly, that does not stand up. The Government were able to do something about the matter because they had available to them a piece of primary legislation, but that is the problem. If we are depending on a passing piece of primary legislation on which to latch a right or condition, it would not be a satisfactory arrangement to ensure Parliament's fundamental rights of access.

4.15 am

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. However, we disagree with him not only on the force of new clause 3, but on how extensive the arrangements for access should be. It is not only a matter of legal or other interpretations of the new clause.

I accept that the Public Accounts Committee has identified various cases in which it claimed that there are gaps or anomalies in the CAG's statutory rights of access. The Committee and hon. Members speaking in today's debate have given as examples bodies such as training and enterprise councils, registered social landlords, the Chessington Computer Centre, privately run and managed prisons, and contractors in the new deal initiative. However, arrangements have been for NAO access in all those cases. Usually, the arrangements involve clauses in contracts. I have already mentioned access to registered social landlords, who are also subject to an agreement with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

I realise that some people are keen that the NAO should have access particularly to the books and records of private finance contractors. The NAO has, of course, already reported on a considerable number of private finance schemes. Therefore, in practice, there does not seem to be a problem with access. Moreover, last July, the Treasury issued guidance on the standardisation of private finance contracts that makes it clear that contract clauses should be included in PFI contracts to allow appropriate NAO access.

Nevertheless, I should like to give four reasons why, if we allowed NAO access through contracts, we would not be prepared to give the NAO a statutory right of access.

First, we have to recognise that giving the NAO a statutory right of access to recipients of public money would impose a regulatory burden on the firms concerned, which they would rather not have. Both the British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses have said that enhancing NAO access in the manner proposed by the Public Accounts Committee would only increase the burden of red tape on small and medium-sized enterprises.

Secondly, giving the NAO a right of access could lead to increasing layers of audit. The right hon. Gentleman perhaps felt that he had dispelled that concern, but a residue of it remains. Contractors could be subject to layers of audits and visits by inspectors.

Thirdly, there is a concern that giving the NAO statutory rights of access could encourage them to duplicate the work of regulators. One reason why giving the NAO access to registered social landlords was so long a bone of contention is that there was a worry that the NAO would use such access to duplicate the work of the Housing Corporation, which has been given by Parliament the job of regulating that sector of the economy.

Fourthly, there are similar concerns about whether the NAO might use a statutory right of access to duplicate the work of competition authorities. Clearly, the NAO should not do work that is properly the responsibility, for example, of the Office of Fair Trading.

Mr. David Davis: There are two points. First, one of the problems at the Housing Corporation was the weaknesses in its own financial control systems. The second and general point is that, at this time of the morning, I shall not press either new clause 3 or amendment No. 17 to a vote, because I should like to make some progress and do want to waste 15 minutes. However, I do not accept the Minister's arguments. We still disagree on those matters, as she will appreciate.

Miss Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making those points, and appreciate that he still does not agree on those points. Our point is that the access issue should not be addressed in isolation. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has said, as we discussed earlier in the debate, that he would like to undertake a study of those issues. I very much hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept my right hon. Friend's invitation to join the steering group for the study.

For all those reasons, I invite hon. Members to reject new clause 3 and to accept the Government amendment.

Question put and negatived.

New Clause 4

PERFORMANCE STATEMENTS

'.—(1) This section applies to any government department which is required to prepare resource accounts under section 5, unless otherwise provided by an order made under subsection (6).

(2) A department to which this section applies in any financial year shall prepare a performance statement in respect of that year analysing the performance of the department in using the resources to which the accounts relate in achieving its objectives for that financial year.

(3) A department shall send its performance statement to the Comptroller and Auditor General with the resource accounts sent to him under section 5, or at such other time as the Comptroller and Auditor General may specify in respect of that statement.

(4) The Comptroller and Auditor General may examine any performance statement which he receives from a department under subsection (2) and may report on it to the House of Commons.

(5) Subsection (4) shall not entitle the Comptroller and Auditor General to question the merits of the policy objectives of a department to which the performance statement relates.

(6) The Treasury may by order designate a department as one to which this section does not apply or as regards which the operation of this section is modified to the extent specified in the order, and such order may be expressed to apply to all financial years or to any specified financial year.

(7) An order under subsection (6) shall be made by statutory instrument, and shall not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of the House of Commons.'.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. David Davis: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 18 to 20 and 35.

Mr. Davis: Hon. Members will be happy to know that this will be my last outing, other than a brief comment on Third Reading.

The new clause is about performance reporting—a matter on which the Bill is silent, but which was supposed to be the most revolutionary element of resource accounting as originally envisaged. The clause is developed from amendments that I tabled in Committee on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee. It would require Departments to prepare performance reports, which would have to be independently validated. It would give the Government flexibility in determining the content of reports and allow for further developments in validation techniques. As hon. Members noted in Committee, it is a remarkably mild provision.

We should be clear about what performance reporting and independent validation will mean in practice. The recent report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Bill said:

> The Government have set the Department of Social Security a target to reduce by 30 per cent. benefit losses from fraud and errors in income support and jobseeker's allowance by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002. In this case the Government have set the target. The Department and Benefits Agency will collect the relevant information and report on the extent to which they have achieved their target. The role of independent validation would be to check the Department's systems for collecting information, the veracity of the conclusions they have drawn and whether the outcome had been represented fairly, and to report the findings to Parliament.

During the passage of the Bill, the Government have set out their objections to the proposals. As before, I shall address each of them. I shall start with the area of common ground. The Chief Secretary told the Committee that he thought that performance reports should be credible, should enjoy widespread legitimacy and should be as objective as possible. I agree with him on all those points. It has long been established that the way to ensure credibility, legitimacy and objectivity in financial accounts is to have them independently audited. The same principle applies to performance reports. An independent report on performance will instil public confidence in the measures and provide Parliament with the assurance that it needs as it considers the Government's spending plans.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the analogy that he has been drawing, he ought also to insist on the independence of standard setting for performance measures, just as he, I and others have for the standard setting for accounting?

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is correct. He may remember that I was provoked to rise to my feet against my prior judgment to make that point when we were considering his amendment on standard setting.

Drawing a parallel with the Comptroller and Auditor General's financial audit, I remind the House that the importance of his role is the positive assurance that he provides. Of course, he draws our attention to errors, but for most of Government his opinion is positive, providing vital reassurance each year that taxpayers' funds have been spent properly. That is why I intervened on the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), to make the point about the overwhelming honesty of British public service. We take that for granted, but we should not because it is not the case world wide.

The routine, year-on-year nature of the CAG's work is important. It is an important validation and encouragement of that honesty. The same is true for performance information. Routine validation would be far less contentious than the exception reporting that can happen at the moment. There are already 2,500 performance measures planned. Given that volume, each will be of less significance. Exception reports would attract more attention and would be more likely to focus on aspects where there were real concerns about performance. Routine validation will result in routine reporting.

The Government have suggested that the CAG might not be the most appropriate person to validate performance measures. They have observed that the statistics commission that they plan to establish might have a role. They intend the commission to contribute to the integrity of the published data that fall within its purview by ensuring that they are collected in accordance with clear standards and subject to valid statistical techniques. The commission can play an important role in enhancing the quality of Departments' performance reports if they feature data prepared under its authority.

The commission cannot fulfil the role of validating performance reports independently because, fundamentally, it is a creature of the Government whose performance is being reported. It is part of the Government's quality assurance system; it is not an independent body working on behalf of Parliament and reporting to it. In so far as the statistics commission will lay down standards for the collection of

[Mr. Davis]

Government statistics and periodically review how well Departments are effecting those standards, it can provide an important source of assurance for the person responsible for independent validation, but it cannot fulfil that role.

4.30 am

Furthermore, as I understand it, the commission will not cover all data appearing in performance reports. Information will be drawn from a wide range of systems, not all of them statistical. Indeed, I understand that it is for Departments themselves to decide what information is or is not to be classified as national statistics. So the proposals, important as they are, will not apply to all performance data.

We then turn to the question of who can validate performance information independently on behalf of Parliament. First, I find it hard to imagine circumstances in which there might be a person better suited than the CAG to provide Parliament with an independent view on performance, so my new clause specifies him. However, the Government have expressed the view that the CAG may not always be the right person. The new clause, therefore, enables the Government, by order, to modify the arrangements for performance reporting in any particular cases, including, for example, specifying a different authority to undertake validation.

Secondly, the Government thought that the CAG might have to go into local government in order to validate central Government performance measures, but in the new world of joined-up working the public auditors are already gearing up to work closely together, to take assurance from each others' work and to minimise the audit burden. They will adopt the same model for performance reporting. Indeed, the CAG already relies on the work of the Audit Commission and its appointed auditors, for example in signing off claims by local government bodies for grants paid by central Government bodies. He would similarly place reliance on the Audit Commission and its appointed auditors in validating performance information emanating from local government.

Thirdly, the Minister was concerned that the CAG would have to make judgments involving him in questioning policy matters, but that would not be the case. The policy element of performance measures would be the decision about which targets would be set. Those would always be matters for the Government. The CAG would not question them, just as in his value for money work he focuses on the implementation of policy and, by law, does not question the merits of policy objectives.

The CAG's role would be to check that the systems used to collect the data were robust and that the results had been represented fairly. He would then be in a position to assure Parliament about the integrity of performance information. He has already reported without difficulty on the performance measures of some Government Departments such as the Benefits Agency.

However, since the risk of bringing the CAG too close to policy is a real concern to the Government, I have removed all possibility of such a risk in framing the new clause. It now explicitly prohibits the CAG from questioning the merits of policy objectives. That is exactly the same statutory prohibition that applies to his value for money work set out in the National Audit Act 1983 and which has proved effective. In effect, it is a belt and braces provision as it is a second statement of the same provision. If the Government are worried about it, it is in the new clause.

Fourthly, the Minister noted:

> No standards for validation have yet been established, and there are still many questions as to what form it should take.

That puzzles me because the Government have embarked on initiatives such as the local government best value initiative, which imposes statutory duties on local government auditors without any standards being in place.

Aside from that inconsistency, the fact that standards are fluid is no reason to delay establishing a statutory framework for validation. Auditing standards for financial accounts are being developed and amended constantly to reflect advances in the profession, yet the statutory framework remains unaffected because it is just that—a framework. Similarly, a statutory framework for performance measure validation does not depend on standards being set in concrete. However, I have worded the new clause carefully in order to allow the evolutionary development of standards and methodologies. It simply says that the CAG may examine performance statements and report on them. That will allow him to develop his approach progressively, in consultation with the Treasury and the Public Accounts Committee. The Government also have a safeguard that under the commencement order they can bring the clause as a whole into force again at a time of their own choosing.

Furthermore, to draw any inference that we are in completely unexplored territory would be misleading. The CAG has reported several times on performance measures; the Audit Commission examines performance indicators in local government; and there has been statutory validation of performance indicators in Australia and New Zealand for some years. Therefore, the issue of standards is not a real obstacle.

I shall quote the Economic Secretary's exact words regarding the Government's final concern, rather than imposing an incorrect interpretation on them. The hon. Lady said in Committee:

> There are also questions relating to the meaning of validation for measures based on data from private sector companies and international bodies, and whether bodies that might conduct validation have the necessary skills and resources to do so.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 13 January 2000; c. 101.]

I think that she was alluding to the trend to progress from output measures to outcome measures in assessing performance. Outputs are the immediate results of a Department's activity, usually within the Department's control. Outcomes are about the ultimate results that a Department's activities are designed to secure. Their measures tend to be beyond the Department's boundaries.

There are complex issues for those developing such measures, but they are not reasons to avoid validation. Indeed, the very complexities are reasons for validation to be built in from the outset. If the Government are asking the public to take confidence from these measures, they must be capable of validation.

The Bill should put performance reports on a statutory basis and provide for the CAG to validate them. I will be very happy to discuss my proposals further with the Government before the Bill goes to the Lords, if that would be helpful.

I wish to reiterate an important point that I made earlier. I have been struck—as, I know, were Ministers in the previous Government—by the absence of a decent management information system in most Departments and the inability of the Minister, senior managers, permanent secretaries and accounting officers to know how well their Departments are working. A great benefit that will come from resource accounting will be the habitual measurement of the outputs and outcomes. That is a revolution in action in the next decade or so which will, I believe, deliver markedly better public services to our citizens and taxpayers. That is a prize well worth having.

One of the most corrosive risks to afflict that prize would be a belief among the public or among the people trying to deliver services—those hard-working public servants who get very little credit in the tabloid newspapers from week to week—that the figures that they were dealing with were in some sense not validated, not impartial, or were, in some sense, propaganda. If that belief becomes common, it will corrode the basis of what I believe offers a hope of improving public services in the next decade or two more than any revolution since the effective creation of the public sector after the second world war. it is for that reason that I have made this point today and would like to discuss it again with the Chief Secretary. As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am one of those strange creatures—a right-wing Tory who believes in public services.

Mr. Letwin: We are dealing here with one of the most important issues in the Bill. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) pointed out, it was dealt with at length in Committee. New clause 4 is substantially modified in comparison with my right hon. Friend's earlier efforts and those of his colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee, in order to accommodate a number of points that were made.

We may, to our ineffable delight, hear from the Economic Secretary in a few minutes that the Government will accept the new clause or something like it. If so, I hope that she will pass over in silence the remarks that I am about to make on her previous arguments on the matter, that she will let bygones be bygones and celebrate the day.

Lest the Economic Secretary should be tempted to argue against new clause 4, despite the substantial changes made by my right hon. Friend, I want to go through the pattern of argument that she used in Committee. Since then, we have had the opportunity to reflect that that argument is incoherent to the point where the Economic Secretary herself may feel that she does not want to continue it.

When my right hon. Friend first proposed the admirable idea of trying to use the Bill as a way of instituting transparent outcome measures, or performance standards, his ambitions were already modest—as were those of his colleagues on the PAC. Indeed, they were too modest. My right hon. Friend omitted to include in his Committee amendments, and also in new clause 4, any reference to the defining of standards that intermediate between policy objectives, which are the proper concern of the Government and the electors, and enforcement and validation, which he has tried to strengthen, in new clause 4 and previous amendments, through the CAG.

However, betwixt policy, which is the Government's prerogative, and validation, which falls to the CAG in any rational system, lies the question of the definition of standards. The Government might have a particular policy—for example, to re-employ all unemployed people aged between 18 and 21 would be a rational policy objective; indeed, it may be similar to part of the new deal. It would then fall to someone to decide the measure for whether the Government had achieved that policy.

I regret that in my right hon. Friend's earlier efforts and in new clause 4 there is no such intermediation of an independent body—which could of course be the very body that was rejected in our previous discussions of new clause 1. There is no intermediation of any body that could ensure that the standards which measure performance are sufficiently robust for them to be validated by the CAG. That is a lacuna.

The reason that we have not tabled further new clauses or amendments is because we want to cross the first bridge first. Unless the Government are willing to accept the principle of validation, there is not much point in trying to insert independent standards. To take the analogy of the national accounts—the whole of Government accounts and the resource accounts for each Department—if the Government had taken the position that no one should audit them, we should hardly have bothered to propose an independent body to set up the standards against which the audit should occur.

It is because we have been able to assume that an auditor—whether the CAG or private auditors—will validate in all cases that we have been able to argue for the next step, which is to try to secure an independent definition. Alas, unless new clause 4 or something similar is accepted, we shall not be able to have the argument that we want—as I am sure, do our noble Friends in another place—about independent standard setting.

Having explained my right hon. Friend's lacuna, which no doubt occurred because he too wanted to establish a bridgehead, I shall explain the Economic Secretary's valiant attempt—no doubt at the behest of her Department—to defend the proposition that the PAC's assertion that there should be some form of validation of the performance measures was inappropriate.

The Economic Secretary asked:

> How straightforward a matter is that?

She was referring to the checking of systems for collecting information—the veracity of conclusions and whether the outcome was fairly represented.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, the Economic Secretary then said:

> The CAG would need to be able to go into local authority, and even private sector, nurseries and form a judgment about how many nursery places each could reasonably be expected to provide. I do not believe that nurseries would welcome such intrusions.

The killer blow to the entire project of having performance standards validated in this country so that we have outcome measures included as part of resource accounts, as has been done for years in New Zealand, was that she did not believe that nurseries would welcome the intrusions. She added:

> That highlights the difficulties that would take the Comptroller and Auditor General away from auditing and matters of fact into a political arena which he has always rightly avoided.

[Mr. Letwin]

My right hon. Friend has pointed out that the new clause specifically tries to exempt the CAG from any accusation that he is involved in politics. It was pointed out at length in Committee that the CAG, the Audit Commission and anyone else who does anything that could remotely be described as value for money auditing clearly has to make subjective judgments about value for money. Inevitably, those judgments are to a degree representable by people so inclined as political judgments. Therefore, we cannot envisage ever wholly removing such people from the political arena. On the contrary, we must hope that their immersion in the political arena does not in any way vitiate their complete impartiality.

Under Administrations of both colours, it has been the record that the CAG and the Audit Commission—notwithstanding their deep involvement in value for money audits, and hence their subjective judgments—have constantly been regarded as entirely impartial by all parties inside and outside the House. Therefore, I do not accept for a moment the direction of thought that suggests that there is a problem of politicising the CAG. However, where there is such a problem, my right hon. Friend has taken specific steps to deal with it in the new clause. We need not attach much importance to the assertion that the problem with nurseries and their lack of welcome for the intrusions is a problem of the CAG's descent into the political arena.

What is the real problem with the intrusion? I take it as a matter of fact that the Economic Secretary did not mean that nursery teachers would be a little upset when they saw the CAG arriving. It is possible that that is what she had in mind, but I doubt whether she seriously entertained that proposition.

We do not have to look far to see the problem with the way in which the Economic Secretary and her Department thought about the matter. On the same day and in the next column, she went on to provide one of the classic expositions of the bureaucratic mind in Parliament. She said:

> Quality assurance checks are already in place.

Let us note that her first defence for the lack of need to allow the CAG in was that somebody else was already doing the job. All was well; the checks were already in place. She added:

> Information from many measures is needed by local line management to make day-to-day decisions and set priorities. It is often—

note the tone of reasonableness—

> in the interests of people near the coal-face to ensure that the data that they return to the centre is of high quality. Departments have analytical services and internal auditors who make systematic checks of data quality and advise on methodology and technical matters.

That is practically the sort of thing that one would expect to see in a brochure for the internal audit service.

Let us reflect on those comments and on what they mean for the nurseries that would not welcome intrusions. If internal auditors make systematic checks of data quality, presumably—to quote the Economic Secretary—they would need to be able to go into local authority, and even private sector, nurseries and form a judgment about how many nursery places each could reasonably be expected to provide.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 18 January 2000; c. 147-48.]

I cannot see how internal auditors could make the systematic checks that the Economic Secretary thinks the CAG would have to make and be as systematic as he would have to be without having to do exactly the same things that she thinks he would have to do. Her proposition is remarkable—it is that nurseries welcome intrusions from internal auditors, who already exist, but would not welcome intrusions from the CAG.

4.45 am

It is almost inconceivable that the Economic Secretary remembered her remarks at column 147 when she said what she did at column 148. I suspect that those two passages were written by separate officials—one of whom was given the difficult task of explaining why the CAG should not be let in, and one of whom, in a separate Department, was told to describe all the wonderful arrangements already in place that made it needless for the CAG to have access. We have an assembly of argume[illegible] thrown together blindfold, rather like a chap who gets up in the morning after a rough night—as many of us will have had—does his buttons up wrong and looks rather odd as a result. Those remarks are certainly not an example of the Minister's thinking, which is much too acute for anything of that kind.

We have the same problem here that has repeatedly confronted us in our debates on the Bill. We have the arguments but not the reasons. We do not know from detailed discussion in Committee why the Economic Secretary and the Government are resisting the eminently reasonable, rephrased and accommodating new clause proposed by my right hon. Friend and other members of the PAC.

We have to speculate on why the Government are trying to prevent their performance measurements being independently validated by anyone. The Government would not have a reason if their internal audit procedures were perfect and transparent. They could simply relabel internal auditors "CAG" and all would be well. The reason can only be that the collective Whitehall mentality resists the idea of somebody else measuring its performance—the reason my right hon. Friend is so keen that somebody else should measure performance.

We have reached the same point as when debating new clause 1 and the CAG's having access and audit rights in relation to accounting itself. Accounting and performance are two sides of the same coin. It is of no interest to man or beast how much Government spend unless we also know what Government do with the money that they spend. If we could be certain that Government spend £370 billion but we had no idea whether all that money was wasted, we would get absolutely nowhere. The purpose of resource accounts is to perform half the task that we need to impose upon ourselves in Parliament and Government to have a functioning democracy; the other half is to understand the way that the money is used and how effectively.

All the same arguments for independence of definition and validation on the one side have to apply to independence of definition and validation on the other side. The weight of history from 1866 onwards persuades

Treasury Ministers and officials, and Ministers and officials in other Departments, of the necessity at least for independent validation if not definition of accounting standards. Because until recently no one concerned themselves with performance measures, they are able to maintain a stone age, pre-1866 attitude towards those measures. They continue to persuade themselves that there is merit in pretending that people will take seriously annual or any other reports that are not independently validated. No one inside or outside Whitehall or in our democracy as a whole will take them seriously. That is sad because, to do them credit, the present Government—like many others—have done many things very well.

Governments do a lot of things well and have much to gain from knowing what they do well and persuading others that they have done them well without people turning round to say, "You have cooked the figures." However, like all Governments, this Government have done some things very badly and also have something to gain from knowing what those things are.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is often a shortcoming with internal auditors because all that they are required to do is give a true and fair view of the situation? They are not required to account for value for money, let alone performance indicators, so Parliament and the general public would benefit enormously if the CAG had the powers proposed in the new clause.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is the point. The very people who employ and unemploy the internal auditors will never give them the task, much less the opportunity, of unearthing real problems of performance management. On the contrary, they will always give the instruction, "Please do not cause too much embarrassment on this front. It is bad enough that you have to tell us the truth about our accounting. We may be able to fuzz up the definitions if those nasty people in Parliament force us to have independent definitions on the accounting side, but you have to tell us the truth. However, be sure that you do not collect too much of this performance stuff. At least we can make sure that only the bits that suit us ever get out."

The problem is that that is counter-productive for Governments of any party because a Government cannot expect to put right those things that they would like to put right—against their own policies—if they do not know that they are getting them wrong because their systems have been so designed that nobody knows that they are getting them wrong. That is the situation we face. It is so acute that it has led, by a strange process of intellectual osmosis, to two incoherent arguments being adduced in consecutive columns of *Hansard* by the Economic Secretary to defend a proposition that can be defended only incoherently because it is an incoherent proposition.

The time has come for Ministers to ditch this stuff. The Economic Secretary should take from her folder whatever has been written of a similar sort for her to say tonight, put it to one side, think of herself in the light that she is in as a Minister of the Crown trying to defend the Government's integrity and their relationship to our Parliament, and come out and say what is true: although the new clause's drafting may or may not be perfect, we all have a common interest in accepting the burden within. If she does that, she will earn the plaudits of those of us who are unfortunate enough to be here at 4.52 in the morning.

Much more importantly, the Economic Secretary may save the Government, of whom she is a prime representative, from great defects and failures, even in the next little while. She would gain also the plaudits of her ministerial colleagues. As we approach the witching hour, I have every confidence that she will indeed do just that and make our lives much more pleasant.

Mr. Edward Davey: Members on both sides of the House will admire the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) for managing to crack a few jokes at this time in the morning. However, although he has kept a few of us amused, he was too hard on the Government. I share many of his concerns, but we have been considering new ways of using performance indicators, targets and measures of success in British government for over a decade under what is often called new public sector management. The Conservative Government tried to develop those measures through initiatives such as the citizens charter, but I must remind the hon. Gentleman that they did so haphazardly, and did not subject any of the charter measures to external validation or independent scrutiny. His own party is culpable in that regard.

Mr. Letwin *indicated assent.*

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's assent. We need to say, in a spirit of cross-party consensus, that the measures have been developed piecemeal in different Departments and agencies and in local government, and are a mishmash. What we therefore need is coherence in the setting of criteria, and a framework to achieve a logical, rational system. Validation will be a key component of that, but the Government need to do much more to ensure that we have a sensible system for measuring the success of their activities.

As I am sure the hon. Member for West Dorset is aware, the Government have been active in that field, with the publication of public service agreements and the output and performance analysis, both of which are integral to resource accounting and budgeting. They have produced a plethora of targets—indeed, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman shares my experience of reading Government documents and quickly becoming bewildered by the huge number of targets and measures that Departments are supposed to meet.

Crucially with respect to the Bill, Departments often have to meet those targets to get their budgets. It is the link between the performance measures and the budgets that makes the issue so crucial, because if the budgets are to be audited properly and accounted for, and there are performance measures on which those budgets depend, the performance measures ought logically to be audited too.

The Government need to stand back a little. I hope that in the review, which the Chief Secretary has talked about with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the Government will make it one of their objectives to get a handle on this growing monster in Whitehall so that we can achieve greater coherence.

[Mr. Davey]

I am sure that the hon. Member for West Dorset is aware that bizarre targets and performance measures are being set. They might seem to make sense in the Department in which they are drafted, but when they come to the House in a public document, they seem to be completely unwieldy and do not relate to our constituents' priorities.

I shall give one example of a target set for the Forestry Commission, which is obliged, inter alia, to

improve the benefits provided by Forest Holidays through a public/private partnership to refurbish the four existing cabin sites by 31 March 2000 and build two new sites by 31 March 2002.

That is an interesting target for a body to meet, but it would not correspond with criteria and a coherent framework for output measures. That is the key point that the Government have to grasp.

The Government need to achieve coherence in their approach. I do not underestimate the size of that task—it is daunting—but they need to do it none the less. If they can achieve that, validation will be the corollary. I made these points in Committee. That task sits neatly with the Government's programme for modernising public services; indeed, it is totally in line with what the Government tell us they want to do.

I share the hon. Gentleman's puzzlement about why the Government seem reluctant to pursue that issue. It may, as the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden said, be a matter of timing—but, if it is, let the Government say so. They should say that they will consider the issue and firmly commit themselves to introducing external validation for the measures in two or three years' time.

As I understand the right hon. Gentleman's new clause and the way in which he is allowing validation to be rolled out, the proposal would allow the Government to take up external validation as they get a better handle on output measures.

The Government should welcome our comments, which are intended to help them to meet their aims. Some commentators suggest that the Government's reluctance stems from concern about the press that they might get if they had a set of targets that were externally and independently validated and did not meet them. It is said by others—not by me, of course—that if such a situation arose, the Government could be blown off target. The hon. Member for West Dorset said that a dislike of independent audit of performance was almost inherent in the civil service culture. Perhaps one could say the same of Ministers.

Mr. Letwin: As usual, the hon. Gentleman is expounding his arguments with great clarity. Does he agree that everybody, not just Whitehall or Ministers, is in that position, and that if utilities could set their own targets instead of having them set by regulators, they would probably find it more convenient?

Mr. Davey: Indeed. That is why shareholders in private sector companies have demanded that the performance reviews and the customer service analysis which many modern private sector companies undertake are independently audited. Best practice in the private sector is what we are asking the Government to take on in respect of public service agreements and performance measures.

In debates such as this, a parallel is often drawn between the Government's proposals and the experience of other countries that have gone down the same road. My favourite is New Zealand. When New Zealand introduced outcomes and output measures alongside the introduction of accruals accounting, it ensured that an independent neutral body oversaw the setting of those measures. The task was given to the state services commission.

Once again, the Government are borrowing partially from the lessons of New Zealand and Australia, but they are not taking the full text. It is unfortunate to see the Government taking the aspect that suits them while leaving those that would probably suit outside commentators and the Opposition. Their pick-and-mix approach to reforms elsewhere is not good enough. It goes against all the rhetoric of modernisation, which is to be regretted.

I hope that, in the other place, the Government will realise that it is in their own interests to set down a strategy for ensuring that performance measures are credible in the eyes of the public. When the public hear the Prime Minister speaking at Question Time about whether the Government have met the class size reduction and hospital waiting list targets and all the others, they are increasingly beginning to question the statistics.

That devalues politics and the vocabulary of politics. It means that the Government are less able to get their message across. If the public were told that the figures quoted by the Prime Minister had been independently validated, and we could get away from a sterile statistics debate, and if the Government had all the successes that the Prime Minister claims, they would be able to prove it. They would be able to do so if they accepted the new clause.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am pleased to make my first speech on the Report stage of the Bill—indeed, my only speech on the Bill—at this time of night. As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I was privileged to serve under my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). He is an excellent Chairman. The House greatly benefits from his chairmanship.

The world-renowned National Audit Office is scrutinised and supported by the Public Accounts Committee, which is fully accountable to the House. It is therefore unfortunate that the Government rail against increased powers for the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit aspects of Government supply and expenditure.

5 am

I have listened to some of the debate. The Economic Secretary claimed that new clause 3 duplicated the efforts of the Government's internal audit service by granting the Comptroller and Auditor General access to all Departments. New clause 4 provides for additional tasks to those that the Government's internal audit service undertakes.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said that the Economic Secretary had advanced the arguments but not the reasons. I say that she advanced the means—taxpayers' money—but not the

ways in which to carry out proper scrutiny. New clause 4 is eminently sensible. It is moderate, and carefully considered and drafted. I cannot understand why the Government are so suspicious of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office. They should be able not only to audit Departments, non-departmental public bodies and other public expenditure but to engage in a value for money exercise. As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), for every £1 spent on the value for money exercise, £8 of public money is saved.

If the Economic Secretary listened instead of talking, she might learn something. She does not seem to want to save public money; she is leaving the Chamber. That shows the Government's contempt for saving public money. The Economic Secretary leaves the Chamber during non-political, non-partisan remarks.

It is worth considering the renown of the National Audit Office, which is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it audits the United Nations accounts. The National Audit Office is renowned throughout the world, and it draws on professional expertise from throughout the world. It is respected in all the accounting convention conferences and is therefore able to set a benchmark on a range of international comparators for the ability of each Department to perform. It can measure the output of every Department far better than any Government internal audit service. *[Interruption.]* I am glad that the Economic Secretary finds that so funny. Perhaps she will consider the new clause carefully. If not, perhaps she will give good reasons.

The more the Government laugh, the more the public understand that they do not care about taxpayers' money. That becomes clearer by the day. It will be even clearer as the Government become more unpopular in the opinion polls. The Government's current behaviour shows that they do not give a damn about the fact that the National Audit Office is renowned world wide. I should have thought that they would want such an audit service, which has enormous democratic legitimacy. The Government should consider extending that worthwhile service.

I understand that it is awkward for Ministers to be subjected to an internal review, and to have matters pointed out to them week after week when individual Departments, non-departmental public bodies and next steps agencies fail to live up to the highest worldwide standards.

If the Government thought about it carefully, they should welcome that, because Ministers do not have time to go around and look at every nook and cranny where taxpayers' money is being spent. I should have thought that they would welcome somebody looking carefully with an independent eye at the whole situation and assessing it on the basis of international comparators—saying, "You could do a little better in this respect. Money is being wasted here. It is being duplicated there. It is not being contracted out properly here. We could have a better PFI arrangement here."

This is a very sensible new clause to add to a Bill that I welcome enormously. When I was on the Public Accounts Committee, the whole aspect of resource accounting seemed to me to add great clarity to the way in which the House can appropriate public money and scrutinise how it is spent. This is a worthwhile Bill, and the new clause would add to it, which is exactly what Parliament should be all about. It should be improving an already worthwhile Bill.

The Public Accounts Committee is accountable to the House. It has huge powers to require witnesses to come to its hearings and question them in a way that no other financial Committee of the House can. It produces very worthwhile reports which the House can scrutinise and be absolutely certain that public money is being properly safeguarded and, if the new clause is adopted, properly used and properly enhanced.

In an ever more complicated world, that power, that duty, is ever more important. As we get more and more convoluted—we have non-departmental bodies themselves incorporating independent companies to carry out their work, so we are getting further and further away from the individual Department—there is more scope for fraud and misappropriation of public money, and the work done by the National Audit Office, as an independent office, becomes ever more important. That is why the new clause is so important.

There is a safeguard in the new clause, because the Treasury has the power by order to vary the Departments and bodies to which the National Audit Office can apply the performance indicators. Moreover, it would not come into operation until the statutory instrument was laid before the House.

In conclusion—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Labour Members say "Ah", but I can tell them that I am quite capable of speaking for another hour on this topic. What do they want me to do? Do they wish me to keep speaking? Then we might find ever more nooks and crannies that we could investigate where performance indicators might be applied. I can reel off a whole list off the top of my head. We used to examine them week in, week out in the Public Accounts Committee. I have a good memory. I can remember where the nooks and crannies are. I hope that the Minister will not require me, perhaps on the next group of amendments, to speak at even greater length, and that she will accept the new clause.

Mr. Swayne: I assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that at this stage I have no intention, or indeed ability, to speak for another hour. I rise for my second intervention with the intention of speaking for a significantly shorter time than on the earlier occasion. New clause 1 was much more widely drawn than new clause 4.

What I have found surprising, and touching in a way, is how both the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), and the Liberal Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey)—

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. At this hour of the morning, I cannot resist telling him that if he has gone all touchy-feely, my faith in human nature will finally dissolve.

5.15 am

Mr. Swayne: My hon. Friend may find, as I proceed, that it is not quite as touchy-feely as he imagines.

[Mr. Swayne]

What I found touching was the fact that both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton expected the Minister to accept the new clause, in a reasonable way. I cannot imagine anything that the Minister would do with less alacrity. What I see is the proper tension—the natural tension—between those who seek to hold the Executive to account and the interest of the Executive in defending their preserve.

We who seek to hold the Executive to account consider the new clause to be entirely reasonable, but, were I in the Minister's position, I would consider it to be irksome and unpleasant. Surely the Minister, wishing to defend the interests of the Executive, will resist the new clause, because, while it may impose an entirely reasonable condition on the Executive, the condition is not one that the Executive would welcome.

Subsection (2) of the new clause states:

> A department to which this section applies in any financial year shall prepare a performance statement in respect of that year analysing the performance of the department in using the resources to which the accounts relate in achieving its objectives for that financial year.

That is a very demanding requirement to place on a Department—a requirement for it to account for the resources that it has used in achieving its objectives. That would be a substantial piece of work for any Department to have to supply in any year. I would quite understand if Departments—protected as they are, in this instance, by the Minister—sought to resist the imposition of the requirement.

Moreover, subsection (4) states that the CAG may examine the document when he receives it,

> and may report on it to the House of Commons.

We, of course, will impose an additional layer of expectations and scrutiny on the Department concerned.

The Minister may think that Departments are, to an extent, protected by subsection (5), which states that the CAG will not

> question the merits of the policy objectives of a department to which the performance statement relates.

But we will! When the CAG reports to the House, we will question those objectives and whether they were appropriate—and the process of making the report, subjecting it to the CAG and presenting it to the House will lay bare to the House the appropriateness or otherwise of the objectives.

Although my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) has sought to protect Departments from any scrutiny of the appropriateness of their objectives, the political reality is that the objectives, and the appropriateness of the policy, will be scrutinised as a consequence of the whole process. That, of course, is entirely what we who seek to hold the Executive to account would wish. We see a natural and proper tension between our objectives—the objectives of the Conservative party—in seeking to hold the Government to account, and the objectives of the Executive in seeking greater convenience in their way of life.

Mr. Letwin: I rarely disagree with my hon. Friend, and I certainly agree with him that the tension he describes is natural; but why does he think it proper?

Mr. Swayne: Perhaps at this early hour I have been rather looser in my use of language than I would otherwise have been. I suppose that it is proper in the sense that it is to be expected and natural that officials or Ministers who are discharging their responsibilities will seek to avoid new, novel and onerous requirements on them and on their Department. I used the term "proper" in the sense that it is understandable, rather than in the sense of probity. I apologise for that lapse in my use of language.

What is entirely proper is the motive behind the new clause. I have said that I understand the Minister seeking to resist the onerous requirements, but those requirements are what the Bill is all about. There is little point in having such a Bill unless we place such requirements on Departments. It is summed up in the first sentence of recommendation (xxiii) of the ninth PAC report, which says:

> We are disappointed to see broken the link between resources used and performance achieved, as originally intended under resource accounting.

What will be the point of having resource accounting if that link is broken and such scrutiny is not applied to Departments? It seems to defeat the purpose. The Bill is not much of a Bill without the new clause, which seeks to restore that link.

Which Department would wish to place itself under such scrutiny? The logical conclusion is that the way in which the Department achieves value for money, or fails to achieve it, will be the basis on which Parliament—which funds it—will apply constraints and conditions to any future funding. That is an entirely understandable point of view for us, but an unwelcome point of view for those who discharge those responsibilities.

As was clear in the debates in Committee, which were quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, the Minister's principal argument against the new clause is that it would be administratively inconvenient. Of course it would. Her argument was that nursery schools would not welcome the attention of the CAG. She is right. I thought that my hon. Friend was somewhat unfair to her in being surprised at such a state of affairs. Of course it is inconvenient. Anyone who has been subjected to an audit of any sort finds that it is thoroughly, fiendishly and excruciatingly inconvenient.

That inconvenience is born of the current accounting practice, which is merely to establish a fair view of the financial reports. Ensuring that value for money has been achieved is a much more discerning audit. The order of inconvenience is multiplied as a consequence of the introduction of resource accounting, but either we accept that resource accounting is a proper way in which to understand the undertakings and expenditure of a Department and the way in which it discharges its responsibilities, or we do not.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am following my hon. Friend's argument carefully. He referred to nursery schools, but,

when the Office for Standards in Education came into being, did not schools object to external examination? Might it not be the same with the performance measurements? There might be an objection in principle at first, but, once the results were delivered, people might welcome what they achieved.

Mr. Swayne: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The whole purpose of introducing resource accounting is to enable us better to understand those operations, so that we might better establish the best ways of achieving value for money. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset said, the Government have much to gain by showing us so transparently what they have done well, and what they have learned—as revealed in the process of scrutiny—from that which they have done badly.

If I were in the position of a Department's senior civil servants, who quite rightly look to Ministers to protect their interests, I would be very disinclined to embrace resource accounting with open arms because of the commitment levels that would be imposed on me. I therefore conclude as I began, by saying that there is a perfectly understandable tension between Opposition Members who support new clause 4 and Labour Members who seek to resist it. Nevertheless, the arguments advanced against new clause 4 are arguments against the Bill itself. The Bill is of little value without the new clause.

Mr. Fabricant: Let us remind ourselves again what resource accounting is all about. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, please."] Let us do that. The point of resource accounting is to emulate what goes on in the real world, not in the Treasury's pretend and fantasy world. Resource accounts include three statements, emulating the type of statements that are issued by chartered accountants in performing a company's statutory audit. There is the operating cost statement, which is equivalent to the profit and loss account, the balance sheet and the cash flow statement.

Mr. Letwin: I simply wonder whether—now that my hon. Friend seems to have woken up Labour Members, which is much to be welcomed—he will join me in hoping that they might actually contribute to the debate, so that we might hear whether, as we suspect, they entirely agree with our arguments?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is always optimistic in such matters. The only contributions that we have so far had from Labour Members are snoring, baying, laughter and walk-outs by Ministers and walk-ins by Ministers. There has been great drama, but no interventions. Nevertheless, I hope that something like that might happen.

Three analyses are produced in resource accounting: the equivalent of the profit and loss account, the balance sheet and the cash flow statement. *[Interruption.]* Someone has woken up, which is very reassuring.

In the real world, the value of a company's stocks and shares is another measurement of its performance. If the company is not performing well, its share value will decline. If it is performing well, its share value will increase. A target is set externally for the company. Even Labour Members—who operate with their BT shares, which they bought because of a privatisation by a Conservative Government in the 1980s—should be able to appreciate that fact.

Labour Members, however, do not appreciate that it is necessary to establish targets. Companies set themselves internal targets against which they can measure themselves. However, it is doubly important that the Government should set themselves targets, as Departments and Government agencies cannot be valued in the market. There is no share value in the Government that could increase or decrease as appropriate.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Before my hon. Friend moves off the principles of resource accounting as they relate to new clause 4, will he comment on the introduction in appropriation accounts of a proper statement of assets for each Department, and on how, in new clause 4, such a statement of assets could be usefully applied in relation to the performance or use of those assets?

5.30 am

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The previous Government initiated the production of what was colloquially called the Domesday book. That was strengthened by this Government. "The National Asset Register"—I have a copy here—lists all the assets owned by the Government. However, it is no good just owning assets. It is more important to determine whether they are giving a return on the national investment. As an aside, it is interesting that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which nominally owns assets such as Trafalgar square, had great difficulty in determining a rate of return on them.

Mr. Syms: And Nelson.

Mr. Fabricant: And indeed on Nelson's column and Nelson himself.

There has to be a measure of performance. I find it strange that Conservative Members have been surprised that the Government do not welcome the new clause. To me the reason is obvious. The Government are king of one thing only—spin. People are beginning to see through that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): The one thing that I am beginning to see is that the hon. Gentleman is straying from the new clause. He must get back to it. I cannot tolerate him talking about the Government's record on spin, because it has nothing to do with the amendment.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall move away from spin and back to performance, which is the opposite of spin.

Mr. Letwin: I would not want something that was not strictly accurate to go into *Hansard*. My hon. Friend correctly mentioned that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport holds historic assets. It is specifically stated on page 314 of the so-called Domesday book that no valuation for heritage assets has been included in the accounts. It turned out to be too difficult.

Mr. Fabricant: One might think that that is because the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and

[Mr. Fabricant]

particularly the Secretary of State, know full well that if any performance measurement were made, he would be shown to be wanting.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does my hon. Friend have an idea of what written down value the dome might have?

Mr. Fabricant: That would be straying from the strict principle of the clause. I suspect that at the moment the dome has a negative value. Given the number of people who are visiting it, I have no doubt that if it were on the commercial market it would be heavily discounted.

Mr. Swayne: May I disagree with my hon. Friend that the issue departs from the principle of the new clause? It is central to the new clause that, rather than taking a cash accounting view of whether the money can be accounted for and whether the petty cash has been nicked, we should move to considering what the objective was and how wisely the funds have been spent in achieving it. Those are more pressing—and therefore inconvenient and unwelcome—questions for any Department to have to answer.

Mr. Fabricant: As ever, my hon. Friend is precise. The House of Commons Library report on the Bill refers not to a performance statement, but to

key performance data by objective.

That is important, because it is at the heart of the new clause that the Government have to set objectives, but, at the same time, a measurement must be made—it would be called a variance analysis in cost and management accounting—of the achievement of the Government. I hate to repeat the word, but that is why the system is such an enemy of spin. When there is transparency it is impossible to spin.

Mr. Letwin: Again in the cause of making sure that *Hansard* records only accurate statements, I wonder whether my hon. Friend has noticed that on page 340 of "The National Asset Register" it is made clear that the New Millennium Experience Company and all its doings are excluded from the register and that the total value of the Millennium Commission is £291,000.

Mr. Fabricant: That is fascinating, given that the new supremo was earning £30,000 a year as a rollercoaster repair man before he took his new £100,000 job with its £100,000 bonus. However, I shall not continue down that line as I fear that I would be straying just a teeny-weeny bit from the main point of the new clause.

There has to be transparency and open government. The Government say that they want to be transparent and open. More importantly, they want to be the people's Government, but the people have to be able to measure whether the Government—and, in this instance, Government Departments and their agencies—are performing. In order to do that, objectives have to be set and measurements have to be made against them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) raised the subject of the national asset register. I remind the House that a few hours ago we were discussing the problem of determining which items are revenue expenditure and which are capital expenditure. It is quite extraordinary that in 1866, when William Ewart Gladstone established the first legislation on the subject, everything was measured in the form of cash flow, but of course assets have value. They appreciate, but we also expect a return on them. That is why it is so important to set performance measures. It is not difficult.

As my hon. Friends have said, such provisions are in place in New Zealand and Australia. About 40 out of the 50 United States of America have them, as does the Federal Government of the United States for most Government departments and agencies operating out of or as part of the Washington establishment. If it can be done in Australia and New Zealand and in the United States, why can it not be done here? The simple answer is that it can be done, but the Government do not want it because they do not want people to see how they are performing, or, more to the point, how they are failing to perform.

Let me be parochial for a moment and let us suppose that performance targets were set on policing in Staffordshire. We are witnessing 250 fewer police officers in Staffordshire, which is a cut of around 10 per cent. The Government talk about 5,000 more police officers. Is that a target or an objective? If it is, have they met it? What is the variance analysis? Two hospitals in Lichfield are under threat. How does that compare with the Government's performance targets? They say that they want people to be able to get to hospital more quickly than ever before, but waiting lists are longer than ever before. Are there targets for local justice? The magistrates court which has been in Lichfield for more than 600 years is closing. We were told that things could only get better, but, over two and a half years, according to some performance targets, things have got worse very quickly.

How does one set performance targets for the BBC? That is an interesting subject that we have discussed before. How should the BBC be measured? It is funded by the licence payer, independent of Government. The funds come out of the public purse and indirectly from the taxpayer; nevertheless, they are collected on behalf of the BBC by a Government agency, the Licence Agency. Should the BBC be measured in terms of the quality of its programmes? How does one put a figure on that? Should it be measured in terms of the number of people who view BBC television programmes or listen to BBC radio? Should it be a quantitative amount—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has talked about performance statements and targets, but he cannot roam around talking about those matters and exclude the CAG. He must tie his remarks in with the CAG or his comments mean nothing in relation to new clause 4.

Mr. Fabricant: I am very grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that I have given plenty of examples and I appreciate your making that very clear point to me.

The Comptroller and Auditor General—I say that because of the suggestion that I did not know what CAG stood for—

Mr. Swayne: The new clause, quite properly, excludes the Comptroller and Auditor General from any decision in respect of performance targets because that is a matter of policy. Does my hon. Friend share the view that there

is a weakness in the new clause in that it fails to examine in any depth how performance is to be measured? What is the measure to be?

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend raises a fascinating point. I tried to give the example of the difficulty of measuring the qualitative output of the BBC. Does one go for popular programming, which might not be of a high standard, or for work of a higher standard that reaches a smaller audience? However, I do not think that it is a question of how performance might be measured. There is no difficulty in measuring it. My point is that performance targets are used all the time in industry and commerce, and resource accounting attempts to emulate that. It is in use in the government of the United States and Canada as well as in New Zealand and Australia.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that the new clause admits the possibility of the Government deciding that the proper measure of the performance of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is how many long-haired rabbits there are in East Anglia? We simply want to know that if the Government claim that there are 10, there are 10, rather than one or 1 million.

Mr. Fabricant: It goes further than that, because there must also be an aim. Every Department, agency and business has an aim. I was dining earlier with a director of the John Lewis Partnership. He has just moved from being the managing director of John Lewis Bluewater which has monthly targets which have just been exceeded by about 30 per cent.—if I am not giving away internal information.

Mr. Swayne: Are those targets monitored on a resource-accounting basis or on a mere cash-accounting basis? That is the key question.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend asks a very interesting question. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] They press me to answer, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows that the organisation that he talks about has nothing to do with public assets.

Mr. Fabricant: I shall not, then, give the answer. It is on a cash basis, although I cannot possibly say that.

Resource accounting attempts to emulate the auditing process and the results of an audit from a commercial organisation. Of course the two are not identical. One cannot compare the operations of the Treasury or the Home Office with the John Lewis Partnership. Nevertheless, for the first time, we are moving away from simply considering cash flows, saying instead that there are assets which need a return and have to be measured.

That is why I disagree slightly with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). It is a question not just of measuring, but of measuring the variance between that which is and that which was projected.

As we heard in an earlier intervention, it is not up to the Comptroller and Auditor General to set the targets. That is right. What is also right is that the CAG should look at what has been achieved, as part of his audit, together with the targets and ask why there is a variance, if one has occurred.

I suppose the Government will object to new clause 4. I hope there will be a Division. I suspect that Labour Members will go in sheeplike drives through the No Lobby. Every Labour Member who votes no will be saying, "We do not want to see performance targets published. We do not want the CAG to assess what is the variance between that which has been projected and that which has been achieved." They will signal to their electorate, "We do not want clarity; we do not want open government—we merely want spin from Millbank."

5.45 am

Mr. Clifton-Brown: If the Government reject the new clause, they will signal to the public that they do not want clarity. Does my hon. Friend think that a future Conservative Government would introduce an enlightened new clause such as this one?

Mr. Fabricant: I sincerely hope so.

Mr. Letwin: I can give my hon. Friends an absolute guarantee that if a Conservative Government are elected at the next general election, one of our first actions will be to ensure not only that there are proper, independently set standards for these matters, but that there is full validation by the CAG throughout Government.

Mr. Fabricant: That is a great reassurance—not for me, but for the people of the United Kingdom. It means that a future Conservative Government will be obsessed with achievement and not with spin and hype. Spin and hype can be hidden only by lack of clarity, data and transparency. That is what objection to new clause 4 would achieve.

This provision is the acid test.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Here is the punch line.

Mr. Fabricant: As the hon. Gentleman says, it is the punch line: can this Government achieve? Can they deliver? Are they proud to show that they can deliver and achieve, or will they be opaque and conceal their lack of achievement by objecting to openness and new clause 4? In the minutes to come, I hope that they will choose open government.

Mr. Rendel: I have only two points to make on the new clause, to which I am proud to have my name, and those of PAC colleagues, attached.

First, it is ironic that in a Bill that is mainly concerned with updating how the Government hold their accounts to a method of accounting that has long been used in local government and business, the Government should nevertheless fail to update how performance reporting is monitored to a method that is already used—at the Government's demand—in local government. It seems that they are all too disinclined to follow the old saying, "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander."

As so often, the Government are imposing measures on local government that they are not prepared to follow themselves. They would be well advised to follow the line that they have taken with local government and ensure independent monitoring of the performance reporting that they are introducing.

[Mr. Rendel]

Secondly, if proper and objective monitoring of performance reporting is introduced, it can lead to only two results. Many people have said that both would be of value to the Government. If the monitoring proves that some aspect of the reporting is not being properly carried out, that can only be of value to the Government. If it shows that the reporting is being properly carried out, the Government would welcome that, because they would be proud of it.

Although the argument has been well made that to point out that performance reporting is not being carried out can be of value to the Government because they can make changes, I understand that they might be worried that that might lead to some embarrassment. That is the only possible rationale for their objecting to the new clause. If the Government object to the new clause because they expect to be found out and think that external monitoring of their performance reporting will prove that it has not been properly carried out, that shows an incredible lack of confidence in their ability properly to introduce performance reporting. I am sorry to see that lack of confidence, and showing it is a matter of embarrassment for the Government. They should be shamed into accepting the new clause.

Mr. Syms: I shall briefly support the new clause. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) rightly said that the real prize of resource accounting was to measure performance and that the Bill was silent about that. His new clause is good and progressive. The Government should consider it seriously.

All of us in political life believe that it is important to measure output. I am sure that it is sometimes difficult to measure how productive we are as elected Members, but it is important to measure the output of government.

Mr. Swayne: My hon. Friend refers to output, but how would he measure it? I think that he would agree that length would not be an appropriate measure. That is perhaps a weakness of the new clause in that it does not discuss what the measure should be.

Mr. Syms: The new clause is drafted in such a way as to make policy decisions a matter for politicians and the Government and that is quite right. However, validation, measurement and ensuring the admissibility, relevance and reliability of performance data are important, too.

Prime Minister's Question Time was mentioned earlier. The Prime Minister throws statistics about and it was suggested that they give him great support. I do not think that that is so, but there is another more serious point. We have not mentioned Select Committees. In the heat of the Chamber, each side throws its preferred statistics at the other and, no doubt, in the whole range of government, we can find things that work well and things that go wrong.

However, we want to ensure that the Select Committee system works properly and the new clause, which would give the Comptroller and Auditor General a greater role in validating the information that is produced, could enable them to do a much better job. In the longer term, that would make a more profound difference to the way in which government operates than has the yah-boo traditional politics that we have in the Chamber. That is the key point that I wish to make.

All Governments dislike interference. I have no doubt that if we were in office, we would be a little sniffy about having outside bodies coming in.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend touched on the important subject of Select Committees. The Public Accounts Committee can point out where public funds are being misappropriated and, under the new clause, that process would be that much more effective. Departmental Select Committees can follow up on the shortcomings in a way that the PAC cannot possibly do because it examines the whole gamut of government expenditure. His remarks are frightfully important.

Mr. Syms: It is also important that Select Committees have good information, and we all know that they are under-resourced. However, the movement to resource accounting and the proposal in the new clause to allow the CAG to become involved in the proper measurement of the Government's targets and objectives might enable us to have more objective debates in the quieter Committees upstairs. In them, it is possible to press Ministers on their priorities. That is better than the yah-boo politics in which we all sometimes engage in the Chamber.

There is a real problem with the statistics commission, which will be a creation of government and whose members will be appointed by Ministers. It is important to validate what we do. Measurement and objectivity in relation to the outputs of government would dramatically improve political debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) asked whether it was proper to involve the CAG. I believe that it is. To all of us who aspire to honest and honourable government, validated measurement is important. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden mentioned how honest our government system is. We must be grateful for that. We should not be complacent but try to improve debate. The Bill gives us the opportunity to improve the quality of information provided to Select Committees. Not to endorse new clause 4 would be a tremendous mistake. Ministers should think carefully before they dismiss that opportunity.

Miss Melanie Johnson: I quite enjoyed the turn by the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). I thought that it was a bid to become a member of the Public Accounts Committee. I was not sure how to interpret the large grin on the face of its Chairman as that contribution developed.

This is one of those occasions when one looks around the Chamber, notices that it is nigh on 6 am and says to oneself, "Would the public think we were doing a good job? What would be the output and outcome measures for our performance?" Were the public watching, although I hope that many of them are asleep—

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Lady was.

Miss Johnson: I have not been asleep at any point. I have been here since 3.30 yesterday afternoon, unlike the hon. Gentleman.

Probably no member of the public would think that the House has been doing a very good job. Perhaps that is something on which we should reflect.

I was impressed by the idealism of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) in his desire to arrive at consensus at about 5 am. I have not noticed any consensus; nor is it likely at 5 am.

We tabled amendment No. 18 following discussions in Committee and it would require the financial statements to present a true and fair view. The Companies Act requires that the profit and loss account and the balance sheet present a true and fair view. The amendment goes further, extending that provision to the whole of the resource accounts. The need for accounts to present a true and fair view is an overriding requirement in companies legislation and the Government are content for that to apply to resource accounts.

Amendment No. 19 fulfils an undertaking that I made in Committee to bring forward an amendment that would re-enact, in modernised form, the requirements of section 26 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866. The amendment will enable Parliament to see clearly where differences have arisen between planned and actual expenditure. It was always the Government's intention to continue to require, under resource accounting, notes explaining variances between the estimate and actual outturn. We did not originally believe that it was necessary to keep that on a statutory basis, but we have listened to the concerns expressed by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis)—and others and the amendment will reinstate the statutory basis of that important parliamentary control.

6 am

On amendment No. 20, clause 7 as originally drafted left the form of the CAG's audit opinion entirely to his discretion. That would have enabled him to report on the regularity of the accounts prepared under the clause when he thought that necessary, but the Government have no objection to making it a statutory requirement for him to report on the regularity of those accounts if that is what he wants. We have, therefore, tabled the amendment, as we agreed to do in Committee.

The Government oppose new clause 4. We have already committed ourselves to reporting annually to Parliament and the public on outturn against performance targets. That will be done through departmental reports, beginning this spring, and the Government's annual report, which will be published in the summer. There is no need to make that a statutory requirement and doing so would lead to inflexibility. For example, the public service agreements relate to three years, mirroring spending plans, so performance assessments tied narrowly to a particular financial year may not be as useful as giving Parliament the very latest outturn. The Government recognise that if PSAs are to affect accountability and raise public service performance, which is what they are aimed at, the information that supports them must be credible.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way because I had not realised that she has been supplied with a text even more amusing than previous ones. Is she seriously maintaining that it would be misleading for Parliament to see the simple figures for one year?

Miss Johnson: I did not say that, any more than I said the things that the hon. Gentleman quoted from Committee proceedings in isolation. I said that in some cases tying an issue to a particular financial year may not be as useful as giving Parliament the very latest outturn. Different assessments of what is the useful information need to be made at different times. That is an advantage of moving to PSAs. They will affect accountability and raise public service performance as a result.

Hon. Members have commented on the work of the new independent statistics commission, which we think is important in this regard, and the future of performance information generally. It would be premature to introduce any statutory requirement at this time as both are undergoing considerable development as we speak. Work needs to be done to achieve coherence, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. *[Interruption.]* I nearly disturbed him.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden commented wisely across the piece on the value of outputs and outcomes and the credibility and integrity of the figures. I could not agree more that they are very important. I also agree that a revolution is taking place in respect of what we can do and how we can manage the public sector and our public services for the greater good of the public, whom we in the House serve. I strongly support placing greater emphasis on evidence-based policy making, as do the Government in all their activities, but the new clause is not the way forward at this point. However, we agree with the import of the changes and the direction in which they ought to take us. We have in hand a number of measures that we believe will take the project forward substantially.

Mr. David Davis: I thank the Minister for the various Government amendments that have been tabled in response to questions raised in Committee. They are helpful and constructive.

I shall not waste another 15 minutes by pressing new clause 4 to a vote. That is not because I am persuaded by the Minister's arguments; indeed, I hope that in my meetings with the Chief Secretary we will have a more constructive exchange.

Miss Melanie Johnson: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is very keen to have a vote on the new clause.

Mr. Davis: He will have to object to my seeking permission to withdraw the motion in a moment, then. I am conscious of the fact that the Economic Secretary has a Select Committee meeting at 9.45 am, so I want to delay her no longer than is absolutely necessary.

I am glad to hear the Economic Secretary talk about the importance of evidence-based policy development. That is the single most important element of the development of resource accounting, all technical aspects and costs apart. That is why the new clause represents the largest missed opportunity in the Bill. That is sad, because this is not a matter of partisan politics; it is a matter of the delivery of public services, which is of common interest to hon.

[Mr. Davis]

Members on both sides of the House. Although I am not persuaded by the hon. Lady's arguments, I do not want to waste time having a futile vote, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3

CONSOLIDATED AND NATIONAL LOANS FUNDS: PAYMENTS OUT

Mr. Timms: I beg to move amendment No. 36, in page 2, leave out lines 15 to 24 and insert—

'(1) Subsection (2) applies to a requisition or order under—

(a) section 13 or 15 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866 (payments out of the Consolidated Fund), or

(b) section 1(3) of the National Loans Act 1968 (payments out of the National Loans Fund).

(2) A requisition or order to which this subsection applies—

(a) may be produced, authenticated and transmitted in any manner which the Treasury, with the approval of the Comptroller and Auditor General, decide to adopt, but

(b) shall be accompanied by evidence of the approval of two officers of the Treasury appointed for that purpose.

(3) A request or order under section 20 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866 (government stock and annuities) may be produced, authenticated and transmitted in any manner which the Treasury decide to adopt.'.

The amendment provides for Consolidated Fund and national loans fund credit requisitions and payment orders to be approved by two officers of the Treasury from a panel of authorised signatories. It builds on amendments tabled in Committee by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), which we accepted in principle. This amendment takes them forward.

The amendments tabled in Committee would have required that Consolidated Fund credit requisitions be approved by a duly authorised officer of the Treasury. Current practice is for such requisitions to be approved by two such officers, rather than one. That applies also to national loans fund requisitions and to payment instructions for both funds. We think that the Bill should make that current practice a statutory requirement, and our amendment achieves that.

The amendment also restructures much of clause 3 to make it clear that the form of requests under section 20 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866, unlike those relating to payments from the Consolidated Fund and the national loans fund, do not need to be approved by the CAG.

I hope that the amendment will be welcomed by the whole House.

Mr. Letwin: I will perhaps surprise the Minister by telling him that I welcome the amendment. I have been unable to find anything in it to complain about, so I shall shut up and continue to welcome it in silence.

Mr. David Davis: As I was one of the Members who raised the matter, I shall say briefly that I welcome the amendment, which seems entirely constructive and proper.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 5

RESOURCE ACCOUNTS: PREPARATION

Amendments made: No. 18, in page 3, line 2, after "accounts", insert—

'(a) present a true and fair view,

(b)".

No. 19, in page 3, line 4, at end insert—

', and

(c) accord with guidance issued by the Treasury about the inclusion of an explanation of the difference between an item appearing in a department's estimate and a corresponding item appearing in or reflected in the department's resource accounts.'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 7

OTHER DEPARTMENTAL ACCOUNTS

Amendment made: No. 20, in page 4, line 24, at end insert—

'() The Comptroller and Auditor General shall carry out his examination of accounts under subsection (3)(b) with a view to satisfying himself—

(a) that money provided by Parliament has been expended for the purposes intended by Parliament,

(b) that resources authorised by Parliament to be used have been used for the purposes in relation to which the use was authorised, and

(c) that the department's financial transactions are in accordance with any relevant authority.'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 8

COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL: ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Amendment made: No. 21, in page 4, leave out lines 32 to 38 and insert—

'(1) For the purposes of an examination by the Comptroller and Auditor General of a government department's accounts—

(a) he shall have a right of access at all reasonable times to any of the documents relating to the department's accounts, and

(b) a person who holds or has control of any of those documents shall give the Comptroller and Auditor General any assistance, information or explanation which he requires in relation to any of those documents.

(2) Subsection (1) applies only in relation to documents which are held or controlled—

(a) by a government department, or

(b) in pursuance of arrangements made by a government department for the compiling or handling of any of its financial records.'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 9

PREPARATION

Mr. Timms: I beg to move amendment No. 22, in page 5, line 5, at end insert—

'() Accounts prepared under this section may include information referring wholly or partly to activities which—

(a) are not activities of bodies falling within subsection (1), but

(b) appear to the Treasury to be activities of a public nature.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 23.

Amendment No. 6, in clause 10, page 5, line 19, leave out subsection (2)(d) and insert—

'(d) publish the information.'.

Amendment No. 7, in page 5, line 26, leave out subsection (3)(c) and insert—

'(c) publish the information.'.

Government amendments Nos. 24 and 34.

Mr. Timms: In the newly harmonious environment that we are enjoying, I can say that clause 9 governs the scope and content of whole of Government accounts. At the moment, the clause defines the scope of the accounts in terms of the bodies to be included. Accordingly, all items included in each body's own accounts would be included within whole of Government accounts.

There are, however, a number of areas of the Government's finances which are dealt with through separate funds, such as the national insurance fund and the social fund. Although specific Departments have responsibility for administering those funds, they are legally separate and so are accounted for separately. We would want to include such funds within whole of Government accounts. Unfortunately, they would not qualify as "bodies" under clause 9(1), and so at present could not be included within whole of Government accounts. The amendment addresses that issue.

Amendment No. 23 is purely technical. Amendment No. 24 introduces an important performance incentive into the consolidation process, allowing an individual official within each designated body to be given responsibility for preparing that body's consolidation pack, arranging for it to be audited and submitting it as directed.

On amendment No. 34, clause 27(3) is a transitional provision to allow the Treasury to collect consolidation information on a pilot basis from public sector bodies which will ultimately be within the scope of full public sector whole of Government accounts, but are outside the scope of the initial audited accounts for central Government.

The amendment extends the provision to allow the Treasury to require another Department to pilot the necessary consolidation procedures for public corporations or local authorities, to prepare for the extension of the scope of whole of Government accounts from central Government to the entire public sector.

I hope that the House will not accept amendments Nos. 6 and 7, as they would severely impair the efficiency of the consolidation process put in place by clause 10. They would remove the Treasury's right to require electronic data submission and to set deadlines for that, which would be a retrograde step.

Amendment No. 6 would also impose a requirement to publish consolidation pack information for a particular year, which would essentially duplicate information that the body is already required to publish in its annual accounts. That would result in unnecessary duplication and expense. I hope that the House will reject those amendments if the Opposition choose to press them to a Division.

Mr. Letwin: I do not agree with much that the Financial Secretary has just said, but I would not want our exchange to be considered disharmonious. Despite the fact that we have had some arguments, our proceedings over a prolonged period have on the whole been harmonious. I do not intend to disrupt that trend.

I have no deep principled objection to amendment No. 22, or at least, I do not think that I have, but I have a difficulty: I do not understand it. Although I listened attentively to the Financial Secretary's remarks, they did not explain it either.

The problem is caused by subsection (b), which refers to activities which

appear to the Treasury to be activities of a public nature.

That takes us to the heart of the problem that we were discussing in the context of new clause 1. What is an activity of a public nature? What are the criteria against which the Treasury will judge whether the activity is of a public nature? Why are we dealing not with whether it is an activity of a public nature, but with whether it appears to the Treasury to be an activity of a public nature?

I admit that, throughout the Bill, as we have remarked on various occasions, more or less everything is left to the discretion of the Treasury. The amendment could simply reflect the exuberance of the draftsman. He got so used to describing everything as a matter of discretion that even reality began to be a matter of discretion, and we move from reality to appearance. That is a possible explanation, but, if it is not an exuberance of drafting, we want to know why the distinction is drawn between activities of a public nature and those which appear to the Treasury in that light.

The more important question is the first part. What are activities of a public nature? If the Financial Secretary had not also been present for many hours in these proceedings and in the earlier Standing Committee, he might be tempted to say that it was obvious to the meanest intellect what an activity of a public nature was.

However, we have discovered that the company set up by the Bill to engage in unknown activities at an unknown cost and to participate on an unknown basis in unknown numbers of PPP projects does not appear to the Treasury to be an activity of a public nature, despite the fact that it will have £400 million of public funds, plus something unknown under subsection (1)(a). If it were an activity of a public nature, presumably it would be caught. We were told earlier that it would not be caught; it will be outwith the scrutiny of the CAG because it is a company.

6.15 am

The Government have specifically excluded various matters from the purview of the CAG by not accepting the reversal of the burden of proof, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden proposed in a new clause. If I remember correctly, those matters were excluded because they did not appear to the Treasury to be of a sufficiently public nature. We were told that while some activities might receive public funding, they were somehow outside the public sector and that made them appear to the Treasury as activities that

[Mr. Letwin]

were not of a public nature. I am in a state of confusion and muddle about what constitutes an activity of a public nature. I suspect that the Financial Secretary is in the same state.

Part of the reason for the confusion is that the phrase "activities of a public nature" is as vague a phrase as the parliamentary draftsmen could have devised under perplexing circumstances. "Public sector activities" is the usual phrase, but the amendment avoids that. We are therefore considering a much wider concept.

Let us consider the student loans company. Does its work constitute "activities of a public nature"? It clearly uses public money, but it is not a public sector entity. Is it intended to be covered by the definition? I do not know, and I wonder whether the Financial Secretary knows. If he does, it would be useful if he could tell us. If he does not, perhaps he could reconsider the phrase. While he does that, he should consider other similar matters that we raised in Committee and try to tidy up the Bill so that we know what the extremely confusing measure covers.

Mr. Keith Bradley (Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household): Thank you.

Mr. Letwin: The Deputy Chief Whip says thank you from a sedentary position. However, I fear that he may not thank me because I must progress to amendments Nos. 6 and 7, which we tabled. The Financial Secretary made a reasoned case for not accepting the gist of those amendments, which deal with publishing the information. He said that it would cost too much. That reminds us of Ministers' frequent resort to the doctrine that they cannot answer a parliamentary question because it would cost too much to find the information. It is remarkable that the Financial Secretary should use that argument in this context.

We are considering a case whereby the Treasury has prepared a set of accounts, which constitute whole of Government accounts. They are the crowning achievement of the resource accounting process. Clause 9 covers that and clause 10 refers to it. Clause 10 states:

> Where the Treasury intend the accounts under section 9 . . . to relate . . . to a particular body, the Treasury may . . . designate that body.

When a body is designated, the information is to be delivered to the Treasury. That is a remarkable matter to put in statute. If we are simply considering an administrative internal action of the Treasury vis-a-vis other Departments, why have Ministers troubled the House with a request for a statute basis? The Treasury has discretion to insist on anything being delivered to it at any time of day or night.

A statute is reasonable only if the information is available to the public and especially to Parliament. That will happen if the information is required to be published. Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 would require that. The Financial Secretary will have to provide a better argument than claiming that a small cost will be associated with depositing the relevant item in the Library. I have not analysed how much it would cost to get a piece of paper photocopied in the Treasury, brought across by a messenger and deposited in the Library. However, I doubt whether it would make a major dent in the fiscal balance of our prudent Chancellor. I imagine that it would cost around £2. The cost argument is a non-starter. We are considering the serious matter of parliamentary accountability.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Can my hon. Friend conceive of a way in which the information could be provided to the Treasury as set out in the subsections that the amendments would delete, but could not immediately be copied—in whatever form the Treasury stipulated—and handed over for public purposes to the House of Commons? How can the Government make such a distinction? It is hard to conceive of a way in which the existing clause could not be adapted to fit the amendments.

Mr. Letwin: While I entirely agree with the gist of what my hon. Friend says, I suppose that the idea is that, dulled by late nights and the insensibility of poor memory, we shall have forgotten by the time these things are being done that they are being done and will not ask for the information in parliamentary questions; or, if we ask, we shall be told, according to the Financial Secretary's arguments, that it is a bit expensive to produce, so we shall never get it.

What we are facing, therefore, is a Treasury that would like to be well informed about all of the Government's activities, but would like to make sure that we are not. That is not a satisfactory position. It is not even a defensible one. I am astonished that the Financial Secretary has sought to defend it. I had genuinely thought that we were dealing here with a drafting omission. I beg the Financial Secretary to look at this again, and ask himself whether as a matter of fact publishing the information is not in this case the absolutely evident requirement under any rational interpretation of the purposes of the Bill.

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman asked me what amendment No. 22 meant. The key is that clause 9(1) refers to

> a group of bodies . . . which appears to the Treasury . . . to exercise functions of a public nature.

The point about appearing to the Treasury to exercise functions of a public nature is already in the Bill. What the amendment does is to extend that to include the words:

> information referring wholly or partly to activities which.

What that allows us to do—which the hon. Gentleman would wish as much as I do, I think—is to include things like the social fund and the national insurance fund, which are not bodies—the existing term used in the clause—but which are covered by

> information referring wholly or partly to activities which

are of a public nature. That is the extension that the amendment makes. I am not surprised that it is not immediately self-evident.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that nobody on the Government Benches is dulled. He said a few moments ago that we might be dulled, but that is certainly not the case.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman's exegesis of amendment No. 22 is very helpful. Could he just add whether it would also enable the Treasury to include things like trading funds within the scope of the Bill?

Mr. Timms: I think that some trading funds would already be included under the existing wording.

Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 are to clause 10, whose aim is to allow us to get designated bodies to prepare and have audited consolidation packs—in the same way as subsidiaries of a commercial group prepare them. Those packs facilitate the consolidation process by gathering together accounts information in a standardised format.

Amendment No. 6, in respect of the consolidation pack for the whole year, would impose an additional requirement on bodies within the scope of whole of Government accounts to publish information that would essentially duplicate the contents of the annual accounts that they already have to publish. It would add an additional and unnecessary requirement that people do again something that they already do.

The two amendments together would also undermine the proposed consolidation process by removing the Treasury's rights to require the electronic submission of data and to set a deadline for those data to be submitted. Clearly, we want as much of the process as possible to be electronic. The amendments would damage the ability to achieve that.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 10

OBTAINING INFORMATION

Amendments made: No. 23, in page 5, line 11, after "body" insert—

'which falls within section 9(1)'.

No. 24, in page 5, line 28, at end insert—

'() A designated body shall comply with any direction of the Treasury as to the person or kind of person to be given responsibility for ensuring compliance with subsections (2) and (3).'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 11

SCRUTINY

Amendment made: No. 25, in page 6, line 19, after "10(2)(c)", insert "or (7)(c)".—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 14

SUMMARISED ACCOUNTS

Mr. Timms: I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 8, line 30, at end insert—

'() Before making an order under subsection (1) the Treasury shall consult the Comptroller and Auditor General.'.

The amendment would require the Treasury to consult the CAG before making an order under clause 14, which allows the Treasury to disapply the requirement for particular bodies to be included in the NHS summarised accounts.

In Committee, the Chairman of the PAC asked us to consider making the requirements of the clause subject at least to consultation with the CAG. We entirely recognise the interest that the CAG would have in any proposal not to apply the requirements of summarised accounts to some NHS bodies, and we tabled the amendment to provide for consultation with him before any such order is made under clause 14. I hope that the House will welcome it.

Mr. Letwin: I am glad to say that the spirit of harmony has reasserted itself. I can see no objection to the amendment, which indeed constitutes a response to complaints made in Committee. I only hope that, following reflection, similar responses will be made to some of the other matters that we have raised.

Mr. David Davis: I thank the Minister for the amendment, which meets the requirement that I stipulated in Committee, and is entirely satisfactory.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 16

EXPENDITURE AND ASSISTANCE

Amendments made: No. 27, in page 8, line 44, leave out "and".

No. 28, in page 9, leave out lines 1 to 13 and insert—

'(b) may incur expenditure for the purposes of investing in the body (whether by acquiring assets, securities or rights or otherwise), and

(c) may provide loans and guarantees and make other kinds of financial provision to or in respect of the body.

(2) The powers under subsection (1)(b) and (c)—

(a) may not be exercised in respect of more than one body, and

(b) may be exercised only in connection with public–private partnership business carried on or to be carried on by the body.'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 17

SECTION 16: INTERPRETATION

Amendments made: No. 29, in page 9, line 34, leave out "public money or".

No. 30, in page 9, line 34, leave out "(except in section 16(3)(b))".

No. 31, in page 9, line 35, leave out "public money or".—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 22

EXAMINATIONS BY COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

Amendments made: No. 32, in page 10, line 38, leave out "This section has" and insert—

'Subsections (2) and (3) have'.

No. 33, in page 10, line 42, at end insert—

'(3) An examination of accounts carried out by the Comptroller and Auditor General shall be carried out on behalf of the House of Commons.

(4) Subsection (5) applies where the Comptroller and Auditor General examines and certifies accounts of a body by virtue of an enactment or agreement.

(5) Section 8(1) shall apply for the purposes of the examination of the body's accounts as it applies for the purposes of the examination of a department's accounts.

(6) The Treasury may by order provide for the accounts of a body to be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

(7) An order under subsection (6)—

(a) may be made in relation to a body only if it appears to the Treasury that the body exercises functions of a public nature or is entirely or substantially funded from public money,

(b) may make such supplementary or consequential provision (including provision amending an enactment) as the Treasury think expedient,

(c) shall not be made unless the Treasury have consulted the Comptroller and Auditor General, and

(d) shall not be made unless a draft of the order has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, each House of Parliament.'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Clause 27

COMMENCEMENT

Amendment made: No. 34, in page 11, line 27, leave out "(4)" and insert "(8)".—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Schedule 1

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendment made: No. 35, in page 15, line 18, at end insert—

'Food Standards Act 1999 (c. 28)

.—(1) Schedule 4 to the Food Standards Act 1999 (Food Standards Agency: accounts) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 2(1)—

(a) for "appropriation accounts" substitute "resource accounts", and

(b) for "the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866" substitute "the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000".

(3) In paragraph 5—

(a) in sub-paragraph (1) (and in the heading to the paragraph) for "section 5 of the Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1921" substitute "section 7 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000", and

(b) in sub-paragraph (3) for "section 5" substitute "section 7".'.—*[Mr. Timms.]*

Bill, as amended, to be reported.

Order for Third Reading read.

6.27 am

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Let me begin by saying a special thank you to the staff of the House who have been kept here all night. We are very grateful for their service. I also thank parliamentary counsel and all the officials who have worked on the Bill, especially those who have been condemned to sit through some pretty tedious proceedings. I thank all who served on the Standing Committee—and, indeed, the Public Accounts Committee—for their careful consideration, and I say a particular thank you to my hon. Friends the Financial Secretary and the Economic Secretary for their heroic work on this important Bill.

Lest we forget—as we may have during a good deal of the debate—the Bill concerns resource accounting. It revolutionises the basis on which Government keep their accounts: the move to an accruals basis is a great step forward. However, most of our deliberations today, and indeed in Committee, have concerned the question of audit. I think that I should briefly run through all the areas in which we have made changes in response to points made in Committee, and by the PAC.

The access clause in the Bill will give the National Audit Office access as of right. We are requiring resource accounts to show a true and fair view. We are requiring a note on the accounts showing the differences between amounts in estimates and outturn. We have introduced a financial limit on Partnerships UK. We have made it clear that the Comptroller and Auditor General does his audits on behalf of the House of Commons. We are giving the CAG a statutory right of access when he is auditing non-departmental public bodies, and providing the means for audit by the CAG to be extended to non-departmental but public bodies which he is currently barred by statute from auditing. Those are not small changes. They are a genuine effort to deal with the concerns that have been expressed in the House and by the PAC in particular.

What is more, as my hon. Friends have pointed out, I have proposed the review of central Government audit procedures, with the terms of reference set out in my parliamentary answer yesterday. That offers a greater opportunity for Government and Parliament to work together to ensure that we improve on the hotch-potch of arrangements that the Government inherited from the previous Administration.

I cannot resist saying that it was very rich of Conservative Members to spend so much time on the Bill; much of it was total time wasting. During the bit that was not time wasting, they attacked procedures that were put in place by their Government. Since we came to office, we have been following procedures that honour the accountability that we all owe the House. It comes ill from Conservative Members to plead in aid integrity, accountability and scrutiny by the House, and, by their behaviour, subvert the House's principles and reputation.

At any rate, we have reached Third Reading. As I say, I have proposed the review, which offers a collaborative way of moving forward on the outstanding issues of concern that have been aired here and in the PAC.

Mr. David Davis: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Smith: Before I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, I greatly welcome his acceptance to serve on the steering committee of the body that will direct the review.

Mr. Davis: I am minded to do that, but obviously we have to have a discussion first about some of the details; the right hon. Gentleman understands that. I warned earlier that I would raise one question with him on the

review because of some misreporting in today's *Financial Times*. Will he confirm that the review's aim is not to amalgamate the NAO with the Audit Commission?

Mr. Smith: That is not the aim. I am pleased to give that assurance, although, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out in the debate on new clause 4, the ways in which the NAO and Audit Commission collaborate are properly a subject for consideration, as they have been in the debates. It is bound to be touched on in the review.

I underline the fact that it is a good Bill. It brings in resource accounting, which offers a great step forward both in the ability of the Government to conduct their business in the service of the public and in the ability of the House to scrutinise Government. It creates Partnerships UK, which will greatly improve services to the public and give rise to innovative ways in which the private and public sectors can work together to the benefit of us all.

Perhaps most important, unlike those Conservative Members who were wasting time, the Bill extends Parliament's ability to scrutinise Government spending and performance in ways that the public outside would expect and welcome. I am pleased to commend the Bill to the House.

6.34 am

Mr. Letwin: In order not to be churlish, I suppose that I should start by thanking the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his thanks to those who were on the Committee. I echo his kind words to the staff, to the other people who have been kept up all night and to his officials, who have shown forbearance and worked hard in producing the Bill. I go one step further and welcome, as we have from the start, with our colleagues in the PAC and the Liberal Democrats, the principles that underlie the Bill. I will not indulge in similar point scoring—

Mr. Andrew Smith: The hon. Gentleman has no points.

Mr. Letwin: If the Chief Secretary tempts me, I shall, but I will try to avoid the temptation.

As the Chief Secretary knows, the movement towards resource accounting has been a bipartisan, indeed tripartisan, affair. It began at a time when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and it has continued apace under the current Government. We all welcome the basic ideas.

I take those basic ideas to be, first and most importantly, the production for the Government of a straightforward consolidated profit and loss, income and expenditure statement; a balance sheet, critically; and a cash flow statement. They offer the opportunity for Parliament and informed commentators, and perhaps even eventually for a wider part of the electorate, to understand—for the first time, in a form that is comprehensible to the ordinary person, including the ordinary Member of Parliament—roughly what is gained and what is spent by Government. That is an unambiguously good thing, and we are all in favour of it.

Secondly, one of the cardinal features of resource accounting is that it seeks to establish an asset base and to examine how well that asset base is being used. That, of course, is highly allied to the matter of performance measurements, to which I want to return. However, the principle that the Government should try to identify the assets that they are using on behalf of the taxpayer—and to which the taxpayer has inevitably contributed, either immediately or in a delayed fashion through borrowing—is unambiguously a good thing. It is good that the Government should know how the assets that they control on behalf of the taxpayer are being used, and whether those assets are being well used.

Finally, I take it that the point of resource accounting is that, allied to the measure of how the money is spent and what money is taken, there should be a measure of whether the money that is spent is achieving the things that it is intended to achieve. That is also a step forward, because—until very recently, but increasingly—it has not on the whole, oddly enough, been the practice for Governments to concern themselves with the simple question of whether the money that is being taken and spent is being spent in any way usefully when compared with the Government's policies.

We all accept those principles. So far, we are in utter harmony. I regret to say, however, that the harmony ends there. This is not only in principle a good Bill, it is also in practice a tissue of missed opportunities—which I do not think are politically inspired. I do not think that they have anything to do with the politics of the current Government or of any other Government. I freely admit—this is why I say that I shall not trade insults with the Chief Secretary—that the previous Government, and Governments before that, for years and years, have been culpable in just the same way.

It is tempting for the Executive to try, in a shortsighted fashion, to protect themselves from proper scrutiny. It is tempting for them to try, in a shortsighted fashion, to redefine matters so that they can present them in ways that sound attractive. As I, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and many Public Accounts Committee members have tried to expose, it is a temptation that, in the long run, benefits the Government no more than it benefits Parliament or the people. In the short term, however, it seems to provide benefits. That disease afflicted not only the previous Government, but other Governments past. It also afflicts the current Government.

The result of succumbing to the temptation is that, in six or seven fundamental respects, the Bill—because the Government have not accepted amendments and new clauses that they should have accepted—is woefully deficient. There will come a time, I hope not far off, when that deficiency will be sufficiently examined by people in another place who are independent of the Executive, so that the Government have to face the prospect either of accepting the amendments and new clauses—or something very much like them—that they have refused in this place, or of eventually using the Parliament Acts to overrule them.

I reiterate that I do not believe that it can be in the interests of the Government, let alone the rest of us, that they should use the awesome power of their majority in the House and of the Parliament Acts to try to enforce systems that narrow-mindedly and shortsightedly protect the Executive from proper scrutiny. That is a most remarkable abuse of a parliamentary majority, and I hope that the Government, when it comes to it, will not do it.

[Mr. Letwin]

I say that it is an abuse of a parliamentary majority because it is proper that a parliamentary majority should be used to push through a Government's programme when their political opponents disagree with them. That is why a Government are elected, and we have no quarrel with that. We may disagree with the substance, but, as a matter of process, it is entirely proper that a Government should use their overwhelming majority, if they have one, to force through policy measures in which they believe.

In this case, however, we are talking not about the new Labour Government doing something in which they believe and using their majority to achieve it, but about the Executive using the power of the Whips to make Parliament do something that is the interests of Parliament and of the people who elected it. That is an abuse of Executive power and I shall go on saying so no matter how much merriment it causes on the Treasury Bench. More importantly, my words will be echoed in another place and there will be a fight—oddly enough, a fight between the Executive, represented in this place, and the electorate and Parliament, represented in an unelected place. If the Chief Secretary cannot see that that is an irony, he is a lesser man than I think he is.

The Bill is lamentably deficient in six or seven respects and constitutes a tissue of missed opportunities. The first such respect is the simplest and the most important. It is an astonishing departure from rationality that a Bill that purports to be—and on the whole intends to be—a framework for normal and proper public sector resource accounts should enable the Treasury to set definitions and standards on a political whim. Ministers have entirely failed at all stages of the Bill to make a powerful or even remotely plausible argument that that is the proper way to proceed. That is why that aspect of the Bill has failed to attract support not only from the official Opposition, as one might expect, but from the Liberal Democrats, from the PAC and, I suspect—and in one or two cases I know—from Labour Members.

Ministers have been unable to bring forward arguments against the proposition that an independent body should set the definitions. That is not because Ministers lack ingenuity, but because there is no such argument and there can never be one.

The second lamentable deficiency in the Bill relates to enforcement. The PAC, supported by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, has made repeated attempts to insert provisions for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have a universal scope of audit across the public sector and the quasi-public sector, with the sole and perhaps unfortunate exception of companies. We must give the Government credit for having made some movement. They have tried to accommodate the force of our arguments, but, for some reason that remains mysterious, they have not wholly accommodated them and we are left with a position in which the much trumpeted studies that the Chief Secretary is going to conduct and in which my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) may well participate could result in nothing changing and the CAG remaining unable to audit a large stretch of the public and quasi-public sectors. That is clearly unsatisfactory. There is no good argument for it and none has been put forward. The reason, again, is not a lack of ingenuity, but that no good argument can be put forward.

The third serious deficiency relates to the access of the CAG. I shall not unnecessarily bore the House by repeating the same points, because they apply in exactly the same way as they do to audit.

The fourth issue is the terrible problem that the performance measurements, which could have been added usefully as part of the resource accounting process, will be added uselessly, because the Treasury will be judge and jury. It is right and proper that the Treasury should be allowed to determine the policies, but it is wrong that it should be allowed to determine the measures of the success of policy. Most importantly, it is unambiguously wrong that it will be able to decide whether the performance measures have been met. It is a pity that, in this short-sighted attempt to protect the Executive against proper scrutiny, a system is being set up that will make it difficult to cure the problem in subsequent legislation. It will be cured in the long run. As the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton constantly points out, we have a sterling example in New Zealand, which shows that when people start down this line of thought, they eventually get to the end of it and insist not just on independently verified definitions for accounts, but on independently verified and validated performance measures. We shall get there in the end, but it is a pity that the opportunity in the Bill is being missed.

Finally, we have the problem that, although the Bill is about resource accounting, another item has been insinuated into it. According to one's taste, it is either distasteful or harmless and, although it bears no particular relation to the Bill, it has driven much of our consideration. I suspect that the Government's helter-skelter attitude to much of the drafting has been driven exclusively by clauses 16 and 17. I do not know the reason for inserting those clauses into the Bill—except, perhaps, a polite sense of irony on the part of the draftsman, who wanted to prove the difficulty of the definitional point by including a body that incorporates practically all the problems to which the rest of the Bill gives rise. Other than that, I can see no particular reason for including the body in the Bill. However, having put it in the Bill, it would have been better to limit it properly.

It is much to the credit of Treasury Ministers that they have made some major concessions and imposed some limits. It is a pity that some of the limits do not seem to apply fully and some of the statutory protections that were asked for have been turned into administrative assurances.

We shall have to wait and see. The proof of the pudding will soon be apparent. We shall see whether this body turns into another National Enterprise Board and ends up with huge guarantees, loans and investments, but carries out what are known in the jargon as the downstream activities of the PPP, in which case it will come a cropper and pick losers as every other such body always has, or whether it will be a genuine facilitator and an extension of the Treasury task force, in which case it will cost much less than £400 million in the long run and perhaps do some good. We shall see. The Bill is inadequate in the constraints that it imposes. It may or may not be inadequate in the outcome.

Having said all that, there is something going on here which is not a matter of party politics, but is associated with a view of Government that Governments ought not to have. I admit that other Governments—including Conservative ones—have frequently adopted the same view, but that makes it no better. It is not a sufficient retort for the Chief Secretary to say that others have suffered from the same disease. For a person who is engaged in burglary to say that his action is entirely legitimated by the fact that the policeman is an ex-burglar is not a sufficient argument. We have been to jail. We have been well and truly thrown out by the electorate, and the Chief Secretary and his colleagues are now the Executive. Their job is to try to make sure that the great bureaucracy of which they are in charge does not allow or force them to indulge in manoeuvres that protect the Executive from proper scrutiny. That is what is going on throughout the Bill.

The Bill has been carefully constructed, in all sorts of ways that I have enumerated and to the maximum extent possible that is compatible with the term "resource accounting", to avoid the true transparency that that concept is meant to produce and has brought about in other countries. That is a dreadful attitude to bring to such a measure.

I understand, in part at least, what will have given rise to that. I mentioned in Committee—as did others—the siren voices that Ministers will have heard, but their duty is not to listen to those voices. They have listened to them and, as a result, we have a Bill that could have been very good, but, in many respects, is very bad. I hope and trust that, in another place where the Executive does not have the power that it has here, the Bill will be much improved. Once it is much improved I hope that we shall be able to support it wholeheartedly, but, in the meanwhile, it gets at most one cheer, and that only half-heartedly.

6.49 am

Mr. David Davis: May I start by joining the Chief Secretary and my hon. Friend in thanking the staff of the House, the Clerks of the Committee, all the members who served on the Committee, the Public Accounts Committee, which laboured mightily over its views on this and, most importantly in my view, the staff of the National Audit Office? The Comptroller and Auditor General's staff worked very hard to brief on the Bill and to produce amendments, some of which the Government have accepted either in detail or in spirit. Even where they have not been accepted, the amendments have been valuable in illuminating aspects of the Bill.

For all my criticism of it, the Bill has merit. If we divide on Third Reading, I will vote in favour of the Bill. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will forgive me if I spend a little time talking about its demerits. First, however, I should like to put to one side a component of the Bill that also has merit—the aspect that relates to Partnership UK. The drawback of the involvement of Partnership UK in the Bill is that it set a pace that was perhaps faster than would have been comfortable. Had we had more time to consider some of the elements of the Bill that have caused controversy between us, we might have been able to resolve some of the questions before the Bill reached its final stage. Partnership UK had that effect. I understand the reason for the pace; I understand the merit of having Partnership UK has an instrument of Government policy. We all agree on the virtues of the private finance initiative. However, it has sat awkwardly in the Bill and could easily have been the subject of separate legislation. That might have been a better approach, but that is what we had, and we had a deal from that point of view.

The purpose of the Bill is desirable. The original intent of resource accounting was the better management of Government resources for public service. Nobody can dispute that. The two major elements of that—better measurement and control of the resources, in either costs or capital—have been debated ad nauseam. The missing component of the Bill is the better measurement of performance. We have just had a short but constructive debate on that.

The missing component, for me, is the weakest aspect of the Bill. It is the largest flaw. Even the Economic Secretary agreed that that was the major component of the motor for reform in the next couple of decades. We must all bear that in mind as we work through subsequent discussions.

My arguments throughout the Bill's proceedings have been about preserving the rights of Parliament via the Comptroller and Auditor General. Audit, access—for purposes of value for money, propriety and regularity—and validation performance measures are the three areas for argument. Throughout the Bill's progress, we have heard a wide range of reasons against them. I hope that the Minister accepts that I have sought each day to identify those reasons. That may have led to tedious repetition in the debates overnight, but I tried each time to identify the reasons and address them in the amendments before us. We were not successful in getting them accepted, but it was more of a refusal than a rebuttal in most cases. Those arguments may prove more persuasive when the Chief Secretary and I have discussions later on.

I do not blame the Ministers for this. It is more a problem between Westminster and Whitehall than a problem between parties. Whitehall does not like scrutiny, because it is painful. It is not unusual in that dislike. Most organisations that suffer scrutiny find it difficult from time to time. Also, Whitehall does not understand well the rights of Parliament. That is something to which I have returned time and again in our long discussions on the Bill.

Two components make the Bill less good than it should be. One is the weakness in the component that will be the motor of the delivery of that massive reform in public service, and the other is honest data. I am talking about Parliament's certainty about honest data, not just the certainty enjoyed by the Government or the Treasury, which has its own view. Honest data—truth—is the diet of a healthy democracy. That has been a missed opportunity when it comes to the Bill.

During our interesting proceedings, the Chief Secretary offered a review. As I said, I am minded to take part in that. I want to discuss with him the remit, the timetable, the staffing, and so on. I am sure that we shall reach a useful conclusion. I welcome that warmly.

However, there is a weakness in that plan: in carrying out the review, we may lose the opportunity to introduce primary legislation. The Banquo's ghost in this matter has been the fact that such an opportunity occurs only every few decades. There have not been many opportunities since 1866. For that reason alone, I should have preferred

[Mr. David Davis]

even permissive amendments to be accepted in this place or in the Lords, to ensure that we had the opportunity to deal with such items as parliamentary right of scrutiny, access and validation.

If, as I suspect will happen in three or six months' time, the Chief Secretary and I come to complete agreement on the proper way for the future of resource accounting and all the associated elements, the conclusion will be impossible to deliver, because there will be no primary legislation on which to hook it. I hope that we do not arrive at that conclusion. I hope that the Chief Secretary will give that matter some thought before the Bill goes to the other place.

However, if there is a Division on Third Reading, I shall vote for the Bill. Even with its weaknesses, the Bill is still a move forward in the management of good government.

6.56 am

Mr. Edward Davey: I echo the thanks given by the Chief Secretary and by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) to the staff of the Palace, because we have kept the staff up all night.

I also thank the staff of the National Audit Office and the CAG, who graciously gave advice to all members of the PAC—often giving detailed answers to our questions. That helped the deliberations of the Committee. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), who has worn two hats during the debates on the Bill—as a Liberal Democrat Member and as a member of the PAC.

The Bill is historic. It is most important. As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) said, opportunities to debate the Government accounts and to legislate on them occur infrequently. The last time was in 1921 and the time before that was in 1866. We could go into more history—as I did in Committee, when I talked about various predecessors of the CAG. However, I shall not do that now. I emphasise that this is an historic opportunity, although as the hon. Member for West Dorset pointed out, it has been a missed opportunity.

The Bill is important for two major reasons. First, it will enable better decisions to come from Whitehall—especially decisions on capital spending. Secondly, it will improve democratic accountability—the way that the House scrutinises the Government's budget.

On the first point, resource accounting and resource budgeting will remove the bias against capital investment that has existed in the public sector for so long. It has been easy to chop capital budgets; the money is saved during the first year and no one seems to notice for a while. Maintenance and basic investment have always suffered.

That has been true for decades. There have been occasional blips when the issue could no longer be avoided. However, in general, public sector investment has been sub-optimal for many decades because the public finance framework has had an in-built bias against capital expenditure. The Bill will help to remove that.

It is slightly ironic that, at the same time that we are removing that bias and creating a level playing field for public sector managers to consider capital investment, we are creating a new body—Partnerships UK—and telling the private sector that it can undertake an increasing amount of the public sector's capital investment programme. I am not against the establishment of PUK, but, as I pointed out earlier, I hope that, as there is a decent financial framework in which the public sector can consider capital investment decisions, public sector managers will be given the chance to carry out duties that, in many respects, they have managed well despite having one arm tied behind their back.

I wish to focus on the second major advantage that I see resulting from resource accounting and budgeting—improved accountability. For more than 80 years, this place has failed the people of Britain by failing to hold the Executive to account for their Departments' budgets, It has failed for three major reasons. First, we have not had the information to be able to debate properly what is going in Whitehall, the spending decisions that have been taken and how taxpayers' money is used. Secondly, even if we had had the information, we do not have the resources, even with departmental Select Committees, to analyse that information properly. We do not have the training—I know that I do not have it—to analyse the information that we have under the cash accounting system and I doubt whether we could analyse it under the new resource accounting system. Thirdly, even if we had the information and understood it, this place does not have the procedures to amend the spending decisions that have been made or to persuade the Government to change their proposals.

I pointed out on Second Reading that the last time the House rejected a spending proposal of the Government of the day was in 1919. It was an estimate on the royal palaces vote and the House rejected the Government's spending proposal for a bathroom for the then Lord Chancellor. We remember the hue and cry that occurred when the current Lord Chancellor wanted extra money for wallpaper for his apartments. However, despite that hue and cry, the House failed lamentably to do anything. That is just one example of how the Executive have all the power over the Budget. It is time that the imbalance was redressed.

I am not arguing that we should take away the Crown financial initiative. Clearly, the Executive have to be the main initiator of spending decisions. However, if this place cannot amend those decisions, does not have the information and the resources to enable it to do that and interpret the information, Ministers will never have properly to defend their budgets. They are able to make spending decisions in the full knowledge that they will probably have left their Department by the time that the scrutiny that works in the House—the Public Accounts Committee—gets to them. They are rarely held to account for the way in which they run their departmental budgets. If we could change that, we would end up with much better decisions resulting from the financial process in Whitehall.

The Chief Secretary rightly said that the Government have listened to many of the complaints made in Committee and have tabled amendments. We welcome that. The Bill is certainly a lot better on Third Reading than it was on Second Reading. However, I share many of the concerns of the hon. Member for West Dorset about definitions of accounting standards and how they should operate, performance measures and National Audit Office powers. I hope that the other place will address the issues and that Ministers will take the time to reflect and see whether they can offer a little bit more. If they cannot

give too much in the other place, I hope that the review process that the Chief Secretary has set up will result in changes.

Possibly, Ministers could introduce a Bill to the House in a year or two. That could address thoroughly all the points that we were not able to deal with in this Bill's passage through the House.

Mr. David Davis: The Chief Secretary should give that promise.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman suggests that the Chief Secretary should give that promise. That is wishful thinking. However, if he were prepared to do so, we would welcome that.

It is great that we are going to have a new system of accounts that will be used for making key decisions, particularly when the comprehensive spending review is announced later this year. Ministers must not let the process finish there but should share its development and future with Parliament. The Government ought to consider training sessions for hon. Members so that we will understand the new estimates. Members of various committees have been deluged with long papers from different Departments and agencies, but hands-on training would be helpful.

The Minister should be looking also at providing extra resources for departments and Select Committees, so that they can analyse accounts and estimates to allow us to ask the right questions.

I do not know whether the House will divide on the motion. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury and I share the view of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden that, even though the Bill is far from perfect, we should not place any obstacles in the way of implementing resource accounting and budgeting. If the House does divide, we will vote for Third Reading. That does not mean that our colleagues in the other place will not seek to amend radically the Bill that we send them.

7.6 am

Mr. Swayne: I will not detain the House long because I had my say earlier in the proceedings.

The Bill's weakness was summed up admirably by the Financial Secretary when she rejected our proposals for performance accounting in new clause 4. She made a revealing comment—that it might be misleading to release performance accounting figures that were tied to an annual reporting cycle and that it could be more appropriate for the Government to give the House more up-to-date information. Surely that is for the scrutineers to decide. It is for the House to interpret the most appropriate information, not for the Executive to choose and release information to the scrutineers.

The missed opportunity and weakness of the Bill is that the Executive will choose what it will report and reveal to those who would scrutinise it. The Treasury will have the whip hand in what it reports and standards of reporting. That cannot be good for democracy.

7.8 am

Mr. Rendel: I welcome the Bill for the most part. It will undoubtedly improve the way in which government looks after its accounts. It has been fascinating to participate in the Second and Third Reading debates and in Committee. I have learned a lot about the Public Accounts Committee, even though I am a member, and about the powers and rights of the CAG and National Audit Office.

Sadly, I have also learned how easy it is for any government to fall prey to its mandarins. I suspect that has happened during the passage of the Bill. The measure is much better than when it first came before us, but I feel sad that we have not made further progress in obvious ways towards making better use of Parliament's auditor—the Comptroller and Auditor General.

I am sad that a basically good Bill has been spoiled in that way and that we failed to seize the opportunities that were open to us. I am sad that the Government failed to accept amendments, particularly those tabled by the Public Accounts Committee, despite being comprehensively beaten in argument—particularly in Committee—and despite every effort being made to allow them to save face. Neither of the two Opposition parties made any effort to make party political capital from the Bill and at every stage we were careful to give the Government every possibility of meeting our requirements for strengthening the hand of the CAG and every opportunity to table their own amendments, which could have done the things that to our mind were obviously ripe for doing. I am very sorry that Ministers did not see fit to seize that opportunity, which they so easily could have done.

All praise is due to Labour members of the PAC who, almost to a man and woman, have been stalwart defenders of Parliament and the Committee. They rightly chose unanimously to sign the two reports on the Bill that we published, and I give them all credit for that. Doing something that one's party does not want one to do is never easy, but they correctly upheld the rights of Parliament in this matter. I am only sorry that more Members from the governing party did not take the same view in the votes as those members of the PAC.

As I said during the night, this battle is between the Executive and Parliament, not the Government and the Opposition, and I am sorry that the Executive have come out on top. That represents a failing of the workings of Parliament and I hope that we will not see it again.

7.12 am

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I echo the comments of others as the debate has, on the whole, been non-partisan and non-political during the few hours in which I have been in the Chamber tonight. Although most of those present agree that this is a good Bill, opportunities have been wasted and I hope that the Government will at least consider some of those when it reaches the other place. There is no doubt that a move from cash accounting to resource and appropriations accounting represents a step change in the way that public money is accounted for and scrutinised by Parliament. The statement of liabilities—including contingent liabilities—and, in particular, the statement and register of assets will make it much easier to see where public funds are being applied.

I welcome the register of assets, which took a huge amount of work to compile, although I suspect that it is a long way from perfect. As my hon. Friend the Member

[Mr. Clifton-Brown]

for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) made clear, a large number of assets have no proper value placed on them at all and it is essential that we consider every single asset that the Government utilise to make sure that we cannot utilise it better to achieve a return. That is an example of how resource accounting will help Parliament to uncover the workings—or rather the non-workings—of government.

We could have improved the system still further. It is a pity that we did not give the Comptroller and Auditor General greater access to any body in which public money is involved and glaring gaps remain even though he has access to about three quarters of all Government non-departmental public bodies and other service sector companies. Paragraph 42 of the fourth report of the Public Accounts Committee makes it clear that there is no reason at all why the CAG should not have at least as much access as the Departments themselves and that a great many resources are wasted in negotiating access. I accept that access is often freely granted, but the time taken in negotiating it is completely wasted.

I remind the House that it was the Camelot affair that caused the Government to change the law—I praise them for that—to give access to Camelot so that the CAG and the Public Accounts Committee could scrutinise the better workings of the lottery. That is an example of the Government listening to the Public Accounts Commission, the Public Accounts Committee and the CAG, and being prepared to change the law. I cannot understand why they were prepared to change the law in that case, but not in other significant areas of Government spending.

Those areas include 200 departmental private companies, covering an annual spend of £2 billion. Some £4 billion of public pay processing by the Government is not scrutinised, and £5.2 billion of training opportunities in the new deal initiative are not covered. There is no good logical reason why those areas should not be properly scrutinised by the CAG, the NAO and the Public Accounts Committee. As I have already stated, a big opportunity has been missed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. May I say to the hon. Gentleman that on Third Reading we should be discussing what is in the Bill, and not what has failed to go into it.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Bill alludes to performance targets, and we could have enlarged on those. Perhaps another place will need to consider that issue because, although it is not in the Bill, it may well have been put into the Bill by the time it becomes law, which is why I make a plea to the Government at this late stage.

As I made clear in my earlier speech, the CAG has already built up great expertise in the value-for-money investigations that he already performs. He produces 160 valuable reports each year, and the Government and everybody else benefit from them hugely because they expose shortcomings. The CAG has already built up a great database of international comparators that could be used by each Department to produce performance indicators, such as output and validation measures.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset made it clear that a Conservative Government would introduce those performance indicators. I believe that once the Government have had proper discussions with the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis)—and others, they will want to include those indicators in the Bill.

There is worldwide recognition of the expertise of the CAG and the National Audit Office, and it is folly not to use it. In avenues of Government and in Whitehall there seems to be a suspicion of the NAO, which is totally misplaced and unfounded. If we have a body of expertise within the parliamentary sphere, we should make best use of it.

If the Government were to introduce those performance indicators, they could draw on the NAO's expertise. After all, one of the most valuable parts of being audited by the CAG is often the discussions that take place during that process. We could learn from that expertise and produce performance indicators. I have no doubt that those indicators would be refined over time so that they became more effective.

When we were in government, the Department of the Environment used to produce a valuable annual report, showing in tabulated form not only how well the previous year's performance indicators had been met, but the indicators for the next year. For some reason the Department of the Environment decided—perhaps when it became the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—that it did not like to be held accountable in that way and stopped producing the report.

We, the Government and the public could all benefit from the model. Setting performance indicators would be a further step change in the way in which public money is accounted for and used. I leave the House with those thoughts.

7.21 am

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): It is axiomatic that the central purpose of this place is to hold the Executive to account, principally on public expenditure. Therefore, as has been widely said in the debate, the Bill is important. I agree with my hon. Friends that, on balance, it improves matters rather than making them worse.

However, I wonder whether, even with the Bill, we have set the highest standards that should apply. The standards of accounting in the public sector should be clearly and demonstrably higher than those applying in the private sector. If we deal with private sector companies, we almost always do so by choice, as a voluntary act, whereas when we deal with public expenditure, we deal with moneys that are gathered by compulsion, with the perceived threat that refusal to pay for that public expenditure could lead to prison or to the full sanction of the law, and ultimately force, being deployed.

I have some concerns that even though the Bill has been improved during its passage through the House, it falls short of the highest standards that we might expect of it.

I welcome the fact that, in his speech on Third Reading, the Chief Secretary referred to his intention to revolutionise the arrangements that he had inherited and

which date back to the time to Gladstone. This Administration, with Lord Jenkins as their ideological mentor, usually favour perpetuating anything to do with the regime of Mr. Gladstone.

We have seen that across the board the Government are following the Gladstonian example, slashing defence expenditure, undermining the integrity of the United Kingdom, pursuing a botched foreign policy, and radicalising for the sake of it. I welcome anything that results in moving away from Gladstonian principles. *[Laughter.]*

I notice that the Liberal Democrats laugh at that. I note that the example given by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) of the last time that the House rebelled against outrageous Government expenditure occurred the last time that we had a Liberal Prime Minister. Perhaps that is a coincidence, perhaps not.

Mr. Edward Davey: May I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the last two occasions on which the House reformed the public accounts were under a Liberal Prime Minister as well?

Mr. Collins: That may well be true. The question is what principles underlay the reforms. Perhaps we should not go back into the history of that because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, that Liberal Prime Minister produced another constitutional innovation. When he was replaced by a Conservative Prime Minister, the Conservative Prime Minister had to introduce emergency legislation to prevent the sale of honours, which was the practice of that Liberal Prime Minister.

I was interested in an earlier remark by the hon. Gentleman. He said that he hoped that one of the changes that would come about as a result of the Bill would be that it would cease to be as easy as it has been to cut public expenditure. He suggested that that was particularly relevant to capital spending, and said that it had been too easy in the past to cut capital expenditure.

Given the history of the past 80 or 90 years, the progression of public expenditure and the ever-greater share of national income consumed by the public sector, many of us, at least on the Conservative Benches, would question whether it has indeed been too easy to cut public spending.

If the system moves towards a better basis for deciding on the allocation of resources in the national economy, I hope that that will not be on the presumption that more should be spent, rather than that the amount spent should be spent more efficiently. Ideally, less should be spent and more benefit should be derived from it, which is what the private sector is expected to produce day in, day out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) made a series of interesting contributions, which fulfilled the PAC's remit. I share his view that the PAC has done its duty to the House and provided excellent recommendations and reports on a non-partisan, cross-party basis. He pointed out that one of the tests of the measure's effectiveness was whether we genuinely moved towards evidence-based policy. It is important to seize the opportunities that the Bill presents. The Chief Secretary is keen on that, and I hope that he will be able to do that, not least in the review that he recently announced.

I suspect that the Government will receive a mandate later in our proceedings. They must recognise that it is a mandate for a rolling review process. They will not receive a mandate on the basis that the measure is perfect as it stands. I hope that a rolling review process will be established.

I am worried that some of the characteristics of the usual process of modernisation are inherent in the Bill. In that, perhaps I am less generous than my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). The Government often use the word modernisation; I am sure that they would use it to describe the purpose of the Bill. Modernisation often becomes a cover for a reduction in Government accountability for their actions to the House and the electorate. Several contributions have made clear the way in which the Bill may undermine the Executive's responsibility to the House. The Public Accounts Committee said that it was worried about that.

I accept that the Bill has changed, and the Chief Secretary pointed out that several concessions had been made. However, the December report of the Public Accounts Committee states that the Committee was worried that the Bill might lead to

> a reduction in the effectiveness of the House's arrangements for controlling public expenditure and for holding government departments accountable for Supply.

We should be extremely worried about that.

We should also be worried about another constant feature of the modernisation process: the reduction in the powers of the House. During the debate, we have heard examples of the way in which the powers of the House might, at most, be left as they were, but might also be undermined. The list of concessions that the Chief Secretary invited the House to welcome included a statement in the Bill that the Comptroller and Auditor General acts on behalf of the House. That is not a concession; it ought to be an acknowledgement of principles that were always important. I worry if the Chief Secretary believes that we should be grateful for that.

The Bill might constitute a further example of the way in which systems that had the merit of tradition and of having been proved in practice are replaced by some form of experimentation. I share the anxieties of the Public Accounts Committee about whether the new system will be ready to operate when the old system is phased out. The worst circumstances for starting resource accounting are those in which Departments are not ready to begin. The number of Departments that were clearly not ready for the new system at the end of last year is worrying. Several of the accounts of Departments that tried to move on to the new system had to be qualified. That does not inspire confidence.

The final example of modernisation and the way in which it might apply to the Bill is that, all too often, one finds an agenda behind Bills to increase the power at the centre of Government. Many hon. Members have mentioned the balance between the Executive and the legislature. However, within the Executive, we are moving steadily away from the principle of the Prime Minister being primus inter pares towards Downing street being all powerful. The Bill refers constantly to the Treasury, but we all know who the First Lord of the Treasury is.

[Mr. Collins]

A number of us would be concerned about anything that gives the Treasury, broadly interpreted, immense power to be judge and jury in its own cause and able to decide, for example, whether performance targets have been met, or whether progress is being made towards them. In an era in which there are vast strategic communications units at No. 10 Downing street, an era of spin, we would feel anxiety about whether the legislation properly balances the structures of our government. As I have said, the balance must be within the branches of government as well as between them.

It is a reasonably safe prediction that before noon the Government will have their way on this legislation. Before that happens, we need to put on record as a House that we welcome the legislation, to the extent that we do, simply on the basis that we believe that anything that produces greater clarification for our constituents must be a good thing; that we all welcome anything that makes the Executive feel in practice, if not in theory, that they need to account for themselves properly to the legislature; and that they are being given a very qualified mandate, partly on the basis of the concessions they have already made and partly on the basis of the review that they have announced.

But the Government should not believe that the House will be giving them today carte blanche to do whatever they like or in any sense a blank cheque. The passage of the Bill is very much on the basis of legislation that has to be structured in a way that strengthens Parliament and does not undermine it. If that is the effect of the legislation, it will be a very welcome departure from the history of this Administration for most of the last three years, which, sadly, has been to shift very much in the opposite direction with regard to the powers and privileges of this place.

7.32 am

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): I do not have much to add to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), but I think it is worth mentioning that I am probably one of the very few people in the House, certainly on this side, who have worked for a nationalised industry and have experienced the problems of cash limits and cash accounting at first hand.

The failure to distinguish between revenue and capital spending has dogged Governments for many years and encouraged them in many wrong decisions. It is extraordinary, though, that in 2000 we should be debating in this Chamber the merits of having profit and loss accounts, balance sheets and a proper cash flow statement for the public accounts.

I would add in passing that we should never place too much confidence in any accounting system. All that a good accounting system does over a bad accounting system is to reduce the amount of detective work required to establish what is going on.

I wish to mention just three aspects of the Bill. First, no accounting system, however good, is a replacement for good government. Difficult decisions will have to be made in the future, as they were in the past. The accounting system may be an aid to good government, but it will not make difficult decisions any easier to make, particularly with the pressures that Government have on revenue and current spending over long-term capital spending.

In an earlier debate, my hon. Friend talked about the water industry and the way in which it was allowed to run down over many years. It ran down not because we did not have an understanding of depreciation, but simply because Governments of both colours felt that pressure on current spending was that much greater than the longer-term requirements of the water industry.

Secondly, if the accounts are to have the confidence of the public, and of the House, they must be put together in accordance with independent standards. There is genuine concern throughout the House over the role of the Treasury. Although sometimes poachers make good gamekeepers, one cannot be a poacher and a gamekeeper at the same time. The dead hand of the Treasury throughout the Bill is an issue of serious concern.

My main, and third, concern relates to an issue mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset. The ultimate test of the Bill is whether, in the long run, the House has greater control over the Executive and more power to scrutinise it. It is, I think, no coincidence that the growth of the Executive has been mirrored by the decline of public confidence in the whole parliamentary system. Until we can regain power over the Executive, the democratic traditions of this country will be permanently weakened. The Bill gave us an opportunity to do that, but I am afraid that it was missed. Although I broadly share the view of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) that there is enough good in the Bill for it to be passed, that opportunity was wasted.

7.35 am

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I think that we have all taken stock of the Bill, and realise that it is about very much more than resource accounting.

I want to stress three points. First, as has been clearly demonstrated, the Bill is about Parliament's holding the Executive to account in regard to public expenditure. Conservative Members feel that the Government may not have best served their interests by not taking more notice of the PAC's proposals, and that it is a pity that they did not do so. They were, I think, beaten in argument on nearly all the key points—and, as others have pointed out, this is not a party political matter.

I echo the tribute paid by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) to the Labour Members on the PAC, who have valiantly supported proposals to uphold the rights of Parliament. This is a battle between the Executive and Parliament, and, after only two and three quarter years in power, the Government seem to us to have fallen into the hands of the mandarins.

Secondly, the debate has confirmed the need for an independent body to prescribe accounting principles. That is particularly necessary, given the introduction of resource accounting. Indeed, it is questionable whether the move to resource accounting will be correct or sustainable without its inclusion.

Thirdly—many will have forgotten this; we dealt with it so long ago—the Bill includes provisions for the establishment of Partnerships UK. We feel that there is still an important need—again, this is very much in the

Government's interests—to clarify the territory and role of Partnerships UK. Will it merely continue the useful role played by the Treasury team to date, or will it develop a major role as an equity investor with significant potential conflicts of interest?

The change to resource accounting is welcomed in principle by virtually the whole House. As we are all aware, it has been planned for some five or six years, but there is a long way to go. There are a large number of assets not included in the register of assets, and major areas of expenditure not included and not to be scrutinised. We hope that the negotiations between the Government and the PAC will improve the machinery for proper accountability to Parliament, and that the Government will take on board the need for the CAG to have proper access and to be empowered to audit in appropriate circumstances.

We will not vote against the Bill, but there remains much to be put right in the other place, where the ultimate test will be whether parliamentary control and scrutiny of the Executive is improved or reduced.

7.40 am

Miss Melanie Johnson: At 7.40 in the morning, I will be extremely brief, not least because, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has pointed out, the Opposition have kept us from our beds for 16 hours during a long debate of dubious quality. Much of it has been of dubious quality, although there were exceptions. *[Interruption.]* Some Opposition Members who are making noises have not been here all night. Indeed, they have not been here at all, so they had better be quiet. My right hon. Friend has pointed out to me that my remarks are all that stand between Members going home to their beds or to their business for the day, so I will be brief.

It is a privilege to bring to a close the House's deliberations on the Bill. I pay tribute, as my right hon. Friend has already generously done, to all those who have contributed to the Bill. I join him in his thanks. I would be the first to acknowledge that the scrutiny of the Bill has improved it, although tonight is not a good example. However, in general, the scrutiny has improved it. It was improved in the Standing Committee in particular.

The Bill's purpose is important. It is to put on a footing the way in which we use our capital, so that we can see how it is used and can account for it properly, as the private sector has done for probably hundreds of years—certainly for more than 100 years. It is important that we have made the change.

It is important to bring Partnerships UK into being, which will enable us to modernise our key public services and to ensure that, in the long term, the type of deal-making skills that are available temporarily only in the Treasury task force will be available to the public sector.

As several hon. Members have mentioned this evening and on earlier occasions—I mention in particular the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey)—the Bill is historic and heralds a revolution in many ways. They have both welcomed it in their own way and supported it.

It is important to note that the right hon. Gentleman, who is Chairman of the PAC, emphasised that he would vote for the Bill, were it to be put to a vote. He believes that it has merit and heralds a revolution. He has said that he is minded to join the committee that the Chief Secretary is setting up to review the audit and accountability issues on a wider basis.

What is probably most important about the Bill is that it will cause us to look properly again at the way we use public money in relation to public services, and at efficient and effective provision of those public services. It will cause us to look harder at the performance indicators that we use, at the way in which we assess whether we are making good use of that money, and at the way in which we decide what is important in achieving the outcomes that we set ourselves and in building policy making on evidence.

All those considerations are important. They have merited much of the discussion that we have given them. I am grateful to all Members who have contributed positively to those conclusions.

I will not detain anyone any further. I have to be elsewhere in a very short time. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Scotch Whisky

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

7.44 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I am grateful—I think that hon. Members will understand how grateful I am now—for the opportunity to initiate this debate. As I stand here, I am reminded of the often told after-dinner joke about the hon. Member who dreamt that he was delivering a speech to the House and woke up to discover that he was.

I should declare my interest in the subject, as the treasurer of the all-party Scotch whisky group; I have a still greater interest in the debate as the Member of Parliament for Kilmarnock and Loudoun. In 1820, John Walker opened a shop in Kilmarnock, starting a wine and spirits business that laid the foundations for the highly successful brand that bears his nan.e: Johnnie Walker—the best selling blended whisky in the world. The business grew throughout the 19th century, until, in 1909, Tom Browne drew the striding man. Although recently, for marketing reasons, he has changed direction, the Johnnie Walker striding man has bestrode the world since then as the symbol of a truly great global industry.

By 1920, Johnnie Walker was sold in more than 120 countries. In these days of globalisation, what commodity other than Scotch whisky can claim to be in every bar or cafe and in almost every hotel world wide? All of that has been has been achieved by people from a small country perched on the north-west shoulder of Europe, with a population of about 5 million people.

In 1998, the Fraser of Allander Institute estimated that a total of £3.5 billion of Scottish output was generated annually by the Scotch whisky industry. Based on 1997 data, the Scotch whisky industry directly employs 12,000 people in Scotland and supports another 28,500 in the wider community. The fact is that 10.4 per cent. of Scottish agricultural jobs and 4 per cent. of all manufacturing jobs depend on Scotch whisky, and that 5 per cent. of the total Scottish work force—or one job in every 54 in Scotland—depends on the whisky industry. Across the United Kingdom, a total of 60,000 people are dependent on the whisky industry. Moreover, the whisky industry is a Government-friendly one, as about £1 billion in taxes is contributed each year by it to the Exchequer.

In my own constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, the United Distillers and Vintners packaging plant, in Hill Street, Kilmarnock, and the distribution centre, at Hurlford, provide employment to more than 620 people. When I visited the Kilmarnock plant yesterday—with my colleague Margaret Jamieson, who is the Member of the Scottish Parliament representing Kilmarnock and Loudoun—we saw premium Scotch whisky being bottled in bottles of every shape and size, for every corner of the globe. The Kilmarnock plant—those 620 people—will produce 7 million cases of premium Scotch whisky this year alone.

All that has been achieved and sustained despite severe economic pressure and major recent adverse circumstances, such as the abolition of duty free sales for internal European Union traveland the large reduction in exports to Asia, in 1998, following the Asian slump. Although there has been some recovery—in 1999—in Asia, there has been a corresponding sharp decrease in export volume to Latin America. Other adverse circumstances include structural discrimination in the tax system and the application of trade barriers in many global markets, including across the European Union.

One of the few compensations that the industry enjoys is European Union export refunds for cereals, but that is now clearly under threat. The export rebate or refund schemes operated by the EU are payable on basic agricultural products such as eggs, rice, milk, sugar and cereals when they are contained in processed products such as whisky and beer, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and chocolates and biscuits.

The purpose of the refunds is to provide compensation on non-EU sales for the higher cost of using EU-sourced raw materials that is a consequence of the price support mechanism under the common agricultural policy. Although total exports of Scotch whisky represent about £2 billion per annum, 60 per cent. of that total is exported beyond the European Union and attracts the potential of that refund. For the Scotch whisky industry, refunds are essential to assist companies to maintain competitiveness in their critical non-European Union markets, where they compete against directly comparable products such as American whiskey and pale Japanese imitations.

The importance of the assistance was acknowledged at the time of the UK and Irish accession to the EEC in 1972, when it was recognised that it was necessary to ensure supplies of European Community raw materials to the spirits industry at a fair and reasonable price.

That recognition was reflected in protocol 19 of the UK and Irish accession treaties, which requires the Council to decide the necessary measurements to facilitate

> the use of community cereals in the manufacture of spirituous beverages obtained from cereals, and in particular of whisky, exported to third countries.

That protocol, which also serves the interests of our farmers, is still relevant today and provides for this country and for the Irish a unique basis for the full maintenance of export refunds for the spirits industry. Importantly, it provides a unique basis for refunds on any of the EU cereals used in whisky production, which includes maize and wheat as well as barley.

Over many years, the European Community has attempted to remove or reduce distillers' rights to obtain refunds. The current attack on the distillers' rights has its roots in the settlement of the Uruguay round of the world trade talks in 1995. There, the EU agreed to expenditure ceilings for export refunds. That agreement, coupled with decisions on the EU budget taken at the Berlin summit in March, generated pressures on the budgeted provision for processed products export refunds late in 1999. The European Commission estimated that demand for refunds was likely to outstrip the agreed budget. For the months of November and December 1999, the Commission proposed flat-rate cuts of 4.5 per cent. to the non-annexe 1 refund rates for dairy products, cereals and sugar.

The UK and other member states criticised that decision. However, despite the lack of support from a single member state, the Commission promulgated and applied the regulations that imposed the flat-rate cut across the non-annexe 1 refund regime.

A flat-rate cut was only a short-term strategy. In November, the Commission issued a communication to the Council of Agriculture Ministers on the longer-term

strategy. It controversially recommended abolishing or reducing refunds for some products, such as Scotch whisky, without any change in the refunds available to other sectors. The Commission has once again specifically targeted spirits for reduction.

The Agriculture Council is due to consider the proposals in March. That is why the debate is timeous. If the paper is agreed, the detailed rate of reduction in the rebates will probably be set thereafter by working groups. Each member state has a representative in each working group, but decisions are taken on the basis of the qualified majority. If the paper is agreed, it may become impossible to prevent the loss of cereal refunds.

It is important that, in March, the Government do not nod through a general, undetailed proposal without knowing the potential detailed impact on distillers. While the flat-rate 4.5 per cent. across-the-board reduction will probably be removed if the working group follows the proposal set out in the Commission's November communication, cereal refunds for whisky may be singled out for cuts that do not apply to other sectors. That is why the proposals must be challenged at the March Agriculture Council. Any reductions now could be the thin end of the wedge for the industry.

Cereal costs are a significant element of the cost of production of Scotch whisky. The industry estimates that for new make grain whisky, cereal raw material costs, after the export refund is paid, are about 60 to 70 per cent. of primary production costs: for malt whisky, they are about 50 to 55 per cent.

The impact of any reduction in refunds is illustrated by the differences between EU and world maize prices. In April 1999, EU prices were 47 per cent. above world prices, and the premium in November 1999 was 58 per cent. World prices fell by 10 per cent. over the period. However, the net EU price for Scottish distillers, even with their export refunds, rose by 7.2 per cent. A broadly similar picture applies to wheat and barley.

Scotch whisky will suffer an increasing competitive disadvantage if, as the Commission proposes, spirit refunds are reduced further or eliminated altogether, unless efforts are renewed to reform the CAP and reduce EU cereal prices to world levels; or there is a full and unfettered access to world supplies; or an alternative form of compensation is devised for the gap between EU and world raw material prices.

It is unfair and anti-economic to expect the industry to carry the can for the failure of the Community to agree adequate reforms to the CAP in Agenda 2000, which would have reduced the need for export refunds by aligning Community prices more closely with world market prices.

The industry also questions the robustness of the Commission's economic analysis, the choice of product sectors for refund reduction or elimination and the principle of targeting itself.

Reportedly, there is a compensatory measure. The package of measures proposed by the Commission includes a proposal for more flexible increased access to inward processing relief, a relief that enables manufacturers to import basic commodities tariff free for incorporation and re-export in processed form. Distillers with longer memories recall that IPR and applications made under it were disagreeably complicated and bureaucratic.

The view of the industry is that IPR does not even begin to represent a solution if the process is not made smooth and easy for processors, and frankly, that is highly unlikely.

IPR as an alternative compensatory mechanism has, however, the significant disadvantage that it will drive manufacturers outside the Community where they can obtain their raw materials at world market prices with obvious consequences for jobs and for the market in agricultural commodities within the EU. That cannot be a long-term solution. The only real solution is to dismantle EU intervention pricing and to allow free market pricing in raw materials such as cereals within the EU, but that can be done only when there is reform of the CAP price structure.

In the meantime, the Commission's proposal to target spirits appears to be contrary to the UK's accession treaty, and discriminatory. As the issue is expected to come before the March Agricultural Council this debate is timely.

I merely ask my hon. Friend to assure the House—and the industry, which will pay attention to this debate—that the strongest possible defence of the industry's vital contribution to the economy will be mounted.

7.58 am

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) and the Minister for allowing me to participate in the debate. There are two large whisky companies in my constituency—Allied Distillers and J&B. Sadly, J&B is closing down as a result of the merger between Grand Metropolitan and Guinness. There has been a loyal and committed work force there for 30 years, however, and record production is still being hammered out week in, week out, and will continue to be until the closure in a few months' time.

The industry and its work force are also extremely good for the economy. Allied Distillers has consolidated its position in my constituency and looks forward to a good future in Dumbarton. It is also a good future for the country. As my hon. Friend said, there are sales worth £2 billion. For every job that is created in the whisky industry, another three or four are created outside the industry. Some 50,000 to 60,000 jobs in Scotland are being supported by the whisky industry and every worker in the industry contributes £80,000 to the Treasury as a result of the duty that is paid on the product. So it is a precious industry and I ask the Minister to be vigilant about issues that affect it such as export refunds. It is felt that the Scotch whisky industry is being singled out. It cannot afford to be singled out because of the workers and their commitment to the industry and because of the cash flow that it produces for the Government.

I know that the Government have listened carefully in the past few years. I congratulate them on the duty freezes, but, in the long term, there must be a structure on adequate duty levels. I look forward, along with my colleagues and Ministers, to ensuring that in the long term there is a level playing field for the Scotch whisky industry, and that it goes from strength to strength.

8 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) on his good fortune in securing this debate? When I first saw that he had done so, I felt sorry that such an important debate was to take place last thing at night, and that it would have been much better to have a daytime debate. However, I did not realise that my wish would be fulfilled in such exhausting circumstances.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his choice of subject. As he proved in his speech, this is an important subject. He said, quite rightly, that it is a timely debate, given what is happening in the European Union Agriculture Council and the fact that this item will be discussed at the March meeting.

The points made by my hon. Friend were pertinent and salient. He demonstrated obvious concern for his constituents as well as knowledge of the industry and its importance to Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole.

I also appreciate the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), who, understandably, spoke with feeling about the industry in his constituency. Other hon. Friends with an interest in the subject are here, even after the all-night debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Dumfries (Mr. Brown), for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe), for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) and for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) are all concerned about the whisky industry and its economic importance.

The debate might seem technical if we talk in terms of export refunds for non-annexe 1 products under the common agricultural policy. It can sound like a minor subject, but what is at stake economically is very important. The whisky industry is important to the economy of Scotland and the United Kingdom. It is also important as a direct employer and in providing related jobs.

The industry is also a very valuable export earner for the United Kingdom as a whole. We are talking about exports worth £2 billion annually, of which about £1.2 billion is exported outside the European Union. Those are all reasons why the Government are determined to achieve the best possible outcome for the industry and our other industries that are affected by export refunds.

In many ways, this is not a new issue in European or agricultural politics. When I was a member of the Agriculture Committee in the European Parliament, we were frequently and understandably lobbied by the Scotch whisky industry and others that benefited from and needed export refunds under the common agricultural policy. What my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun has described this morning is the latest twist in a familiar tale. As he pointed out, the whisky export refund is one of a series of export refunds paid under Community rules to compensate exporters for the higher prices of agricultural raw materials supported under the common agricultural policy.

Other industries also receive such export support—other spirit drinks industries, including gin and vodka, but also, importantly, processed food and drink, confectionery, cakes, biscuits and so on, as well as pharmaceuticals. Many interests need to be taken into account.

My hon. Friend pointed out the reasons for the latest form of pressure on such export refunds. He correctly explained that under World Trade Organisation agreements, the EU is committed and obliged to make progressive reductions. That applies to export refunds both for agricultural raw materials, the annexe 1 products, and for processed agricultural products—the non-annexe 1 products on which the debate has focused.

Specific reductions now need to be found in time for the EU's next budget year, beginning in October. At that time, the budget ceiling for non-annexe 1 products will be 415 million euro; that is almost 200 million euro less than the projected expenditure for the current year. In order to keep this year's expenditure within the budgetary ceiling set by the Berlin European Council in March 1999, since last December a cut of 4.5 per cent. has already been imposed by the Commission on all non-annexe 1 export refunds.

As I am sure my hon. Friend and colleagues are aware, the Council of Ministers was not happy with the Commission's approach. It made clear its view that, in future, any adjustments to export refunds that were necessary to meet WTO and budgetary commitments should be governed by a strategic and targeted approach rather than across-the-board cuts in refunds. The Council pressed for speedy progress of the Commission's communication on that issue in time for Ministers to give it further consideration at the forthcoming Agriculture Council.

The amount of targeting and the number of across-the-board measures remain vexed issues. The problem is not helped by the fact that the Commission's thinking and the full effects of its proposals are not yet clear. My hon. Friend referred to that point. The details of any proposed reductions are not clear. We need a better idea of the detailed impact on distillers. I assure my hon. Friend that we will challenge those proposals at the March Agriculture Council.

The general approach of the Commission's proposed strategy is known. It would be to withdraw eligibility for non-annexe 1 export refunds from a range of products; reduce rates for others; and provide more flexible access to inward processing relief to enable processors to access raw materials at world prices.

The Commission has the competence to act on most of those strategic measures, including the proposal to reduce the export refund on cereal-based spirit drinks—whose main impact would be on the UK in the Scotch whisky industry—although white spirits, such as gin and vodka, and beer would be similarly affected.

The pain of any reductions or eliminations will affect other industries and other countries. For example, in Germany, there is a particular worry about the effect on beer export refunds and on a particular class of yogurt that is exported. In Finland, Denmark, Austria and France, there are a variety of concerns. However, I am well aware of the concern in the whisky industry as to the extent and likely impact of the proposals.

Although it is within the Commission's competence to propose such measures, it is important to remember that it must also meet treaty obligations—one of which is protocol 19 to the UK treaty of accession, as my hon. Friend mentioned. The Government fully agree that the provisions of the protocol must be respected and we shall

seek to ensure that any action taken to implement the Commission's approach is compatible with the provisions of protocol 19.

Treaties of accession and protocols to treaties of accession are important. They were introduced to try to cover areas in which particular countries who were joining the European Community, now the European Union, could have certain key interests recognised that would otherwise have been in danger of being overlooked, because they were special to a particular country. Therefore, we are very conscious of the importance that the industry attaches not just to the protocol, but to its importance in the overall treaty of UK accession.

I assure my hon. Friend that discussions have taken place at an official level. My Department has been in close contact with the Scotch Whisky Association and with the sectors of the food and drink industry where the measures would have an impact. Further consultations involving Ministers will take place between now and the March Council. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has plans to hold such meetings over the next few weeks.

There are also discussions between Ministers in my Department and the Scottish Parliament. For example, I spoke yesterday with the Scottish Minister for Rural Affairs, Ross Finnie, about these and other matters. Indeed, there are regular meetings between my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Ministers in the devolved Administrations. We are fully aware of the importance of keeping in touch on these and other issues.

It is also important—I stress this to my hon. Friend—to get detailed information from the industry. The whisky industry and others need to provide us with all the possible ammunition in terms of fighting this particular European battle. We have a responsibility to consider the effects of the different proposals on all those parts of our industry that are at present entitled to export refunds. Given that we accept that world trade commitments must be honoured and are ultimately an important part of the agonisingly slow common agricultural policy reform process, we need to respect them.

At the same time, however, as UK Ministers we have a responsibility to ensure that our industries are not unfairly treated. To help to do that we need as much detailed information as we can get. In particular, we have asked the whisky industry for detailed analysis that would help us challenge the Commission's view that whisky is insensitive to the rate of refund.

I agree strongly with my hon. Friend's analysis of the real cause of the problem and with his belief that the best long-term solution is fundamentally changing the common agricultural policies and those protectionist aspects that cause our industry such difficulty. The UK is in the vanguard of the reform process. We need to push ahead with our allies—and we do have some allies in that process—to achieve agricultural reform.

I thank my hon. Friend and other colleagues, and I assure the House that the words spoken tonight will be important as a contribution to Government thinking and their defence of this crucial and successful industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes past Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 1 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

PRIVATE BUSINESS

Order for further consideration, as amended, read. To be considered further on Wednesday 8 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Development Banks

1. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If she will make a statement on the role of development banks in her Department's policies. [111173]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): The Government are a major shareholder in, and work closely with, all the key multilateral development banks—the World Bank, the Asian Development bank, the Inter-American Development bank, the African Development bank, the Caribbean Development bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. I am the United Kingdom governor of the development banks, and an alternate governor of the EBRD. UK representatives sit on the boards of all the banks, which have the capacity to contribute significantly to development. The regional banks have special authority in their regions. Since May 1997, we have worked to ensure that all the development banks focus their efforts on achieving international poverty eradication targets.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the right hon. Lady for that reply. The state of the road network in Mozambique has significantly impaired relief and rescue efforts. However, a 30-month programme for rehabilitation of Mozambique's roads is due for appraisal by the African Development bank at the end of May. What can the Department for International Development do to pressure banks to develop infrastructure in countries prone to natural disasters?

Clare Short: The African Development bank went through a bad phase of overlending and inefficiency, but has become much more efficient under the leadership of President Kabbaj. I believe that the public sector should contribute to road building where private finance cannot work. In Mozambique, that idea applies largely to rural roads, which make a difference if people are to improve their livelihoods by getting their crops to market or to get their children to school.

Africa has suffered because roads have been built but not maintained. We must encourage the private sector to become involved and the public sector to organise itself to maintain roads. The African Development bank should help to achieve a network in collaboration with the private sector, and the public sector should help rural people to have basic roads. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that Mozambique needs masses of them.

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): It is greatly to the Government's credit that we can talk more widely about organisations in which we are major shareholders. Particularly welcome is the Asian Development bank's recent commitment to the eradication of poverty as one of its major purposes. Does my right hon. Friend welcome that commitment, and does she hope that other bodies will follow suit?

Clare Short: I do, indeed, and I admire the leadership given to the Asian Development bank by President Chino. My hon. Friend's point is similar to that made by the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne): we need feasibility studies and regulatory systems that will bring private sector investment into major infrastructure, and we need to use the development banks to strengthen social sectors and focus on poverty. President Chino has done that effectively, and I am very impressed.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that the African Development bank can play a vital role in the eventual reconstruction of Mozambique. Does she agree, however, that the clear priority today is to save the lives of the 100,000 people stranded in trees, on roofs and on high ground in a fellow Commonwealth country? I thank the right hon. Lady for what her Department has already done, but is it not obvious that too few helicopters are flying in Mozambique? Why will she not combine forces with the Ministry of Defence, charter heavy-lift aircraft and fly a batch of British helicopters and pilots to Mozambique before it is too late?

Clare Short: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's praise for my officials, who are working enormously hard. I fear that the situation in Mozambique is terrible, and that it is going to get much worse. Another cyclone is on the way, another river is about to overflow, and Caborra Basso must be allowed to overflow if it is not to put more people at risk.

Since I made my statement to the House on Monday, we have found some more helicopters. On the point about the Ministry of Defence, however, I must say that my Department's duty—the instruction that I have given my officials—is to find, from whatever source, the most rapidly available equipment and people who can be sent into theatre as quickly as possible. If the Ministry of Defence can help, that is good, but we must not delay just so that we can have equipment or personnel from our own Ministry. We must deploy whatever we can.

We have found two extra helicopters, which will be working tomorrow. We are sending to Mozambique tomorrow two planes and 30 UK volunteers who are expert in emergencies—including fire brigade personnel. We are sending 79 boats with engines: even with all the helicopters we could get, we could not get people out without boats. We need helicopters and boats. We will drop boats so that people can get into them, and we will need bigger boats to pull them in. We will do everything in our power to put in whatever equipment we can as quickly as possible. If the MOD is the best source, we will use it; if not, we will not.

Mr. Streeter: I am sure that the whole House welcomes what the Secretary of State says, but our responsibility is to do all that we can today. If it takes two days to fly helicopters down there from Europe, surely the sooner we get them flying, saving lives and distributing food, the better. It was obvious from the response on Monday that co-operation between her Department and the Ministry of Defence is not all that it might be. Will she make it a key priority to co-operate with the Ministry of Defence and get more helicopters working to save lives today?

Clare Short: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman is misinformed. There is absolutely no problem about co-operation with the Ministry of Defence. He may remember that, when Hurricane Mitch struck, we happened to have a British ship full of helicopters in the area. We have to be opportunistic in emergencies and make use of what is available as rapidly as possible. Even if people manage to cling on to their trees, they will not have water and food unless we get to them. We are talking about human lives that need to be saved very quickly. I have no preference for any source, and that is my instruction to my officials.

The problem is not shortage of money, either, but getting resources deployed in theatre quickly. If the Ministry of Defence can help, we will take that help; if not, we will go elsewhere. We should use MOD forces when they can get there quickly, but we should not be biased towards them and make things slower and more expensive. That would be very foolish.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): My understanding is that the Royal Air Force has hired an Antonov, which is on its way carrying helicopters that will be deployed within 48 hours. Is that correct?

Clare Short: I hope that my hon. Friend is right, but I have not heard that, and I think that I would have if it were the case.

Development Education

2. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What steps she is taking to encourage the promotion of education on development issues in schools. [111174]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): In the White Paper we said that all children in the United Kingdom should be educated about development issues so that they can understand the key global issues that will shape their lives, so our Department has participated in curriculum reviews throughout the UK and secured enhanced opportunities for development issues to be included in the mainstream curriculum. We are working to ensure that teachers have the back-up to achieve that.

We have also doubled support for school linking projects, which I know that the hon. Gentleman is particularly interested in. There are now 822 recorded, and we are ready to consider further support for such schemes.

Mr. Heath: That is extremely welcome. The Minister obviously understands the huge value in helping young people to understand the enormity of events such as those in Mozambique by learning about the everyday life of people in developing countries. Will he celebrate with me the work that is going on in schools throughout the country? May I renew my invitation to him and the Secretary of State to visit Ansford community school in my constituency, which is doing outstanding, and now nationally recognised, work with Zambia?

Mr. Foulkes: I certainly hope that one of us can take up that offer. We really enjoy visiting schools. I went to Holy Cross school in Croy in Lanarkshire, where the children had been studying Victorian times in history. When they read about child labour, they suddenly realised that the same thing is happening in our world today, and we need to do something about it.

I then went to Tunbridge Wells. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Yes, we go anywhere: there are no no-go areas for new Labour. There, the kids had accessed the DFID internet site. They knew all about me, including my age, and they had accessed photographs of me. They had also accessed the House of Commons website, and they had a photograph of you, Madam Speaker, which was much better than the ones of me.

Madam Speaker: Perhaps Mr. Pike can do better than that for me.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not most encouraging that the two things about which young people most often write to Members of Parliament are the environment and international development? Does not that show that there is a great future for our young people and that education in those areas is already working?

Mr. Foulkes: I agree. When I visit schools I am greatly encouraged by the depth of knowledge and understanding of such issues, but we are not complacent: we inherited a budget of £750,000 for development education, and next year it will be £5 million.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will the Minister consider how his Department can encourage schemes whereby the increasing number of young people who have a gap year after school can visit third world countries and contribute directly to development there?

Mr. Foulkes: Yes, I am certainly happy to look at that—we look at all sorts of things. I have met with my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith), who is the Scottish Education Minister, and with Martin McGuinness when he was the Minister

responsible in Northern Ireland, and I intend to meet Welsh Ministers. We shall discuss all those opportunities for school and post-school activities.

Poverty Reduction

3. **Mr. David Drew** (Stroud): When she last met her EU counterparts to discuss the issue of poverty reduction. [111175]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last discussed poverty elimination with her EU counterparts at the Development Council in November, at which she introduced a specific agenda item on improving the poverty focus of European Commission aid. I, too, met Ministers at the informal Development Council in Lisbon in January. I assure my hon. Friend that we are working to improve the contribution of EC development programmes to the international poverty eradication strategy.

Mr. Drew: I thank my hon. Friend for that good news. Does he agree that it is vital that the EU speak with one voice? The Government have a clear strategy on poverty alleviation. Anything we do to pull countries along with us is to be welcomed.

Mr. Foulkes: I agree. We are spending more than 70 per cent. of our development assistance in the poorest countries of the world. The EC did the same in 1987, but by 1997, the proportion was down to 54 per cent. That trend must be reversed. We are pleased that, at our suggestion, the Commission is to make proposals on improving the poverty focus. We expect the paper to be produced later this month. We believe that it should include a target of at least 70 per cent. of expenditure going to the poorest countries in the world.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will the Minister make it clear to his EU counterparts that the eradication of poverty is not furthered by corruption, military adventurism overseas, or the expropriation of private agricultural holdings, as is happening in Zimbabwe? Will he ensure that there is a moral dimension to the EU's aid programme?

Mr. Foulkes: I agree with all the hon. Gentleman's points. We are especially concerned about Zimbabwe's proposals on land acquisition. We are in favour of land reform in that country and would encourage proper land reform. On his other points, the hon. Gentleman and I spent a couple of hours this morning in European Standing Committee B, discussing them in detail. I am sure that he knows that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the Government as a whole and I are all committed to improving the poverty focus of the European Commission's programme.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Is my hon. Friend aware that Poul Nielson, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, visited Mozambique yesterday? Is he also aware that, at lunchtime, Glenys Kinnock criticised the EU's lack of speed in delivering assistance to Mozambique? Given the excellent response of his Department, will he join me in appealing to the EU to give as much aid, in every sense, as it can, while remembering the greater need for long-term development?

Mr. Foulkes: I understand that the EU has already pledged 1 billion—*[Interruption]*—sorry, I almost increased the figure substantially; the EU has pledged 1 million euro for humanitarian assistance in Mozambique and is considering ways in which that sum can be increased. Contrary to the words of the Opposition, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the British Government are taking a lead in providing humanitarian assistance in Mozambique. I hope that other European countries will follow our example.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Last month, the Commission representative in London confirmed to me that aid programmes in Africa will show more cases of irregularity and fraud, that corruption is endemic, and that, when money is given directly to Governments, it is difficult to ensure that it is well spent. Despite that, last year, the Minister gave almost £1 billion of aid directly to foreign Governments, whereas only half that sum was delivered through non-governmental organisations, such as the British Council, the programmes of which have been slashed by his Department. Will he now admit that his policy has misfired and adopt the policies advocated by the Opposition to increase the use of NGOs and reinstate the British Council, which can deliver aid far more effectively than most Governments?

Mr. Foulkes: I am not sure how that question relates to the one on the Order Paper, but I can assure the hon. Lady, as I did in Committee this morning, that we are determined to ensure that the EU has procedures to prevent fraud and, if it does occur, to root it out. This morning, I gave the hon. Lady the example of the Côte d'Ivoire, where fraud was discovered and the money paid back. We do ensure that that takes place. Under the Labour Government, the delivery of assistance by the EU has improved year by year, and we aim to ensure that that progress continues.

Debt Relief

4. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): If she will make a statement on the action taken by her Department to ensure that debt relief is linked with poverty eradication. [111176]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): The Government contributed a paper to last year's review of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, a copy of which is in the Library. We argued that, to qualify for debt relief, countries should develop a national poverty reduction strategy. The strategy should set out the Government's policies and actions to tackle poverty, and demonstrate how all resources will be allocated, including those arising from debt relief. Governments should consult their public and the international financial institutions in formulating the strategy, so that it commands broad-based support. I strongly support this approach, which was agreed at the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International

Monetary Fund in September, and is now being implemented. In this way, debt relief will help to achieve a stronger commitment to policies to reduce poverty.

Mr. Cunningham: Given the number of natural disasters, particularly that in Mozambique, what practical steps have been taken to help to restructure and rebuild those economies that have been affected; and can my right hon. Friend give some examples of poverty relief schemes?

Clare Short: Debt relief on its own cannot help countries to restructure their economies. It can remove the hangover of debt that prevents Governments from using their money well, and we can give such countries further support to help them to manage their economies better. In Mozambique, we have a crisis and we need to save lives, but there will be a massive reconstruction effort. The reduction of poverty requires good macro-economic management to attract domestic and inward investment to help the economy to grow; children need to be educated and basic health care needs should be met. The poverty reduction strategies that are developing alongside debt relief will help to achieve such policies.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Under the HIPC2 initiative, Mozambique was due to qualify for more debt relief this year, but that would only have reduced its debt service bill to $62 million a year, which would still have been more than its total spending on health and education. That fact, combined with the destruction of its infrastructure due to the floods, means that it will be years before Mozambique ever reaches the level that it was at even two weeks ago. Will the right hon. Lady reassure the House that she will press the international community to strengthen long-term aid for Mozambique and press for immediate 100 per cent. debt cancellation?

Clare Short: As we said on Monday, Mozambique has been a star reformer since the end of the civil war, and that is admirable for one of the poorest countries on earth. The present crisis is a tragedy because it has been driving its economy forward. However, at the moment, it has big reserves because its Government's capacity to spend is so weak. We must get it through this crisis. Yes, it must have its full debt relief and the debt overhang must be removed. As the hon. Lady knows, Britain is committed to 100 per cent. debt relief, for which Mozambique has qualified. It will repay no more money to the UK, and yesterday the Chancellor pressed other Governments to do the same. After the immediate crisis in Mozambique, the big job will be to help with the reconstruction when it will draw down on many of its reserves, but it will need more support.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the rapid response of sending two plane loads of small boats to Mozambique. Does she agree that, while, of course, corruption must be rooted out for the good of those who suffer poverty, it can far too easily be used as an excuse by those mean people who do not want to give money to good causes and simply refuse to cough up?

Clare Short: I agree that we must find ways of helping. In countries with grave corruption we should not allow the poor who are the victims of that to become victims twice over by denying them help from the international community. The poor pay the price for corruption in the loss of economic development and by having to pay bribes for basic services. We must root out corruption to obtain faster development and eradicate poverty, and the international community is now, at last, addressing that.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Last week, when the International Development Committee visited Malawi—one of the poorest countries—the Finance Minister told us that with HIPC, for which the country does not yet qualify, it would receive a reduction in capital repayments and interest on its indebtedness of only $30 million. Therefore, the reduction per year would be from $120 million to $90 million, which is insufficient. Is the right hon. Lady satisfied that HIPC is generous enough and that, when there are savings, those will be concentrated on poverty reduction in the spheres of health and education?

Clare Short: It is my view that the enhanced HIPC, which will cancel $100 billion of debt—the highly indebted poor countries have $145 billion of debt—is about right. Countries have to be responsible about their borrowing, but HIPC will reduce it to reasonable proportions. Malawi is a desperately poor country, which inherited limited capacity from a dictatorship. The United Kingdom has a large and growing programme. My view is that HIPC2 is the right balance. Beyond that, we should help countries to get their debt down to manageable proportions and to drive forward by borrowing wisely and receiving aid, not focusing on ever-increasing amounts of debt relief. HIPC is about right and we should speed up implementation.

Kosovo

5. **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): What assessment she has made of the progress made by UK non-governmental organisations funded by her Department in rebuilding the education system in Kosovo. [111177]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Our main support to education in Kosovo has been through the United Nations children fund—UNICEF. We made £2 million available to UNICEF as soon as the refugees had begun to return, most of which was allocated to educational support. That helped UNICEF to get 75 per cent. of school-age children back in school by 1 November 1999—the figure is now 85 per cent.—which is a considerable achievement given the widespread destruction of buildings and the fact that, from 1990 on when the Albanian language was banned in schools, the state school system crumbled. We also provided £600,000 to KFOR to support emergency repairs to school buildings.

Mr. Coaker: I thank my right hon. Friend for that encouraging response. I also pay tribute to the work that she has done along with UNICEF. Does she agree that, in the sort of environment that exists in Kosovo, education

is essential? It gives the children stability and teaches them the value of tolerance, which will be essential for the rebuilding of the various communities in the region.

Clare Short: I agree. Many people who comment on Kosovo have now forgotten the build-up. For 10 years before the conflict, Albanian teachers were expelled from schools, the children could not speak their language in schools and they did not have a normal education system within which Serb and Albanian children met. Now, it is difficult because of the bitterness. We are trying to reconstruct a normal school system within which children will learn to treat each other as equals. That is important.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Is the Secretary of State aware that of the 300,000 school children in education in Kosovo, fewer than 0.3 per cent. are of Serbian extraction, which demonstrates that almost all Serbian families with children to protect have left the province? That shows that the product of our policy there will be an ethnically pure Kosovo of Albanians only.

Clare Short: I agree that those matters are a worry, but no one should be surprised. Ten years of persecution of Albanian-speaking people before the conflict and all the killing have led to bitterness. It is crucial that we stand up for the principle of equal treatment, as KFOR is doing. We are inching forward, but the situation is bad because the seeds of bitterness and hatred have been sown for 10 years and, sadly, it takes time to put that right. We are doing our very best.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): In welcoming the excellent work of UNICEF in Kosovo, will my right hon. Friend also warmly welcome the launch today of its Growing Up Alone Campaign, which, in the next 18 months, aims to improve dramatically the lot of children throughout the world who face the problems of poverty, war and AIDS-HIV?

Clare Short: We welcome the campaign. We work strongly with UNICEF in trying to develop policies that reach all children, not only some children, and that is the way in which UNICEF is moving. That campaign is focusing, for example, on child soldiers and AIDS orphans—children who have no one to protect them. We should be particularly responsible for them.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [111203] **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 1 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

I should like to pass on the condolences of Labour Members to the Leader of the Opposition and other Conservative Members on the tragic deaths of the Member for Romsey, Michael Colvin, and his wife. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family at this difficult time.

Mr. Pike: I endorse the Prime Minister's comments on Mr. and Mrs. Colvin. I am sure that all hon. Members associate themselves with those comments.

In the week when the Labour party celebrates its centenary, and when we have a Government who are so keen on combating and eliminating poverty in the United Kingdom, is the Prime Minister not ashamed of banks' plans to charge customers for using cash machines? Does not the fact that the Nationwide is prepared to impose a lower charge demonstrate that mutuality is better and that we should have stayed with building societies? What are the Government going to do to address the issue?

The Prime Minister: First, I share my hon. Friend's concerns. However, it is important that we should try to establish the facts. There are indeed legitimate concerns: in particular, we need to know how such charges might impact on pensioners and lower-income customers, and what assessment has been made of the impact on small rural communities, where there may be only one cashpoint. We shall also be receiving shortly Don Cruickshank's report on banking efficiency and competition, which examines some of those issues.

I also remind the House that, today, the Competition Act 1998 comes into force. It will give Britain one of the toughest competition regimes in the world, with new powers to crack down on cartels and other anti-competitive practices that harm the consumer.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I thank the Prime Minister on behalf of the Opposition for his kind remarks on last week's tragedy and the death of Michael and Nichola Colvin. Michael Colvin was a fine Member of Parliament, and Nichola Colvin was a wonderful lady. The whole House is absolutely united on that.

Last night, the Prime Minister said:

clinical need is supposed to determine whether people are treated or not. If that is not happening, that is wrong.

Can the Prime Minister assure the House that doctors never have to distort clinical priorities to meet the Government's waiting list target?

The Prime Minister: The actual guidance that we issued—it is important that we repeat it—states:

clinical priority must be the main determinant of when patients are seen as outpatients or admitted as inpatients.

Mr. Hague: What seems to happen in practice under the Government's waiting list initiative is quite different. The chairman of the British Medical Association said:

The Government is obsessed with waiting list targets that distort clinical priorities to the detriment of patient care.

Yesterday, Dr. Wilde, from Bristol, told the Prime Minister that the

crisis in heart surgery was deepening,

and that treating urgent cases first would save lives.

We also read stories such as that of the man who died after waiting 72 weeks for a heart bypass. If clinical need was paramount, how could those things happen? Will the Prime Minister accept that the waiting list initiative,

as implemented by the Government, is distorting priorities, and that we need a policy on waiting lists in which the patients who most need treatment are treated first?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the principal problem with waiting and heart disease and heart operations is the shortage of heart and cardiac specialists and specialist nurses. That is why we now have 400 extra cardiac specialists in training, which will deliver by 2005—of course it takes time to train them—a 50 per cent. increase. That is a significant increase.

In relation to the Bristol Royal infirmary, which is where Dr. Wilde practises, additional funding will allow seven high-dependency beds to open in October 2000. That, too, will be of some assistance. The new cardiac centre in Plymouth also will help.

Mr. Hague: Is it not a fact that priorities are distorted? Is it not time that the Prime Minister gave all the facts? I have here the briefing that the Department of Health sent to No. 10 for Prime Minister's questions a few weeks ago. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members should listen, because the Prime Minister does not read it out. Under the heading "No. 10 Briefing for PM Questions" its fact number one is:

> At the end of September 1999 there were 264,000 more patients waiting over 13 weeks for an outpatient appointment than at the end of March 1997.

We have asked the Prime Minister several times for that information, but he never reads it out. We now know that the civil servants give him the facts, but he does not read them out because he dare not do so in the House. Is he not in danger of being the polaroid Prime Minister who turns up for photocalls at hospitals, but does not listen to what is happening and blames doctors and managers and now the media? Is it not time that he took the blame and made sure that clinical priorities are dealt with first? Otherwise he really will be all mouth and no delivery.

The Prime Minister: First, on cardiac services, the national service framework is being published on Monday. I have pointed out the number of extra cardiac surgeons in training. Nobody disputes that there are problems that need to be sorted out, but we are taking action to sort them out: the £21 billion extra investment, all the accident and emergency departments being renovated, 37 new hospitals—the largest capital programme ever—4,000 more nurses, 2,000 more doctors, a 60 per cent. increase in cancer specialists, NHS Direct, the new primary care groups, which handle three times the budget of the old two-tier fundholders, and half a million more operations. That is not to say that there are not still many other problems to be sorted out, but we are trying to sort them out. The difference is that we see those problems as a reason for action. The right hon. Gentleman sees them as an excuse for undermining the health service in principle.

Q2. [111204] **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): I welcome the steps taken this week to boost volunteering, but will my right hon. Friend accept that, particularly in less prosperous areas such as South Yorkshire, the networks set up to support volunteering can be successful only if they are properly funded? Will he also assure me that employers will be encouraged to allow staff to do voluntary work without it affecting their pay or prospects?

The Prime Minister: We are already funding the millennium volunteers scheme. I want to see how we can do more to give opportunities to people who want to volunteer. I also entirely accept my hon. Friend's comment that employers can do more. A number of major companies intend to embrace the scheme to allow their staff to take a paid day off once a year to work in the voluntary sector. I intend to do that myself, both as an individual and as an employer, with people in Downing street and the Cabinet Office able to take a minimum of one day's paid leave a year to do voluntary work. I hope that many will take up that opportunity throughout the country.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): I associate my colleagues and myself with the proper expressions of condolences to the Colvin family for the truly terrible experience that they have endured. I also take this opportunity to welcome back warmly my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones). We are all very pleased to see him restored to his parliamentary duties. He has told me of the case of his constituent, Mr. Bob Howes, who has suffered two heart attacks, yet he is still waiting an inordinate length of time for the cardiac treatment that he needs. Dr. Wilde's remarks have been well reported. Is it not a deplorable state of affairs, three years into a Labour Government, with all the expectations that were generated at the general election, that he is citing the fact that 10 of his patients have died who could have been saved had the medical procedures been available?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) back to the House of Commons, as we all do. I am delighted to see him back here.

In relation to waiting for heart surgery, there is no doubt that this is a serious problem, although it is always as well, in the interests of balance, to point out that some 46,000 operations are carried out. It is precisely for that reason that we need to deal with the root of the problem. The root of the problem is the absence of sufficient specialist nurses and specialist surgeons. That can only be cured, I am afraid, over time. That is precisely what we are doing.

Mr. Kennedy: Does it remain the Prime Minister's intention over five years to get health spending in this country up to European levels? If so, does he believe that the tax cut in April will assist that process? Does he not acknowledge that the pledge that he and his party were elected on was to save the NHS before cutting tax? Is it not the case that we are getting tax bribes from the Government instead of saving lives from the Government?

The Prime Minister: The £21 billion is extra money for the national health service. It is also infinitely more than the Liberal Democrats have ever promised. Indeed, we have already put more money into the health service than the Liberal Democrats promised. The plain fact of the matter is that yes, we can get additional money into the health service if we manage the economy properly.

It is important that we do that, which is why we have pursued policies that have given us 800,000 extra jobs in the economy, that have given us the best record on inflation of any European country and that have managed to cure the appalling debt that we inherited from the Conservatives. If we followed the recipe set out by the Liberal Democrats, and spent and spent and spent without any idea of where the money came from, we would not be able to maintain the funding in the consistent way that the country needs.

Q3. [111205] **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): Is the Prime Minister aware that I have never started a question by congratulating him? Is he further aware that I have to break the habit of a parliamentary lifetime due to the astonishing work being done by himself, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development in combating world poverty? Given that Britain is spearheading the relief effort in Mozambique, and given the scale of that catastrophe, which I saw for myself a few days ago, will the Prime Minister or Members of his Government undertake to contact Heads of State in the European Union and, indeed, President Clinton, so that our allies take the lead that we have taken in saving lives around the world?

The Prime Minister: We are certainly in touch with our allies. I am sure that the whole House will be appalled by the terrible scenes in Mozambique. We have now found and chartered five more helicopters locally, making, I think, a total of nine. We are sending two large transport aircraft with 69 inflatable boats and motors, 39 self-inflating rafts and Land-Rovers, and there is a team of 30 expert volunteers going with this equipment. We are also sending more shelter material and sheeting. The United Kingdom has, in fact, already committed £4.2 million to help people in Mozambique. That is more than any other country, but it is what is necessary, and we hope that other countries will join in with the effort.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Could the Prime Minister confirm the rumour that is circulating in the House that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) is resigning as Labour's candidate for London mayor?

The Prime Minister: No, I cannot.

Q4. [111206] **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): The Prime Minister will be aware that more than 1.5 million people in this country suffer from diabetes. It is the main cause of blindness in the under-65s, and half of lower limb amputations are because of diabetes. Does the Prime Minister share my view that the decision today to make pen needles free on prescription will benefit the 400,000 diabetics who inject insulin and will continue our battle against a condition that kills, maims and blinds?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done as secretary of the all-party group on diabetes. This is an issue, as he says, that affects more than 1 million people. We take the burden of diabetes very seriously. I am therefore delighted that from today, people who treat their diabetes with insulin will be able to get pen needles and reusable pens on prescription from their GP.

Q5. [111208] **Mrs. Eleanor Laing** (Epping Forest): What would the Prime Minister say to my constituent, Mr. Thomas of Loughton, who faced the choice of either a long and dangerous—*[Interruption.]* I do not know what was funny about my constituent. It is a tragic case. What would the Prime Minister say to Mr. Thomas, who faced the choice of either a long and dangerous wait for a heart bypass operation or spending his life savings so that he could have the operation more quickly? At the same time, the health authority was carrying out many minor operations. Today, the Prime Minister has been glib with his statistics. Does not he realise that, in the real world, people like Mr. Thomas know that clinical priorities are being distorted just to make the Prime Minister's waiting list statistics look better?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I do not know the individual case of the hon. Lady's constituent. As I have said, the only way to deal with these matters is to deal with the root of the problem—insufficient specialists and insufficient specialist nurses to carry out those operations. I hope that she will agree that what is necessary in the health service is additional investment. I hope, therefore, that she will also agree that any political party that had the policy of cutting taxes before anything else would have the wrong priority for the country. The one group of people who cannot say that they would do more for people in the health service are the Conservative party.

Q6. [111209] **Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware of the massive hospital building programme that has gone on since he came to office. In fact, he has given the go-ahead for 37 new hospitals at a cost of £3 billion. Is he aware that the first hospital to be completed will be the new Cumberland infirmary in my constituency? We waited 20 years for that hospital under the previous, Conservative Government. Will he join me in congratulating all the staff involved in the construction and design of the building? I understand that it will be delivered 13 weeks early and on budget; that is probably a first for the NHS. Does he agree that that is another example of the Government delivering for the NHS?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend campaigned for many years for that hospital. It is worth pointing out that, although about £30 million was spent on consultancy fees under the previous Government, not a single hospital was built under the private finance initiative. This is the first acute private finance hospital to be completed; it is on time and on budget. It will provide a state-of-the-art hospital with more than 400 beds for the people of Carlisle and the surrounding area. However, we know that in many other parts of the country the same thing is wanted. We shall get there and deliver them their hospitals too.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Which of the Labour candidates for mayor of London supports the Government's policy on the tube?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman should allow me to run the Labour party and he can run the Conservative party.

Mr. Hague: This is a question about the Government's policy. Which of the Labour candidates for mayor of London supports the Government's policy on the tube?

The Prime Minister: The policy on the tube has been well set out and is, in fact, supported; it is the policy that will be carried through. I repeat that I will take care of running the Labour party and the right hon. Gentleman can run the Conservative party.

Mr. Hague: So the answer is that there is no Labour candidate who supports the Government's policy on the tube. Was not it all summed up by the Labour spokesman? He said:

> Basically, Frank can say what he likes about the tube, but the policy is the policy.

Then he added:

> Of course, Frank's going to be his own man.

Did not the Deputy Prime Minister say that unless a candidate agrees to support the party manifesto, he cannot stand as a Labour candidate? Now that the official Labour candidate is not going to support the Prime Minister's policy, is he going to change the policy or is he going to impose a new candidate?

The Prime Minister: What the right hon. Gentleman says about the policy is nonsense. The real difference is between the Labour party, which supports a public-private partnership, and the Conservative party, which will privatise the whole tube system. People know, if they vote for the Conservative candidate, that the same privatisation that happened with the railways will happen with the tube. That is not the case with us.

I repeat what I said to the right hon. Gentleman. I suggest that he look after the problems of running the Conservative party. I notice that, as there has been a lot of talk about independent candidates, he has decided to appoint an independent as his shadow Chancellor.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I have just returned from being a patient who received excellent care and attention in two NHS hospitals, so I have to pay tribute to the hard-working staff—both medical and non-medical—of ward 9B of Aberdeen royal infirmary and of ward 10 of Woodend hospital. Will my right hon. Friend promise me that he will do everything in his power to ensure that all NHS patients get the excellent care that I received? Will he also continue the Government's policy of making sure that there are above inflation increases in the wages of all NHS staff?

The Prime Minister: We will certainly do that. First, in relation to NHS staff, we have now got the large starting pay increase for new nurses and that has resulted in a 25 per cent. increase in the numbers taking nursing degrees. Of course, the number of nurses in training was cut before we came to office under the previous Government. Secondly, the almost 8 per cent. increase for grade E nurses will mean that more than 60,000 of them will get a decent pay increase. I can tell my hon. Friend that 4,500 extra nurses have come back to the health service since we began our recruitment campaign.

My hon. Friend is right. There are many problems in the health service that we need to deal with. However, as I said yesterday and repeat today, we need a sense of balance. The vast majority of people get treated very well in the health service; we have fine staff in the health service who treat them well. For example, 99 per cent. of operations are carried out on time. That is no excuse for the 1 per cent. that are not, but it is simply a plea to get balance in the debate. If we carry on with both the reform and the money, we will improve the health service and make it once again what it should be, but failed to be under the previous Government: the pride of Britain and the envy of the world.

Q7. [111210] **Mr. Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South): Will the Prime Minister say why council tax payers should have to pay more to house the nation's asylum seekers?

The Prime Minister: In fact, we provide help to local authorities that face the pressures of asylum seekers and we are trying to make sure that, in circumstances where they face additional costs, we do what we can.

Of course, the problem is the asylum system. That system requires fundamental reform. That is why we are introducing a new system from April this year in which cash payments are limited simply to £10 a week and people do not get the old benefits payments that they used to get under the system that the hon. Gentleman's Government introduced. We are now imposing a penalty of £2,000 on hauliers carrying illegal entrants. Those measures will help us separate bogus asylum seekers from genuine asylum seekers. The measures have one other thing in common: both were opposed by the Conservative party.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Is my right hon. Friend aware of Beach Radio, a local radio station that serves the far eastern part of East Anglia, including my constituency? If he had been able to listen to Beach Radio yesterday, he would have heard our local hospital, the James Paget hospital, announce that it had just taken on 20 new nurses. In the millennium period the hospital said that it was managing extremely well, it is on course to meet its waiting list reduction targets at the end of this month and it is having a £700,000 refit of its accident and emergency service. Is that not proof on the ground that the NHS is being rebuilt, unlike under the Conservative party, which would just privatise it?

The Prime Minister: Of course that is precisely what the Conservatives intend to do. They want to force all people who have conditions that are not serious or life threatening to go for treatment outside the national health service. That is absolutely wrong and we will not go down that path at all.

On new nurses, it is important that we recruit extra nurses and that we retain them. It is important that we invest in accident and emergency departments, but it is important also that we reform the system. By the end of this year, at least 2 million people will be able to get a booked appointment without any system of waiting at all. In time,

we will have to extend that throughout the health service. If we recruit the right staff, make use of the best technology and have proper co-operative partnerships between the various players in the NHS, we can radically improve the whole concept of waiting lists and waiting times.

Q8. [111211] **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): In the spirit of good will, will the right hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) on being elected to the House for the first time 50 years ago and serving his constituency since then? I know that my right hon. Friend will be as concerned as I am that in the past two and a half years the number of operational officers in the Metropolitan police has been reduced by 793. What hope is there that in the next two and a half years the trend will be reversed, let alone the number increased? Before the right hon. Gentleman answers, I remind him that under the previous Government, Metropolitan police numbers went up from just under 22,000 to more than 28,000.

The Prime Minister: I understand that from March 1992 the figure fell by 2,000. As a result of the additional money that is now being put into the crime fighting fund, we can start to recruit extra officers. I am delighted to join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). He has been not only an outstanding politician and leader in this country, but an outstanding parliamentarian. The whole House is delighted to welcome him here today and to pay tribute to him.

Q9. [111212] **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): Is the Prime Minister aware that the viewing figures for the ITN news at 11 pm are much lower than they were when the news was at 10 pm? Will he join me in calling on ITN to review its decision and to put the news back to 10 pm, to restore the national institution that we all loved?

The Prime Minister: I share my hon. Friend's views on that issue, and I know that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee will take evidence on it later this week. Although this is obviously a matter for the Independent Television Commission, I liked "News at Ten" and I had concerns about the likely consequences of moving it, as did many Members, and I am afraid that those concerns have been largely borne out by what has happened since. "News at Ten" had developed an important place in our national life, and I fear that the decision to move it eroded that position, so I very much hope that ITN will think again.

Q10. [111214] **Mr. Andrew Stunell** (Hazel Grove): I thank the Prime Minister for his kind words about Stockport council's crime and disorder fight. Will he instruct the Home Secretary to make available the £335,000 required to implement the strategy to which he gave great praise?

The Prime Minister: I am taking urgent instructions from the Home Secretary, but I think that a bid has gone in to the relevant fund that finances those projects. Far be it from me to admit that I did not know the answer, but I shall certainly look into the matter and write to the hon. Gentleman about it.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): With a cheque.

The Prime Minister: I shall not say that the cheque is in the post. I shall say simply that the decision is with the Home Secretary.

Q11. [111215] **Dr. Desmond Turner** (Brighton, Kemptown): Is the Prime Minister aware that it is now a year since the royal commission on long-term care policy, which was chaired by Sir Stewart Sutherland, reported its conclusions and recommendations? Since the problems addressed by that report are still very much with us and are a matter of urgency, will my right hon. Friend give an indication of the Government's response to the report's recommendations?

The Prime Minister: The Government's deliberations on the report have taken some time, because of its importance. Also, there are obvious cost implications that must be examined and worked through. My hon. Friend will be able to see the results fairly shortly. We are well aware that it is a major issue that must be considered in the context of the health service as a whole.

One of the other problems of management in the health service is to ensure that we have the proper system of long-term care in place so that the acute beds that are needed for acute care in the health service are occupied by people who must have them. We are trying to make sure that any proposals that we produce on long-term care tie in with what we are doing with community hospitals and social services, to make sure that we have adequate levels of care for everyone. That is why I say, once again, yes, there is a problem of finance, but we also need to change the system under which that money is used.

Q12. [111216] **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley** (South-West Surrey): When the Prime Minister last answered questions, he informed the House that there had been a fall in the number of midwives under the previous Government. The Health Minister subsequently confirmed that actually the figures increased by 7,760. In the past, there would have been four occasions when Back Benchers could have challenged the Prime Minister on that inaccuracy. Will he clarify the situation now?

The Prime Minister: I understand that during the previous Parliament, the number of midwives did fall. If that is wrong, I am happy to correct it. There has undoubtedly been a 79 per cent. increase in the numbers registering for midwifery as a result of the changes introduced by the Government. That is in addition to the additional numbers of nurses now registering for nursing degrees and the extra nurses in the health service. There can be no dispute about the overall direction. When we came to office, we inherited a situation where the number of nurses in training was cut, and we are now putting extra resources into the health service.

BILL PRESENTED

School Crossings (Amendment)

Mr. Michael J. Foster presented a Bill to amend the law relating to school crossings: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 April, and to be printed [Bill 75].

Telecommunications Masts (Development)

3.32 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate the development of telecommunications masts in the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Mr. Bercow, I know that you have a very good voice that carries, but please wait a moment. Will hon. Members leaving please do so quietly and quickly? We have an hon. Member on his feet.

Mr. Bercow: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mobile phones are here to stay. There are now 24 million subscribers in the UK, the business turns over £6 billion a year, and more than 20,000 base stations exist across the country, including no fewer than 40 in my Buckingham constituency. Furthermore, the industry confers real benefits in terms of economic efficiency and personal convenience.

Nothing in the Bill that I advance today seeks to hamper the legitimate growth of that industry, or would, in my assessment, be likely to do so. However, the House will recognise that there is widespread concern on both health and environmental grounds about mobile telephones in general, and the frenetic proliferation of masts in particular.

That concern has been reflected in the House, since the general election, in 96 written parliamentary questions, five oral questions, four early-day motions—notably that of the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate), which has so far attracted 168 signatures—and three Adjournment debates, the most recent of which was initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) on 18 January this year in Westminster Hall.

I referred to anxieties about the threat to human health. The Government contend that there is no conclusive proof of a threat to health. Nevertheless, studies undertaken in Australia, Poland, Sweden and the United States have raised the spectre of dizzy spells, fatigue, headaches, memory loss, skin irritation, damage to the immune system, brain damage and cancer.

Anxiety about those conditions is such that, in the United States, no fewer than 39 states have so far decided to prevent any further erection of mobile telecommunications masts pending the generation of greater confidence in the technology, while in Australia a ban has been imposed on the erection of such masts fewer than 500 m from homes, hospitals and schools.

The House will also be conscious of the widespread anxiety about the threat to, above all, children under the age of 12, whose brains are not fully developed, whose skulls are less resistant to radiation, and who are therefore more susceptible to the damage to health that might be entailed.

I hope that hon. Members in all parts of the House will appreciate my legitimate anxiety on behalf of parents—not least Mrs. Lyn Pasqua—of children at the Acorn pre-school nursery in Winslow. It should be noted that there has been a telecommunications base station in an adjoining building for two years.

A distinguished academic, Dr. Gerard Hyland of the physics department of the university of Warwick, maintains that there is a possible threat to human health from the non-thermal impact of radiation.

In the light of those concerns, I make just two requests of the House at this stage. The first is that the National Radiological Protection Board should be instructed to study the possible non-thermal impact on health; the second is that the House should undertake to debate fully, at the appropriate time, the reports that will in due course be forthcoming from the United Kingdom childhood cancer study, from the NRPB's independent expert group on mobile phone technology, from the European Commission's expert group on mobile phones, and from the World Health Organisation's international project on electromagnetic field radiation. These are all important concerns, and we need to consider and respond responsibly to them.

The nub of the problem, however, derives from the planning policies that apply in this country. I make the point on no party-political basis whatever—the matter is far too serious, and we know that hon. Members in all parts of the House are concerned about it—but the fact is that planning policy guidance note 8 contains a presumption in favour of development. Under that note, it is expected that local authorities, in responding to applications from licensed operators, will do so positively and without questioning the need for the erection of new masts.

That difficulty for the environment is compounded by the fact that, under paragraph 24 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order, a general permission is conferred on licensed operators to erect new masts, subject to the caveat that they should be less than 15 m high and should not be situated in areas of outstanding natural beauty, conservation areas, national parks or sites of special scientific interest.

Apart from that, the position for the local community and its elected representatives is very difficult. The councils have only a short period in which to object, meagre grounds on which to do so, and, judging by the record, limited success in the process. The effect of the arrangements, whatever their intention, has been to give a green light to companies such as Orange plc to ride roughshod over the wishes of local residents in the village of Long Crendon in my Buckingham constituency, where the company proposes to erect a new mast a mere 130 m from the boundary of the local school—with scant, if any, serious consultation with the local community that will thereby be affected.

Despite the company's advertising slogan, "Find out what people want: give it to them", and its explicit commitment to open dialogue, I am sorry to say that indifference, disdain and contempt have been the hallmarks of the company's treatment of my constituents. They are fighting back. Mrs. Penny Garrett, Mrs. Jean Gower and Councillor Mrs. Cecile Irving-Swift believe that such behaviour is unacceptable. It will not do, and it needs to change. The only light on the horizon is that a public meeting will take place, courtesy of an agreement with Mr. Richard Rumbelow, the organisation's sensible public affairs manager.

The rules that were appropriate for generating a national network need radical adjustment because such a network now exists. Respect must be shown for the

[Mr. Bercow]

environment, human safety and the tranquillity of communities. That is why we should amend planning policy guidance note 8 to ensure that proper account is taken of community concerns. Full planning permission for masts on greenbelt land, listed buildings, wildlife sites, and sites near areas already protected by law is urgently needed.

Full planning permission is also needed for sites near homes, schools and hospitals. It should be obligatory for mobile phone operators to provide one or two-year plans to local councils detailing their mast intentions; it would thus be possible for councils to know what was sought and to assess its validity.

More encouragement of mast sharing is required through linking it more integrally with the planning process. We should examine cross-network roaming and the opportunities for greater convenience and ease of use for consumers that that would entail. We need an acceptable method of ensuring that masts are sympathetically blended into the environment in which they are situated.

The proposals that I have outlined are practical, constructive and forward looking. They will enjoy widespread support in the country. Confident in that knowledge, I appeal to the House for its backing for the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. John Bercow, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Crispin Blunt, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, Mr. Mark Fisher, Mr. James Gray, Mr. Gerald Howarth, Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith, Mr. Laurence Robertson, Mrs. Marion Roe, Dr. Howard Stoate, Mr. Phil Willis.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS MASTS (DEVELOPMENT)

Mr. John Bercow accordingly presented a Bill to regulate the development of telecommunications masts: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 April, and to be printed [Bill 76].

Standards and Privileges

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House

(i) approves the Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (HC 260); and

(ii) accordingly suspends Mrs. Teresa Gorman, Member for Billericay, from the service of the House for one month.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

3.43 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to say a few words about the report of the Standards and Privileges Committee. I want to begin by saying how sorry I am that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) suffered a serious health problem when he collapsed recently. I am happy to say that he is mending. He has been extremely helpful and courteous to me as the events that we are considering have developed.

I want, for my constituents and my friends on both sides of the House, to try to put matters in context because the report is long, complex and often contradictory.

The complaints deal with events from 10 to 15 years ago, before I even entered Parliament. We all lead busy lives in our job, and I had long pushed many of the events that we are considering to the back of my memory. In my initial discussions with the commissioner, I tried to answer her questions about events of long ago from memory. I do not consider that the answers that I gave her were dishonest, but I admit that some were very muddled. My explanation for that is that memory is sometimes mixed and failing after so long a period.

I accept, of course, that, as a Member of the House, I must deal with allegations made by newspapers or members of the public, but I was quite clear in my own mind that these allegations related to my husband's interests and that I had no beneficial interest in them. That is why I had not initially declared them in the Register of Members' Interests. They were originally raised in 1994 and dealt with by the former Committee, which dismissed them. They were then resurrected, in addition to other matters, by *The Independent* newspaper.

I strongly resent the amount of intrusion on my husband's life. He is not one of us and is—or at least was, once upon a time—a very private person. He is not in the public eye in the way we are here. I cannot find a single example of a Member who recorded a spouse's job, assets or financial affairs in the register. That may change because, in the post-Nolan period, we live in a completely different ambience in relation to the register. Nowadays, one is in danger of being in difficulty if one does not register having a doughnut at some entertainment or other.

The register says that

> the scope of the Register seeks to balance on the one hand what should be publicly known about Members and on the other, the proper degree of privacy to which they and their families are entitled. They are not required to disclose the interests of spouses or children.

Much of the inquiry, and certainly its length, represents, to some extent, an attempt to link me to my husband's property and therefore to justify a complaint that I failed to declare an interest when I introduced a ten-minute Bill in 1990—10 years ago. If I had thought that I had an interest to declare, why would I not have entered that

interest? If I had something to hide, why would I have presented the Bill in the first place? Clearly, in my own mind I did not have an interest to declare and everyone in the House knows that ten-minute Bills are mainly a way of airing a point of view. In this case, I was airing a point of view that I had formed as a result of being a member of the housing committee of a local council on which I saw the problems of housing through the eyes of those young people who were trying to find accommodation, particularly in the private sector. That was my reason for introducing the Bill.

The report says that I failed to co-operate with the commissioner. That is untrue. I dealt, in great detail, with almost 30 letters from the commissioner—many of them relating to long-forgotten events—until I was forced to take legal advice. At that stage, my solicitors called a halt because they considered by then that the inquiries had little or nothing to do with the original complaints. Far from my failing to co-operate, the commissioner wrote to me on 22 July 1999 to say that

> I do appreciate the effort and time you are putting into answering my inquiries and I very much share your hope that I will be able to conclude them in the near future.

I have never sought to mislead the commissioner. I have admitted that my earlier answers to her may not have reflected a clear picture of the situation as to those properties, which are the focal point of the inquiry, but once I had obtained the advice and help of a solicitor I was able to discover the original documents, which backed my claim that I was not required to enter those assets in the register. I hope that the House will eventually adopt the recommendation of the Neill committee that Members who find themselves in a similar position should be given legal aid or advice to deal with matters in an orderly fashion. I repeat: we live in a completely different world from 10 years ago, before the Nolan report. In today's circumstances, it is imperative that people who are going to be involved in such a situation speak to a lawyer before they speak to anyone else.

These Benches are littered with barristers and solicitors. Most of them, I am sure, would not approve of the system that we have devised for ourselves. There is no independent judge, no independent jury, no defence counsel and no appeals system. All those are recommended in the Neill committee report for change. I hope that, when the Government introduce the Neill recommendations, colleagues will support them.

In the House, we are here not just to make laws, but to protect the rights of citizens to a fair trial before an independent judicial system. Although I am not criticising the Committee's decision, I believe that, in the long term, it is imperative that we adopt that procedure for our system in the House when we deal with complaints.

I hope, from my experience and from bringing it to the attention of the House, that we will draw some lessons from it. I can see in retrospect that I have handled matters less than satisfactorily. Of course I could have done better, but I draw the line at being called a liar, which the report states. I find that offensive, quite unnecessary and unreasonable.

I quote from an interview in *The Daily Telegraph* that was given by the commissioner, Ms Filkin, on her appointment to her present role. She said:

> I am aware that all of us can make mistakes and look foolish. One can always reflect on how things could have been done better.

I rest my case.

3.52 pm

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): The House will well understand the reason why the Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), cannot be here today. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) for her good wishes. I know that the good wishes of the whole House are with him for a speedy recovery. No one wishes more than I that he were here today, because he understands better than anyone—he has had to do it more often, sadly, from his point of view—how unpleasant it is to move to suspend a longstanding parliamentary colleague. It is not a pleasant experience. I suspect that I regret nearly as much as the hon. Lady the fact that we are in this situation.

I apologise to the House that I am going keep, as the hon. Lady did, rather closely to my remit and to my brief because of the complexity and the personal sensitivities of some of the issues involved.

I am here to ask the House to approve the fifth report of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges on complaints against the hon. Lady, and its recommendation to suspend her for one month. That is the longest period of suspension that the Committee has ever recommended in its five years of existence. The sadness is that, as the report says, many of the complaints against the hon. Lady

> could have been dealt with swiftly, and without the need for extensive inquiry, if she had co-operated properly.

I should remind the House of the findings of the commissioner and of the Committee and explain why the Committee decided unanimously—I must emphasise that—that such a serious penalty was justified.

The Committee upheld three complaints about registration and declaration of interests. The first is that the hon. Lady failed to register her interest in various properties in south London, which she owned jointly—it is not a point that she brought out in her comments—with her husband and which were let to tenants for rent between 1987 and 1994. Secondly, she failed to declare that interest when she introduced two ten-minute Bills about rented property. Thirdly, she failed to register her interest in an offshore trust. Several other complaints were made about properties in Portugal and Germany, but the Committee has dismissed those complaints.

The hon. Lady's failure to register would inevitably be a source of criticism in its own right. However, the Committee felt that the other complaints against her were far more serious. We upheld four further complaints. The first was that she provided seriously misleading and inaccurate information to the Registrar of Members' Interests, the Parliamentary Commissioner, the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee and the Committee itself. Secondly, she made false allegations against a member of the public. Thirdly, she improperly contacted a witness during the investigation. Finally, she failed to uphold the code of conduct for Members by not observing the principles—

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: No, I am sorry, but I will not.

Mr. Howarth: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: I have said no. This matter is too serious for the playing of games.

Mr. Howarth: In that case, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Williams: Let the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) carry on his Hamilton vendetta somewhere else.

Mr. Howarth: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman has outrageously accused me of waging some kind of vendetta when I had sought only to obtain information. Can the right hon. Gentleman's words be accounted parliamentary?

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that tempers must cool. I quite understand why the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) wishes to put the Committee's case before the House. If the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) seeks to catch my eye during the course of the debate, I will try to call him.

Mr. Williams: The hon. Member for Aldershot may want information, and I intend to give information. That is why I intend to stick closely to my brief.

The hon. Member for Billericay failed to uphold the code of conduct for Members by not observing its principles of honesty and accountability—principles at the centre of our debate. The Committee considered that her behaviour was a breach of the code of conduct and a contempt of the House. It is for that reason that the Committee recommended such a severe penalty.

Let me turn to the south London properties to which the hon. Lady referred. She implied that those properties belonged entirely to her husband. As long ago as 1995, allegations were made that the hon. Lady had owned properties in south London that were let to tenants for rent when she had sought, in 1990, to introduce a Bill to repeal the Rent Acts. There were further allegations that the properties had been sold to offshore companies with which she was connected.

The hon. Lady denied those allegations in the most unequivocal terms. In a letter to the Registrar of Member's Interests on 23 May 1995, she wrote:

> It is not true either of the two properties were let to tenants in 1990/91 . . .
>
> It is not true that I have any connection with an offshore company as alleged.

Four years later, in April 1999, the hon. Lady told the commissioner that there were no paying tenants in either house while she was the owner. Subsequent events have shown all those statements to be untrue.

Despite the allegations made against her in 1995, which led to lawyers being instructed, and despite the matters being raised again by the commissioner and the Committee in April 1999, it was not until June 1999 that the hon. Lady told the commissioner that each of the south London properties had, contrary to her previous assertions, been let to tenants until sold.

There were originally thought to be only two properties. It was not until the commissioner discovered that a third had been owned by the hon. Lady and her husband that she revealed her connection with it. Only when she discovered that the commissioner was preparing to contact previous tenants of the south London property did she admit the existence of those tenants.

One of the papers in the case is a sworn statement from a man who said that he had rented a bedsit in one of the houses. The hon. Lady told the commissioner that neither she nor her husband owned property in which the man was ever a tenant, and that his sworn statement was false. She went further, and told the Committee that the statement had been

> falsified for a cash payment.

That is a serious allegation; it is even more serious when a Member of Parliament makes it under the protection of parliamentary privilege, as the hon. Lady did. Later she had to admit that there was nothing in the statement that she knew to be false. She could produce no evidence of any cash payment. We concluded—the House must decide whether we were right—that her unfounded allegations were intended to mislead.

When the south London properties were sold, they were bought by offshore companies, and two flats in Portugal, used by the hon. Lady and her husband as holiday accommodation, were also owned by offshore companies; but all those companies were owned by the Queenstown Trust, itself an offshore discretionary trust, which was established in 1986 on the instructions of the hon. Lady and her husband. There was a network of offshore companies—although she denied any contact or connection with such companies—involved with the properties.

The hon. Lady was deemed to be the settlor of the trust. I had never come across that term before, but we have been assured that the settlor is the person who sets up the trust and provides it with assets. She asked the trustees to regard her husband as the prime beneficiary of the trust but that, should he die before her, she herself was to be regarded as the prime beneficiary. Again, that hardly fits the picture of someone with no connection with offshore companies.

Sadly, the Committee did not get any of that information from the hon. Lady herself. Eventually, we got it last November from the management of the offshore company, who insisted that we apply for it in writing. In April last year, she told the commissioner that she had never had any connection with the offshore companies that bought her properties, and as late as last July she wrote to the commissioner:

> I confirm that my husband and I have no connection with off-shore companies.

I will not comment on that: it speaks for itself. The statement was simply untrue in relation to her husband and disingenuous at best in relation to herself.

The Committee expressed the opinion in our report that the hon. Lady's denials of any connection with offshore companies were intended to deceive. Again, the House must make its mind up whether we were right. She claimed in her evidence in January this year that she had no registrable or legal connection with offshore companies. That was not what she was asked about. She was asked about a completely different point. The commissioner and the Committee had asked whether, as alleged, she had any connection with offshore companies.

We were hoping for—it could have foreshortened the whole situation—a straightforward and honest answer. If the hon. Lady had been straightforward and open with the

commissioner and the Committee, she would have explained at the outset the nature of her connection with the Queenstown Trust and its connection with the other offshore companies, and not sought to conceal those connections as she did. I should like to draw the attention of the House to paragraph 40 of the report. Its effect on all Members of Parliament is intended to be cautionary. It states:

> Members should not seek to mislead by keeping information from the Commissioner on the ground that they do not themselves consider the interest to which it relates to be registrable. Many of the complaints against Mrs. Gorman could have been dealt with swiftly, and without the need for extensive inquiry, if she had co-operated properly. Mrs. Gorman should have been open and helpful in her dealings with the Commissioner at the time when the complaints against her were first made, especially where a number of these complaints rested on understandable assumptions about Mrs. Gorman's personal circumstances.

It is a sad feature of the inquiry that, with the possible exception of today, the hon. Lady has throughout been quick to assign blame to almost anyone but herself for the situation that has arisen. According to press reports, our Parliamentary Commissioner has been accused of bias. The Committee has been accused of

> behaving like the Spanish Inquisition,

and, even more devastating, of being

> a tool of the Labour Party spin-doctor industry.

I look at the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and I wonder whether the hon. Lady sees the same Committee that I see.

I am sorry to go on at length, but I was asked for information and I believe that the hon. Lady deserves to have the case spelled out in full. I hope that the House will allow me to continue and to consider the claims that the hon. Lady is reported to have made. She has claimed that the investigation went unnecessarily into her personal life. We did not want to investigate matters relating to her personal life. Members of the Committee recognise, as would any Member of Parliament, that Members have the same right as anyone else to privacy in their personal life and that that privacy should be protected wherever possible. We, as a Committee, would never want to intrude unnecessarily on any hon. Member's personal affairs.

Our problem however was that the hon. Lady's evidence to the Committee was founded on the proposition that, between 1986 and 1994, she and her husband were separated and she had no knowledge of and no involvement in his business activities. Her entire argument for non-registration rests on the personal and previously unpublicised agreement between herself and her husband. Her claim is that, according to a draft agreement dated 1986, she had no beneficial interest in the south London properties because, she claimed, although she remained the legal joint owner of the properties—the crucial admission—her husband was granted complete control over their use and disposal.

The commissioner and the Committee felt that that separation agreement made no difference. The hon. Lady admits that she continued to be the joint owner of the properties and the land registry entry still listed her as such. Furthermore, the Committee seriously doubted that the agreement had ever been put into practice. No formal deed of separation was ever executed; there was only a draft. During the alleged separation, the flat in Portugal was acquired as a second home for the hon. Lady and her husband. The hon. Lady set up two companies with her husband as joint shareholder; he had only one share, but that is a normal arrangement. Throughout that time, the hon. Lady's husband was on the electoral register and on the community charge register for her Westminster home. The house in the hon. Lady's constituency, which she purchased in 1993, was registered in the joint names of the hon. Lady and her husband.

Perhaps one of the most convincing points, and the final one, was that the tax liability on the sale of one of the south London properties would, if what she has claimed was correct, have been met by her husband, but, in fact, the tax liability was met by one of the hon. Lady's companies.

Therefore, for the Committee—the hon. Lady may say that we have it wrong—the evidence was overwhelming. It took the view that, if the hon. Lady owned the properties, they should have been registered. After all, the main purpose of the Register of Members' Interests is

> to provide information of any pecuniary interest or other material benefit which a Member receives which might reasonably be thought by others to influence his or her actions, speeches or votes in Parliament, or actions taken in his or her capacity as a Member of Parliament.

Given that the hon. Lady's arguments for non-registration rested on the document and the alleged separation of assets, the Committee could not in all conscience—I invite hon. Members who have not had a chance to read the evidence to do so—have omitted the evidence, however unhappy it was about disclosing elements of the hon. Lady's personal life. It was a defence that she used; it was a defence that either had to be accepted, or certainly had to be explored, and possibly had to be rebutted. In our case, we did not accept it.

As the Committee stated in its report,

> The evidence about their separation is crucial to Mrs. Gorman's explanation for her actions, in particular her failure to register certain interests. Its omission would be misleading and would undermine the basis of this Report.

That evidence—I re-emphasise this—need never have been published if the hon. Lady had sought advice in the first place, and if she had registered the property as early as she could after she discovered that she had an interest.

The hon. Lady has claimed—she has repeated it today—that fresh allegations were raised during the course of the investigation which were not in the commissioner's original memorandum. Hon. Members are too busy to read everything in detail and the document is voluminous, but anyone who has read it will have noted that the Committee's conclusions mirror completely the commissioner's memorandum and do not raise any fresh allegations against the hon. Lady. I shall come in a moment to her knowledge and the nature of the allegations.

The hon. Lady has also said that she wants to appeal against our finding. It is important to emphasise that it is not the facts in the case that are in dispute—the facts, sadly, are clear—but the conclusions to be drawn from them and the propriety of the hon. Lady's behaviour in the course of the inquiry. It is beyond dispute that she remained joint legal owner of the three properties until they were eventually sold. It is beyond dispute that she is connected with the trust in the way described in the

[Mr. Williams]

Committee's report and as I have outlined. It is for the House to judge whether the hon. Lady has broken our rules, as the Committee believes that she has.

All the evidence that has been relied on in constructing the report has come from, or been confirmed by, the hon. Lady, her advisers or her business associates. We have therefore done everything we can to ensure that she has been treated fairly. However, and this is the most serious allegation, the hon. Lady questioned the fairness and impartiality of the commissioner and the Committee. Other Committee members who are not Labour Members may wish to say whether they think that she was dealt with fairly.

The hon. Lady made play of the recent report of the Neill committee, which makes proposals for the handling of disciplinary cases in the House. Obviously, the Standards and Privileges Committee and the House will have to study those proposals. Importantly, the report states that appeals should be allowed in serious cases—I regard this as such a case—in which facts are in dispute. I do not regard this as a case in which the facts are in dispute, other than by the hon. Lady. Anyone who reads the evidence is forced, however reluctantly, to that inexorable conclusion.

The fact remains that the Standards and Privileges Committee is a creature of this House: it set us up, gave us our remit and laid down the rules by which we have to decide. We can only work by the rules that are in force. Far from being as frivolously arrived at as the hon. Lady tried to suggest, the Committee is only five years old because it was set up in the light of the Nolan committee's recommendation. We have amended—we may not yet have got it right and I am open to discussion about that, as I think that we all are and have to be—but none the less we have done our best to meet what Nolan requested of the House.

The Standards and Privileges Committee has always been acutely aware of the need not only to be fair to the hon. Lady but to be seen to be fair. We bent over backwards in our attempts to do so. Uniquely, we provided the hon. Lady with a copy of the commissioner's memorandum, which is not our usual practice—I am sure that she will acknowledge that we did so—so that she could be fully aware not only of the evidence that the commissioner had received, but of the conclusions that the commissioner had arrived at and was putting before the Committee for it to discuss with her. We also wanted the hon. Lady to appreciate the seriousness of her position.

I hate to say this, but there were times when we doubted that the hon. Lady fully realised how serious her position was. We suggested that, in her own interests, she should take proper advice about how she should proceed. Indeed, when it came to taking oral evidence from her, although we started to consider the allegations made against her, and to her, in June, we agreed to her request to adjourn the hearing until mid-January to give her the time that she wanted to retrieve documents, take legal advice and prepare her arguments.

In January, the Committee received substantial written submissions from the hon. Lady and took oral evidence, which lasted most of a morning and the major part of an afternoon. Throughout those hearings, she was accompanied by a solicitor, who was allowed to advise her. She and her solicitor subsequently had ample opportunity to correct the transcript of the minutes of the hearing and to clarify and comment on the evidence given, which they did at length. The Committee considered those corrections and comments at length.

As far as impartiality is concerned, I can only reiterate that the report before the House is unanimous. It was agreed after careful consideration by every member of the Committee, including two hon. Members from the same party as the hon. Lady. Perhaps it is not fair to single them out in that way, but I do so to reassure her colleagues. The independence of mind of those two hon. Members is well understood and respected throughout the House. Of course, I think that everyone would agree that the Chairman of the Committee is one of the most respected and fair minded people—there are not many of them—in the House.

Members of this House have a duty of accountability, under the code of conduct, to

> submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

We have a duty of honesty to provide full and accurate information to the Parliamentary Commissioner and to the Committee. Sadly, the hon. Lady has fallen short of the standards that the House is entitled to expect. The way in which she responded to the complaint against her was both a breach of the code of conduct and a contempt of the House.

We believe that the House can uphold its standards only by imposing a substantial period of suspension on the hon. Lady. I ask the House to note that, as stated at paragraph 50 of our report—which also was unanimously agreed—the suspension would have been "considerably longer" were it not for the fact that we recognised the embarrassment and distress that inevitably would be caused to the hon. Lady by the publication of "sensitive personal information".

I ask the House to support the Committee and approve our report.

4.21 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I should like to make only a brief contribution to the debate. I was asked if I would look very carefully at the Committee's report, and I have done so. I have also had conversations with my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). I stand here neither to condemn her, other than in the terms of the Committee's report, nor to make a plea in mitigation. I shall simply give my opinion on the way in which the Committee has conducted its affairs concerning my hon. Friend, and make one or two suggestions for the future. I do not want those suggestions to be thought in any way to be reducing the work of the Committee.

I have read the report very carefully. In my view, the Committee's proceedings were conducted fairly and properly according to our procedures, and the penalty—although undoubtedly severe—is within the range of penalty that reasonably is available to the Committee. Although I thought about it, I do not think that I would have done my hon. Friend a service if I had really considered tabling an amendment suggesting a shorter penalty.

I agree with the whole substance of the comments of the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) in summarising the Committee's report. I believe that the report—the House would expect no less—is entirely accurate and balanced.

There is no doubt that, sadly, my hon. Friend—I know that she will understand this—has brought upon herself the great majority of what is said about her in the report. There is no doubt that a Member in that situation, from the very earliest moment, should first have consulted the registrar, and explained privately and exactly to the registrar the background facts. The Member should then have taken the advice of the registrar, who is extremely fair minded and helpful in these matters, on whether the matter was or was not registerable. Similarly, when the commissioner comes along, the Member should take exactly the same attitude.

To be fair to my hon. Friend, if she had done that, she would not really be in a difficult position at all. When it comes down to the basic facts, had the interests been registered, there is nothing very remarkable about them at all. There must be very many hon. Members who own let property, and many hon. Members who hold sincere views on either side of the argument on the Rent Acts in relation to which, 10 years ago, she introduced her ten-minute Bill.

The fundamental problem in this case has been the way in which my hon. Friend has sought to defend herself, and the extra difficulties that she has brought upon herself by the manner of her doing so.

I do not know my hon. Friend all that well as a private individual, but I respect her courage, as most of us do. We know that she is exceptionally combative. It is not just, as the old adage says, the lawyer who represents himself who has a fool for a client. It is very difficult to represent oneself when one is in a spot. Criticisms of a partly political nature inevitably intrude in our business and in the newspapers. Someone of a combative frame of mind can easily go in at the deep end and make matters worse for themselves, although not normally as badly as did my hon. Friend, who managed to go as far as possible and further, plumbing the depths in almost every respect.

To give some balance, there is one respect in which that is not necessarily the case. I do not criticise the Committee, but I have some doubts as to whether my hon. Friend's contact with a particular witness mentioned in the report was improper. I know that that is not a major part of the report, but if someone who is left to defend themselves wishes to speak to a witness, there is nobody else to do it. I say that only to ensure that I give as much balance as possible.

What is the point of my speech? It is simply to ask whether we should consider any reform of our procedures. I shall make some suggestions for further consideration, but I do not wish to deprecate what the Committee has done. I shall not oppose the penalty. According to our present procedures, the whole matter was conducted openly and fairly and I have no criticism to make. It was well done.

I emphasise that it is difficult to defend oneself. I have read what was said in the Neill committee and the report as well as the views of Lord Nicholls—a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary who took particular care to consider the issue. Most of his recommendations are not at all contentious. Everyone agrees that one should know at the outset exactly what charges one has to meet. By and large that was true in this case, although I have one comment to make about that.

I should like to emphasise one point made by Lord Nicholls that deserves serious consideration. Many cases are not serious, but, as the right hon. Member for Swansea, West said, this one developed into a very serious case and is producing the most serious penalty for many years. In such serious cases, there is a strong argument for allowing legal advice and, when necessary, legal representation to be provided by the House. It is incredibly difficult to cross-examine and argue one's case and to give the facts at the same time. The two inevitably get muddled up. Very few people can do themselves justice in those circumstances.

Although we are right not to wish to become over-legalistic, not to over-encumber our procedures with legalism and lawyers and to maintain the maximum amount of self-regulation, we should reconsider our rule about entitling people to legal advice. Once the Committee considers that the case against an hon. Member is serious, as opposed to substantially administrative and routine, a halt should be drawn temporarily in the proceedings. The hon. Member concerned should be warned of the seriousness of the position, be invited to obtain legal advice—and given assistance in that if necessary—and be able not merely to have the legal adviser sitting beside them in the Committee, but to have some representation before the Committee. I think that doing that would improve our procedures.

This is a sad day. A difficult matter has been well handled according to our present procedures. The result is sad but not unjust, and there are improvements that we could make for the future.

4.30 pm

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Having read the whole report, I regard the penalty proposed by the Committee as disproportionately severe. I do not wish to make party political points of any kind, but there have been a number of cases of so-called sleaze on both sides of the House. One, not very long ago, was connected with a property matter. For us to be told that my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) is to be suspended for a longer period than anyone else for what she has irregularly done seems an unfairly severe penalty.

Outside the House, to be suspended without pay for a month does not seem a matter of great severity, but inside the House, even to be suspended for three days involves an element of public disgrace. If that sentence were imposed upon me, I would be deeply mortified. So we must not lose sight of the fact that a very severe penalty is being proposed for my hon. Friend. Unlike my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), I wish—to use his words—to put in a plea of mitigation.

When I first came to the House, and for many years afterwards, we had none of these rules and tribunals. I have always taken the Enoch Powell line that it is very much better to treat each other as honourable people and not have a tremendous number of codes, commissions, and outside bodies looking into things. Unfortunately, many of my colleagues—particularly, I am ashamed to say, in my own party—behaved so disgracefully in the

[Sir Peter Tapsell]

previous Parliament that we were inevitably drawn into the present situation. There is no reversing that, and it is going to get worse. The thrust of my right hon. and learned Friend's speech was that we will gradually move away from the position of controlling our own affairs and hand it all over to judicial supervision.

Let us not lose sight of the object of the exercise, which has been to avoid the corruption of the House and of public affairs. I do not believe that my hon. Friend has sought to corrupt anybody. The offences of which she is accused, although technically correct, are of the utmost triviality. They happened a great many years ago, and she has never been secretive about her interest in property matters. Not long ago, for weeks on end, it was almost impossible to open a newspaper without seeing her defiantly trying to defend a charming gothic porch which she had added to one of her houses and which the philistines in her local planning committee wished to demolish. Everybody knows her views on rent restriction. There has never been any suggestion that she was being corrupted or that she was seeking to corrupt anybody else.

Then we come to the extended nature of the inquiries that were made of her. The discussion about overseas trusts, although not one of the criticisms of her in the report's conclusions, takes up quite a lot of space in the cross-examinations that are published. For the uninitiated, the mere mention of the words "overseas trust" raises the suspicion that some skulduggery is going on.

Unfortunately, I have never been the beneficiary of an overseas trust, but they are entirely legal. There are hundreds of thousands of them. If one visits a lawyer's office on any island in the Caribbean, he will proudly talk of the tens of thousands of overseas trusts that he runs from his little office—including those for some of the world's most famous companies and personalities. Whether such trusts should be more carefully supervised is another matter; they are legal.

One aspect of the report that seemed to throw an element of discredit on my hon. Friend related to the fact that her properties in Portugal were held in an overseas trust. However, it was legal for her to do so. Indeed, if one tries to buy a property overseas, one is invariably advised by one's lawyers—I have always taken the advice of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire and surrounded myself with the highest-paid lawyers before I do anything at all in life—to put such property in an overseas trust.

I have some overseas properties. I hasten to add that I have never let them to paying tenants. I have not put them into overseas trusts, because overseas trusts have two great snares. The first is that one has to trust one's trustees. The second is that one's family cannot always be relied upon to die in the order of precedence that one has laid down in the trust. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) said, as a criticism, that my hon. Friend had included her husband in that sequence. However, it would be automatic in an overseas trust. One's lawyer will say, "If you kick the bucket, old boy, it's going to be inconvenient for me if I don't know who is to inherit the properties." That criticism was thus irrelevant.

Why was that matter raised in the first place? Incidentally, the allegations against my hon. Friend came from two journalists, whose motives were not as closely examined by the Committee as I should have expected. Their allegations related to English properties subject to the Rent Acts—that is what the whole matter is about. By no conceivable stretch of the imagination can it be thought that our Rent Acts apply to a holiday home in Portugal. That matter is irrelevant.

The report slowly turns into a trawling operation. The Committee began by looking into a specific situation. My hon. Friend has admitted to that matter, although she has denied throughout that she benefited from the English properties. The Committee then examined a series of aspects of her life—including her private life.

One part of the report that is offensive is the conclusion. It states not only that the period of suspension is the longest that the Committee had ever recommended, but that it would have been even longer but for the distress caused to my hon. Friend when the fact that her marriage temporarily went through a difficult patch was dragged into public knowledge. Such difficulties are not unknown to many Members on both sides of the House.

The Committee implied that the difficulty in my hon. Friend's married life—now happily overcome, I understand—was part of the punishment, because the punishment would have been longer if the matter had not been exposed. All that is deeply unsatisfactory.

The report does not bring out in any detail how much money it is alleged that my hon. Friend made out of the properties that she should have declared. It talks about a substantial sum and then refers to a figure of between £3,400 and £4,400 from the Portuguese properties. To someone on benefit, figures of £3,000 to £4,000 are substantial, but I warn people who might want to own and let an overseas property that they must spend £15,000 to £20,000 a year on running costs if they want to let it to tenants.

The owners have to pay the local property tax, which is substantial in most overseas countries. They have to pay for a maid if they want to let the property. When guests arrive after a flight and a long drive and are accompanied by screaming kids, they are absolutely exhausted. They expect to find the property in spotless condition and they expect to have a maid to look after them. That maid cannot be appointed for the week or fortnight that the property is let; she has to be appointed and paid for over 12 months.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): What about a gardener?

Sir Peter Tapsell: If there is a garden, there must also be a gardener.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I put the hon. Gentleman out of his agony? The whole question of the Portuguese properties was dismissed by the Committee, so he has no case.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I am not in any sort of agony—rather the reverse. The hon. Gentleman refers to one of the issues about which I am complaining. He says that the Committee dismissed the question of the Portuguese properties, but a considerable section of the published evidence in the report is about them. He is a long-serving and distinguished member of the Committee and he says that the issue was dismissed. Therefore, it was all a

mare's nest, but references to overseas trusts and the Portuguese properties were put before the public eye. That would lead people to suppose that my hon. Friend was involved in a carefully organised and fairly substantial overseas operation in which she avoided paying tax because she had an overseas trust.

I mentioned the issues of staff and tax, because the figure of £3,400 that the report quotes would have long since been swallowed up. The owners of overseas properties find that it is extremely difficult to make a profit out of them because of the overheads that I have described.

My hon. Friend's personality is an important part of the process. From my reading of the report, it seems that what really upset the Committee was not so much what she did, but the way she responded to the questioning to which she was subjected. The right hon. Member for Swansea, West mentioned the propriety of her responses, and my hon. Friend admitted in her speech that she was unwise in the way that she handled the affair and her defence. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire spelt that out in technical terms and was right to do so. However, is it correct that my hon. Friend should be so severely punished because of that behaviour?

My hon. Friend is a combative and zany lady. I have known many such ladies in the course of my life, and indeed I rather like them. I particularly like my hon. Friend, who is a woman of courage, integrity and patriotism, with no malice in her at all. I do not believe that she has behaved in a shabby fashion, although I think that she has behaved unwisely, and I shall be proud to continue to regard her as my hon. Friend.

4.45 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): There are times when I wonder whether all Members of the House live on the same planet.

I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) for her outstandingly moderate and gracious speech in what must be difficult circumstances for her.

I regret the absence, through ill health, of the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). He has conducted this investigation as he conducts all investigations—with outstanding fairness and rigour. I also pay tribute to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who is fully living up to the demanding standards set by her predecessor.

As a member of the Committee who sits for no party on the Opposition Benches, it is important that I make the point that the Committee is not partisan; it is not Labour-dominated; it is not Labour-run; and it does not divide on party lines. If it did, I would not serve on it for five minutes—and neither, I am sure, would Opposition Members or Members on the Government Benches.

I know that objections have been raised in the press, and some journalists are suggesting that our procedures have become too rigorous. They are rigorous because they have to be, because we want this Parliament to be held in higher esteem than the previous Parliament. We owe that to ourselves, our constituents and the institution in which we sit.

The report is outstandingly fair, and I hope that the rest of the House will take the same view.

4.47 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I am exceedingly uneasy. I say to the former Attorney-General, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), that when he said that it is difficult to represent oneself, he was wrong—it is impossible to represent oneself.

I say that with some passion because I was in the position of having to try to represent myself in the light of a privileges investigation into chemical and biological warfare, and my talking freely to the late Laurence Marks of *The Observer* a third of a century ago. I was not allowed to have a lawyer present. When one appears before the Committee and one is not a lawyer, it is impossible to try to defend oneself, especially if one is not used to such situations. I was completely tied up by woolly questions from non-lawyers, and the then Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), then simply asked me, "Mr. Dalyell, did you really mean that?" I was then reduced to a state of sheepishness.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the hon. Gentleman note that the Government have accepted the force of what he has just said in the context of the BSE inquiry? He will know that all those who have had to appear before that inquiry have had the advantage of legal advice beforehand, and of representation, if they chose to have it, at the inquiry itself.

Mr. Dalyell: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is a QC, and I do not in any way hesitate on the point that he made.

My contribution will be very short, because I only want to ask one question. Will the Leader of the House address the question about legal representation that was properly put by the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman)? Some of us think that prime time or any other time in the House ought not to be taken up with a situation that has, frankly, bordered on the preposterous. This is a matter for the courts, and it should be dealt with by the courts rather than by the House, however well intentioned and conscientious, trying to act as a court of law. In the light of personal experience, I am against any Committee of the House setting itself up as a court of law.

4.50 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I echo what others have said and wish the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) a speedy and complete recovery from his illness. The House owes a debt to the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) for the way in which he presented the report, as well as to his Select Committee.

I am sorry that the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) is in poor health. I understand the additional pressure that that has put on her. I hope that nothing that I say about the report will undermine the sympathy that I feel for her on that score.

By comparison with some of the other cases that the Select Committee has recently had to investigate, the original offence—the original offence—of non-declaration was a minor one. Of course my hon. Friend should have declared her interest in private rented property before she introduced two ten-minute Bills. As a Housing Minister in

[Sir George Young]

the early 1990s, I was well aware of my hon. Friend's views on the private rented sector, which accorded with her generally libertarian and free-market views on other matters. I did not for a moment believe that her espousal of a free market in housing, and a belief that rent control was wrong, were driven by her own private interests.

If that had been my hon. Friend's only offence, I am not sure that we would even be having this debate. The Select Committee has adjudicated on a number of occasions where interests should have been declared and were not. Hon. Members have survived the usual, rather minor, press interest that ensued, with their reputations intact. Indeed, some on both sides have gone on to hold very high office.

What clearly exasperated the Select Committee in this case was the smokescreen that descended, which caused it to veer all over the road, and to stop and ask a few people for directions before it eventually found a way through. The Committee's strong conclusion in paragraph 42, and the sentence at the higher end of the tariff scale in paragraph 51, flowed from the general obfuscation, and in particular from my hon. Friend's denials of links with offshore companies.

In the present case, three things have happened which have led us to where we are today. First, as I said, my hon. Friend was initially unable to respond accurately to the questions put to her by the Committee, and found herself tangled in the subsequent web.

Secondly, my hon. Friend has not found it possible to accept the verdict of her colleagues, who I think displayed some patience in dealing with the case, or to express her regret for what happened. If she had felt able to do that, she would have found the House to be generous and forgiving.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend has cast aspersions on the neutrality of the Committee and therefore on the roles of my right hon. and hon. Friends who serve on it and on the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell). Neither my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) nor my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would assent to what they believed to be a miscarriage of justice just because they were in a minority. I give away no secrets when I say that both of them are outwith the conventional range of discipline of my party: I cannot imagine that they would have subjected themselves to the discipline of another.

My hon. Friend the Member for Billericay suggested that the procedure that found her guilty was tainted. A number of those who have spoken have mentioned the relevant report of Lord Neill's committee, "Reinforcing Standards". Of course, we should debate that report, which has been published since we last had a report from the Select Committee. It made recommendations about serious contested allegations. Whether that would cover my hon. Friend is a matter for debate. As I said, I personally do not regard her original offence as particularly serious.

Neill stated in paragraph 3.51:

> We considered whether an accused MP should have the right to elect the full tribunal procedure in all contested cases, whether a minor or a serious case. We concluded that they should not.

I agree with what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) said. Once a case has escalated to the extent to which my hon. Friend's case has now escalated, there is a strong argument for the sort of assistance that was mentioned.

Mr. Dalyell: Does the right hon. Gentleman think that Members of Parliament who are not lawyers, however well intentioned, conscientious and untainted they are—I am sure that all members of the Select Committee were like that—are the people to handle contested allegations? When he mentioned offshore companies, the hon. Lady's body language suggested that she strongly contested what was said. I do not know whether she is right or wrong, but it is a matter for a lawyer, rather than for Members of the House of Commons.

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong case for a debate on the report "Reinforcing Standards", and for a debate on the parallel report by Lord Nicholls, which reached the same conclusion.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: No, I am going to finish.

I speak in a personal capacity. I have to say that I think the proceedings were fair. I think the Committee was painstaking in its deliberations, and I support the verdict and the sentence.

4.55 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I shall speak briefly, really to reinforce the anxieties expressed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell).

I think that the process itself is flawed. There are three stages in the process that we adopt. First, there is the complaint to and investigation by the commission; secondly, there is the hearing by the Select Committee, and the report; and, thirdly, there is the process that we are conducting here today. I make no particular complaint about the first and last stages. I recognise that, when it comes to suspension, it must indeed be a matter for the House as a whole, to be debated on the Floor of the House on the basis of recommendations. The fact that most Members will not have read the report is a misfortune, but many decisions are made without all Members' being wholly informed.

I do, however, feel great concern about the second stage—the investigation by a Select Committee of the facts and the recommendations. I strongly support the views expressed by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). When I make the criticism that I am about to make, I hope the House will understand that I am not making a personal criticism of this Select Committee on this occasion; I am dealing with the generality rather than with this particular case.

As the House knows full well, it is one of the principles of the law of this country that no man or woman who knows an accused person can sit in judgment on that accused person. Indeed, any person who appears before a tribunal is entitled to ascertain whether or not the tribunal has an interest in the matter that is before it. Consequently, judges and magistrates from time to time

disqualify themselves from sitting in particular cases because they know the accused person. That is true of every disciplinary committee of which I am aware, and also of every profession of which I am aware.

The reason for that is very sound. If the tribunal sitting in judgment on a person knows that person, there is a risk that the ultimate decision will be affected, either for or against, by that knowledge—or at least it might be supposed to be affected by that knowledge.

I do not for a moment make any criticism of the Select Committee. but the truth is that every member of the Select Committee knows my hon. Friend. Perhaps they know her better than they know many other hon. Members, because she is indeed a very notable figure. In cases such as this, there is a danger that the Select Committee inquiring into particular facts and making recommendations either may be affected by its knowledge, or may be thought to be so affected.

Let me make another point. Again, I am not being critical of the Select Committee, because I have no cause to be. Let us face the facts: the House is an intensely political and partisan place, and when a notable Member appears before a Committee on a disciplinary charge—for that is, in effect, what happened—there is a risk that political baggage will get in the way of a fair hearing and fair recommendations. I am not saying that that happened, because I have no cause to say that it happened; but I do say that the process is flawed, because in other cases it may happen.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that although there is a majority of Labour Members on the Committee, only Labour Members have been suspended as a result of its earlier deliberations? That does not imply that the Committee is tempted to move on party lines, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman may be suggesting.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman has not fully grasped my point. There is no other judicial process in this country whereby individuals are entitled to try another whom they know, or entitled to try a case in which they may be perceived to have a political interest. Through the Select Committee's composition, its members know the accused person, and they may also be thought to have a political interest. I do not say that in this case they did, but we cannot eliminate the danger that they may have had such an interest.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I accept the thrust of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's remarks, but does he not accept that other circumstances exist in which people in the same group try each other, for example, the local CIU, Labour club or golf club committee? The great saving advantage in those circumstances is the right to independent representation. That may be the answer to the problem in the case that we are considering.

Mr. Hogg: I shall speak about legal representation in a moment. We are considering the point that a person's public reputation is on the line. My hon. Friend will be deeply humiliated by what has happened. The facts have been broadcast on radio, television and in many newspapers. It is wholly different from the proceedings that take place in, for example, a golf club.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Is not the essence of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point that we are not considering whether those who try an individual are likely to be guilty of bias, but the principle that justice must not only be done but be seen to be done? Any suspicion—even though it is nothing more—means that the forum is not appropriate to deal with the matter.

Mr. Hogg: I agree with the hon. and learned Gentleman. I have tried to make it plain that I do not allege that the Select Committee was biased or that it acted improperly. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire made it clear that that was not the case in the inquiry. However, I am trying to deal with the process, which is deeply flawed.

When a serious complaint has been made against an hon. Member and has been the subject of a report by the Committee, and when it seems likely that such an hon. Member should be suspended or suffer other serious penalties, it would be proper for the House, through the Select Committees, not to adjudicate the facts and not to hear the case.

An external panel, probably comprising three members, which sits under a judicial chairman, should consider the facts and make the recommendation. The recommendation should be made to the House, because I accept that suspension is a matter for the House. However, hon. Members should not make the critical inquiry into fact and consider whether an hon. Member's word can be trusted, or undertake the investigation and the preliminary recommendations. Hon. Members know the accused person.

That leads to my final point. We should adopt the suggestion of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire. In a case of gravity, an hon. Member needs a lawyer to provide advice and represent the person at the hearing. An hon. Member who is the subject of a serious inquiry is not best placed to weigh up the wisdom of a specific course of action, to conduct cross-examination or even to give evidence by themselves. They need legal advice.

That point is reinforced by the fact that in this case it appears that the original offence was fairly trivial. The sentence is severe because of the way in which my hon. Friend conducted herself—ill-advisedly, if she will forgive my saying so—but the truth is that if she had had legal advice before and during the process she would have conducted herself very much more wisely, and the penalty that she would have faced, if any, would have been much less than that which she now faces. That of itself seems to me to be an argument for legal representation.

Mr. Dalyell: May I reinforce that? After my 1967 privileges case, I was told repeatedly that I made a pig's ear of it. So I did, but with any kind of legal guidance, that would not have been so, because the case was quite good.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is one of the most distinguished Members of the House. If he, in the absence of legal representation and advice, made a pig's ear of it, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is confusing two very different questions: that

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

of standards, which in this case was minor, and that of privilege, which as far as the Committee was concerned was major. Is he arguing that lawyers should be involved in issues of privilege and represent Members of the House on them? If he is, and as against the issue of standards, he will find little support among those on his own Benches. He is confused.

Mr. Hogg: I am not confused; I am talking about liberties and rights. The outcome of the process is that my hon. Friend will be suspended for a month and her reputation will be gravely damaged. Whether we call that liberties, rights or privileges matters not. She will suffer very severe penalties at the hand of the House, which has to put in place a process that treats Members fairly. I do not believe that we are doing so in the case of hon. Members facing the Select Committee.

The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) said that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is one of the most respected and fairest-minded Members of the House. Then he added—I think jocularly—the words, "one of the few"—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Swansea, West makes a deprecating hand motion. Fair enough, but the point is this: are we certain that the process that we have put in place ensures that Members are tried exclusively by Members who are fair minded and responsible? I am not saying that there was any departure from that principle in this case, but I am saying that the process is suspect. We should reform it.

5.8 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): May I make a particular point at the outset? I commend the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) for the way in which he introduced the report. I also make it clear that I have not the slightest doubt that the Committee spent, as it would see it, an enormous amount of time trying to be fair. It has already been said that, given the number of mavericks from both sides of the House who are members of it, none of those people were in any sense subject to pressure. Knowing the personalities to the extent that I do, none would have thought that they had the opportunity to do something horrid to a colleague.

The right hon. Gentleman was fair enough to say that we must surely take from the process an understanding that we can improve our procedures. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) picked up that point as well. I hope that Members read the report and I urge those who have not to do so. It has to be read; it bears reading for both good and unsatisfactory reasons and we must learn from it in the light of experience.

Mr. Alan Williams: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his courteous comments.

For 15 months, the ex-Attorney-General, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), and I sat on a Joint Committee of this House and the other House under the chairmanship of Lord Nicholls, producing recommendations to change and update the position. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) was on the Committee, too—my apologies: he was an active member of it. We spent 15 months going into great detail. I doubt whether many Members know that its report exists. I would wager that, even if they know that it exists, not one of them has read it.

Mr. Nicholls: What the right hon. Gentleman says is entirely right.

I have read the report extremely carefully on, I think, four occasions. I have studied it over two weekends. I have given at least as much attention to it as I used to give to briefs of clients who were paying me to do so, so I can probably say that I have read the document more carefully than many that I have been called to vote on from time to time.

I did that for the following reason. I realised only relatively recently the trouble that my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) was in. I read about it in the paper as casually, I suppose, as many other people. I thought, "Oh dear, that person's reputation is on the line."

I found that interesting. I do not say that I know my hon. Friend particularly well. We do not live near each other. We share some political views, but there are many that we do not. She is to me an honourable friend in theory; I hardly know her at all, but the one thing that I have come to believe over the years from seeing her operate is that she is straight and fair. She may be zany, but she strikes me as someone who would not have a corrupt bone in her body. Therefore, I was interested in the fact that her reputation was on the line. Let us be in no doubt: her reputation is on the line, although, ironically, probably not in the House.

Members have had the benefit of reading the report—if they have cared to do so—and hearing the speeches of people such as the right hon. Member for Swansea, West, but the following will be said at the Frog and Bucket later today: "Have you seen what they have been up to in Parliament? Someone has done something dodgy"—the person must be dodgy because that is implicit in overseas trusts. "She did not disclose a load of dodgy trusts. They caught her and kicked her out for a month. Well, they are paid too much anyway."

Whatever we say tonight, that will be the way the matter will be perceived by the general public. If we condemn anyone—any hon. Member or member of the public—to such a judgment, we owe it to ourselves and to the people whom we represent to ask whether we could have done it better.

I make it clear: I imply no criticism of the care that the Committee and, indeed, the commissioner have taken when I say that, as a lawyer, I read things in the report that make me deeply uneasy. I will not detain the House for many minutes, but I will draw its attention to one paragraph as an example: paragraph 32 on page xii. After the first sentence, it says:

> We agreed with the Commissioner's conclusions, and said: "Although not a requirement, there are occasions when interests of this nature would be better registered, and if a doubt should arise Members ought to seek the advice of the Commissioner. We and our predecessors have made this point on several previous occasions. If a Member feels it necessary to seek professional advice on a matter of registration it is clear that some doubt must exist".

I ask the House to think about that sentence:

> If a Member feels it necessary to seek professional advice on a matter of registration it is clear that some doubt must exist.

We seem to have put ourselves in a position whereby, if a Member is prudent enough to say, "I do not know the full implications. I have many other things to do in my life. I had better take advice," and he does so, it must mean that he should register the interest.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): That is not what the report says.

Mr. Nicholls: I have quoted from it. The hon. Gentleman can go away and look it up if he wants to. It is as if someone is brought to a court of law and, at the end of that process, the judge says, "I have now checked the books and there is not an offence that quite fits your case, but you should be convicted. That is the way of it." That is the effect of such a process. We should be concerned about that.

Mr. Levitt: I speak as a member of the Committee. The quotation that the hon. Gentleman uses is from an earlier report, which talks about slightly different affairs in terms of trusts, but, most significant, it seeks to advise Members to get rid of any ambiguity in the situation. Advice should be sought. If that advice is that Members do not need to register an interest, there is no need to register it, so it is not fair to say that seeking advice confirms that there is a registrable interest.

Mr. Nicholls: I see the point that the hon. Gentleman is driving at, but he is wrong. The first part of my quotation was a phrase from the previous commissioner of which the present commissioner approved. My point stands.

The quotation contains a further implication. It has been said several times that my hon. Friend said that she had no connection with overseas trusts. My reading of the evidence is that she made that point after having thought about it—doubtless with the benefit of lawyers—and in the belief that she had no interest that was registrable. Whether she had such an interest is a matter of debate, but we cannot say that someone who felt she had no interest, but who was subsequently held to have had an interest, must have been acting dishonestly.

My hon. Friend is not the only person who felt that way. We are in a remarkable position. One of the charges upheld against my hon. Friend is detailed on page xv as follows:

> Mrs. Gorman gave seriously misleading information in 1995 and 1999 about her connections with the offshore companies Partingdale Holdings, Loxhill Investments and Kinloch Investments, owned by Queenstown Trust, and did not specify them in the Register.

However, my hon. Friend had taken advice on the point from leading counsel. At annex A, on pages lix-lx, the opinion of Philip Heslop QC concludes, at paragraph 9:

> It follows that, for the same reasons given in the opinion of Michael Beloff QC but a fortiori, Mrs Gorman had, in my opinion, no interest in the Queenstown Trust registrable under category 9, and Mrs Gorman's position as regards non-registration under category 10 is, for the reasons also set out in Michael Beloff QC's opinion, more than arguable.

My hon. Friend has been found guilty of not registering a particular interest when leading counsel had said that she did not have to do so.

The Standards and Privileges Committee—perhaps like many juries—draws on a wide range of experience. I have gone through the relevant entries in "Dod's Parliamentary Companion" and "Who's Who" to find out the backgrounds of those who sat in judgment on my hon. Friend. I detected one non-practising barrister and a solicitor who had previously had experience of employment law. That was the sum total of legal experience on the Committee. In effect, we have set up a jury that passes judgment without the benefit of counsel arguing before it or a High Court judge who can direct it on matters of fact or law.

I have on a number of occasions spoken not in defence of lawyers. I am a lawyer, but none of us is perfect. As a species, I do not particularly like lawyers. I do not mix with them, and I am not very keen on them. But even lawyers have their uses. We have set up a judicial process in which someone's reputation may be put on the line. We have given the Committee the impossible task of arguing matters of law before itself on which its members are not qualified to argue, yet no trained lawyer is present to ensure that the right inferences are drawn.

These matters used to be handled better. My hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell) said that it was probably inevitable that we reached this point because of some of the excesses that occurred in the previous Parliament. Yet it was probably better in the old days when, if one behaved badly, the judgment of one's peers was such that one's life here became untenable. If one did not realise that one's place was untenable, the Chief Whip would telephone the association chairman, and one would find oneself not standing again for Parliament. That is the way it used to be.

I accept that these matters can never be handled that way again, but we have achieved the worst of all possible worlds. We have condemned someone through a judicial process in which that person did not have the benefit of a lawyer or a chance to have someone sit in judgment.

To give one tiny example of what can happen when people sit in judgment on matters that they are not in a position to judge, I refer to paragraph 47 of the report, which says:

> Even if Mrs Gorman believed that the beneficial interest had been transferred, she remained the joint owner of the properties.

The last thing that I would want to do—perhaps because I would be doing it for free—is to give hon. Members who are not lawyers a potted history of land law in this country, but I can inform them that nobody owns land in this country apart from the sovereign: everybody else merely owns an interest in land. It is known as an estate. People own either a legal or an equitable estate.

The point that was being made on my hon. Friend's behalf, as any student of law would know, was that she had severed the beneficial interest. If that had been properly understood, with the help of counsel, by those deliberating on it, a different conclusion would have been drawn. It might not have made a huge difference in the end, but it is an example of statements appearing with all their tendentious force that are not properly understood by those who make them.

It would be inappropriate and needless to make this a party political matter. The public, whom we are here to represent, will be concerned to work out the gravity of my hon. Friend's offence, and to do that they will look at the penalty. That is usually quite a good measure—if one weighs up life imprisonment and a 10 quid fine, one assumes that the greater offence attracted the greater penalty—but that is not how it seems in this instance.

[Mr. Nicholls]

For one of the complaints against the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), we read:

> Complaint upheld but no action recommended,

and for another:

> Complaint upheld, personal statement made.

The right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) felt obliged to resign from the Cabinet, but the verdict on his misdemeanour was:

> Complaint upheld . . . The Committee considered that no action should be taken.

By contrast, the severest penalty of all is being applied to my hon. Friend.

I am worried more than anything else by the fact that the punishment to be meted out is based not on the gravity of the substantive offence but on the fact that the Committee thought that its corporate dignity had been infringed. The most draconian penalty has been imposed for what everyone—including, in fairness, the Chairman of the Committee—accepts is a relatively minor offence.

In the 19th century, Lord Macaulay referred to the way in which the British public can look

> in one of its periodical fits of morality.

We have to learn the lessons and say that if we are to impose this procedure on ourselves it must be a fair procedure. If we do not hold ourselves in sufficiently high regard properly and adequately to protect our own, we may ask ourselves why sometimes the general public do not hold us in such regard either.

5.23 pm

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): As a former member of the Committee who then suffered its penalties, I have experience of both ends of its work. When I was on the Committee, a series of hon. Members came before us. If we have a debate about whether we should change our procedures, I certainly hope to be here to defend the Standards and Privileges Committee, which is the most appropriate method whereby we can discipline ourselves and Members of Parliament can be held to account by their peers.

I do not want to invite the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) to enter the debate, but I remind hon. Members of the way in which he demonstrated to a Member of Parliament who came before the Committee that had he taken the option of being truthful in the first instance, the outcome would have been much easier both on him and on the Committee. His attempted refusal to accept the facts made the process far more difficult for him. My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) said that had the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) been up-front, honest and more helpful to the Committee, the punishment it proposed might not have been so severe.

Our current system is the best system. I broke the rules of the House, I understood that I had done so and I accepted the authority of the Standards and Privileges Committee. It would have helped the House if the hon. Lady had done the same. Instead, regrettably, we have heard a succession of right hon. and hon. Opposition Members, with one or two exceptions, attack the Committee. They say that they are not attacking it, but they are. That does not help the Committee or help to uphold the standards that we set for ourselves as Members of Parliament. They are trying to confuse those outside this place, who do not understand how we work. They do not further the debate or help the hon. Lady's case by so doing. It would have been far better had she come to the Chamber and apologised. Then, we could have got on with our business.

5.26 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The matter is a serious one. I rise to speak in this debate because I wish to follow the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell) and others who have suggested that it is the draconian nature of the penalty that most exercises us. My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) is right to draw the House's attention to the way in which today's debate and the decision of the Standards and Privileges Committee will be represented outside the House.

We stand in grave danger of trading complaints against each other and placing them before the Committee for partisan purposes. The only beneficiaries of such a process will be the media, to which we provide wonderful copy, and those who want to denigrate our Parliament. All Members of Parliament recognise that there is little corruption here and that the vast majority of Members—probably all—work extremely hard in the interests of their constituents. We would be hard pressed to name one Member of Parliament on either side of the House who we believe represents an interest that is outside his or her political philosophy for the sake of personal gain. By repeatedly dragging out these cases, we supply the media with sticks to bash us with.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the reputation of the House was harmed during the previous Parliament? Does he not realise that the Parliamentary Commissioner and the new Committee arose from the scandals of those days? If he is concerned about the reputation of the House—I have no reason to believe that he is not—does he not agree that it is essential to have standards? If we do not set standards or create the means of inquiring into complaints—in the current case, serious complaints—we might as well give up.

Mr. Howarth: I could not possibly dissent from the view that we must uphold standards in Parliament. My point is that I believe that our standards are rather good. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman made a partisan point. It was a feature of the general election—as the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, admits, it was a part of the Labour party's campaign—that the Conservative party was portrayed as sleaze-ridden. The fact is that, since the election, relatively seriously charges have been preferred against Labour Members.

The hon. Gentleman makes my very point. We are neither advantaging ourselves nor doing justice to the institution which most of us hold in great affection by continually trying to score these points off one another. As I say, the only beneficiaries thereof are the media.

One of my complaints against Sir Gordon Downey was that he felt it necessary that people should be able to come to his door to make all sorts of complaints about right

hon. and hon. Members. There is a lot of mileage for journalists in doing so because it provides useful copy. The letters "MP" are useful in making short headlines. MP does this, or MP is up to that—it makes wonderful copy and further feeds the public perception that we are not honourable people.

I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) made a rather unworthy comment at the outset of the proceedings when I sought to intervene on him, and I hope that he will accept that.

Mr. Alan Williams *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I shall do the right hon. Gentleman the courtesy of giving way—a courtesy that he did not accord me—but in a moment.

Hon. Members should know that the right hon. Gentleman reserves his venom for me to the Chamber. He is the absolute picture of courtesy outside. We have a fine relationship outside and I do not know what drives him to be so venomous towards me in the Chamber. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes me to give way, I shall do so.

Mr. Williams: I was about to extend the courtesy to the Chamber and say that if what I said upsets the hon. Gentleman so much, of course I withdraw it.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for so doing. I am sure that it helps. But the point that I wanted to ask him was this. He referred to the fact that one of the charges levelled against my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) was that she had sought to interfere—that was the word used in the report—with a former tenant of a property. Yet the report refers to Fran Abrams, who I understand is the journalist from *The Independent* who lodged one of the initial complaints. She apparently wrote to the commissioner, Ms Filkin, on 28 June and 5 July. On page xxv the report states:

> The Independent have contacted 6 former tenants—

not one but six—

> who were living at this property in 1990 and paying rent to Mr. Gorman.

If the Committee had genuinely wanted to be fair, it should not only have said that the hon. Lady should not have interfered with the witnesses, it should also have referred to journalists. It is all right for journalists to dig around and find dirt on Members, but it is not in order for Members to warn people that journalists are snooping around trying to make a story. That was why I sought to intervene on the right hon. Gentleman and for no other reason.

Reference has been made to the rules of the House. There is growing acceptance across the Floor of the House that the matter has grown out of all proportion. Our rules have already been quoted, but I wish to do so again because it is important that the public understand them. The main purpose of the register is

> to provide information of any pecuniary interest or other material benefit which a Member receives which might reasonably be thought by others to influence his or her actions, speeches, or votes in Parliament, or actions taken in his or her capacity as a Member of Parliament.

Essentially, the accusation made against my hon. Friend is that she moved a 10-minute Bill when she was in receipt of rents from properties which she had not declared. Whether she or her husband was a beneficial owner of those properties is immaterial. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) made clear, my hon. Friend is known to have been a libertarian and a deregulator, so what she was proposing was entirely consistent with her political philosophy. What the House and the public want to know is when a Member is advancing a cause not because it is one in which they strongly believe and which is part of their political philosophy, but for another reason, namely, that there is some personal advantage to them. I honestly do not believe that many hon. Members could claim to be as politically consistent—indeed, as ideologically consistent—as my hon. Friend. Therefore, it is unfair of the Committee to have taken to heart so seriously and self-righteously the fact that my hon. Friend moved her 10-minute Bill—although I accept that if one has an interest to declare, one should do so.

We need to return to the basic question of the purpose of the register.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: In a moment.

In connection with another matter, I had cause to go through some of the speeches of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. I will name no names because that would serve no purpose but I found that many hon. Members who had properly declared an interest in the register—whether they were sponsored by a trade union, working for a company or whatever—regularly participated in associated debates, particularly 10 years ago. Their interest was probably known, but it may not have been.

I could score petty party political points by naming one or two Ministers and saying that on such and such a date in 1988 they participated in a debate but did not declare their interest. I am not interested in doing so, because I do not believe that those right hon. and hon. Members who are now Ministers in this Labour Government participated in those debates 10 or 15 years ago because they were paid to do so. The fact that they were sponsored by a trade union or whatever was incidental.

The idea that my hon. Friend was influenced by her ownership of a property in Portugal to participate in affairs to do with that country in this House is monstrous. We do ourselves a disservice if we try to pretend to people outside that my hon. Friend had such a serious interest in some property in Portugal, or even two properties, that it influenced the way in which she behaved in the House. We would be telling the public that this place is behaving in a way that none of us intended.

Does the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) still wish to intervene?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: No, the hon. Gentleman has moved on.

Mr. Howarth: Fine.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): The hon. Gentleman read out the rule of the House and the test that has to be applied. It is not a subjective test as to whether the hon. Member for

[Mr. Robert Maclennan]

Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) felt that she was moved by her role as a landlord to take a particular view of the Rent Acts; it is an objective test to do with pubic perception. In making his case, the hon. Gentleman seems completely to have lost sight of that fact.

Mr. Howarth: I am sorry, but I do not think that public perception is such a readily identifiable objective test.

I do not believe that, given my hon. Friend's consistently proclaimed position on the matter in question and on deregulation in general, one could possibly suggest that her ownership of properties in south London—whether she did own them or not—was a factor that influenced the way in which she behaved in the House. I used to represent a mining constituency and participated in many mining debates in which coal miner after coal miner spoke passionately on an issue in which they clearly had an interest. Of course, they declared it, but no one sought to belittle them because they spoke with passion about an industry in which they had a close and personal interest.

Mr. Bill Tynan (Hamilton, South) *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I will give way once more and then I must get on and finish.

Mr. Tynan: I am reluctant to speak, but I am saddened by the tenor of the debate. Hon. Members who have decided to participate are doing so for the best reasons—to sustain a Member of the House who is in trouble. I appreciate why they are doing it. However, although I am relatively new Member, I also appreciate the fact that the House created a procedure providing for a Committee to investigate such cases. I ask the House to recognise not only that such a Committee was established in this case, but that it attempted in fairness to ensure that justice was done. I ask hon. Members to accept that the Committee should be treated with the respect that its deserves.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have been indulgent to the hon. Gentleman, who is a new Member, but he should remember in future that interventions must be brief.

Mr. Howarth: I quite understand why the hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) wished to intervene. He is a new hon. Member, and I am sure that we all welcome him as Lord Robertson's successor.

I appreciate that the Committee is an all-party one. I have made the point before that, formerly, the Committee was presided over by the Prime Minister of the day and composed entirely of very senior hon. Members. That is the way it should be. I do not believe that new hon. Members should be members of the Committee. However, I do not wish to deal with what we should do about the future, but simply to consider the specific case and the dangers that might arise if the House were to approve the Committee's report.

As I said, the proposed penalty is draconian. We have to ask ourselves what damage has been done to the House by my hon. Friend. Perhaps the real damage is that she failed to take advantage of the assistance of one of my right hon. and learned Friends, who—for a very small fee, or perhaps a very large fee—might have been enabled her to deal more expeditiously with the Committee.

The proposed penalty is not only draconian, but wholly out of proportion to any damage. It also sits very uncomfortably with decisions made in cases involving prominent Labour Members. As for perceptions, the danger for Labour Members is that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool—who is a very senior man—was able to preside in investigations of the company affairs of another Minister without declaring to his own private secretary that he was in receipt of a very substantial loan from that other Minister—

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall not give way.

Within a year, the right hon. Gentleman was not only back in the Government, but in the Cabinet. However, my hon. Friend—who had a lapse of memory, did not remember all the details, and perhaps gave the Committee a bit of a hard time as well—will have imposed on her the most draconian penalty that the Committee has dished out since the general election. That is unfair, and that is why the House, should it decide to support the Committee on the proposed penalty, will be making a grave decision.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) was on the Committee, and I know him to be an extremely fair man. I also appreciate that the Committee takes its decisions on an all-party basis. Nevertheless, on the proposed penalty, I think that he and his colleagues are quite wrong.

5.43 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I had not intended to speak in the debate—I am the newest member of the Standards and Privileges Committee—but I have become extremely concerned about the tone of the debate. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) asked what damage the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) has done to the reputation of the House. I tell him that Conservative Members, in this debate, are doing more damage to the reputation of the House than the hon. Lady has done.

The speeches by Conservative Members—with the honourable exceptions of the shadow Leader of the House and the former Attorney-General, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell)—have been made in the manner of Mark Antony, suggesting that the Committee was honourable, but then seeking to undermine not only the Committee's judgment and work, but the process. We should be very cautious on that particular point.

I dissent entirely from the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). This is not a judicial procedure, and a suggestion that it should be treated as such is quite contrary to the purpose of the Committee and the way in which the House judges its business. The suggestion that people do not sit in judgment on their peers is a denial of what life is mostly about. People are always sitting in judgment on their peers. How on earth do people get promotion, demotion or the sack other than by being disciplined by their peers and people with whom they work?

The House has determined that we wish to establish standards of conduct by which we judge ourselves. The last thing that we want to do is put that process in the hands of barrack-room lawyers outside the processes of the House.

The issue in this case was whether the hon. Lady had a registerable interest to declare and had failed to declare it. It is that simple. The Committee concluded that she had and that she then tried to hide the fact.

This is the first report in which I have been involved. I was very impressed by the time and the trouble that was taken to ensure that every fact was considered objectively and in detail and that everybody had their say. Where there were doubts, we went back over the ground to ensure that we did not proceed until we had secured agreement.

Mr. Dalyell: Who are the barrack-room lawyers outside the House whom we are supposed to have suggested?

Mr. Bruce: I do not know. It was the hon. Gentleman who wanted to bring in the lawyers. My suggestion was that the procedure was best kept within the House and not handed over to judicial process. Some of the senior Conservative Members who have spoken were disingenuous if they were seriously suggesting that that would be an appropriate way forward. They have done a disservice to the House, the Committee and our proceedings by suggesting that, because they know that they were trying to throw up a smokescreen. I hope that the House will move to a decision on the basis of this appropriate and detailed Committee report, which has been considered very carefully and has the support of hon. Members on both sides.

5.47 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Like the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan), I had not intended to take part in the debate. I just want to say a couple of things and I promise to be brief.

Many Labour Members have a deal of affection and respect for the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). I remember the time when she and I—in the company of others—were almost involved in a plane crash in South Australia. In those dreadful minutes before we crash-landed, she behaved with immense courage. I was white-knuckled at the time. However, she has been ill served by her defenders this afternoon.

If the motion is passed, I know that the hon. Lady will behave with the same dignity and rectitude as were shown by my hon. and old Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) when he was rightly suspended for what he has admitted this afternoon was a transgression.

I have complete confidence in the integrity of the members of the Committee. I pray to heaven that I shall never appear in front of them, but I know that I would get a fair and just hearing. One Conservative Member kept talking about the audience outside. There are a number of audiences, including the two devolved Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament, which are dealing with legislation on ethics and standards. The Scottish Parliament is doing that at the moment. I hope that they all learn from how we conduct ourselves. This sounds very self-regarding, although I am not a member of the Committee, but much of what we do in dealing with Members of Parliament whom we believe have transgressed and broken the code of conduct is admirable.

If the motion is passed, I know that the hon. Lady will behave with the same dignity as my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West. Her defenders this afternoon have served her badly.

5.50 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) in wishing the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) well? We pay tribute to the woman concerned and to Duncan Goodhew for taking action immediately when the right hon. Gentleman was taken ill a week ago.

My views on the matter before us are reflected in the Committee's report, and I will not rehearse them. However, published with the report are the minutes of evidence that were taken before the previous report on my hon. Friend. I should like to quote from one of the replies that she gave on page 4 of the evidence given on 18 May 1999. In answer to a question from the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), my hon. Friend said:

> But I perceived the Members' interests Register as a document listing income which I was receiving from elsewhere and where I was not receiving income I did not consider that was a matter that needed to be declared. I acknowledge again that that was an error of judgment on my part for which I am extremely apologetic and sorry, and that is what I want to say.

I think that the memory from this debate and from the second report should be those words—my hon. Friend was right then. I think that the learned counsel who was quoted in one of the letters is wrong. I believe that the learned counsel and others who may follow these debates and consider what to do, especially if we get close to adopting the Nicholls recommendations, should consider paragraph 39 of our report on page xiii, which states:

> Members have a duty of accountability under the Code of Conduct and "must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office".

The relevant footnote 61 refers to the House of Commons paper 688, Session 1995-96, page 3.

No one in this debate has challenged the commissioner's fact-finding. That is a good thing. The first question is whether my hon. Friend should have registered information to begin with, the second is whether she should have made a declaration.

When a complaint is made, the commissioner has to ask whether there is a prima facie reason to investigate it. When complaints are put formally to an hon. Member, that hon. Member would have a duty to give the commissioner all the information available so that the commissioner can easily find out the facts. On some complaints, the commissioner finds that there is no case to investigate. On others, there is a case to investigate, but responses show that there is no need to take it any further. If there is a difference of view, or an hon. Member's view has changed, the hon. Member should say that it would have been better to register, do so, and say to the Committee, as my hon. Friend did on 18 May, that she had changed her view.

I do not necessarily agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), but he challenged neither our procedure

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

nor our conclusions. I disagree with the suggestion of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) that such matters should go to a tribunal or a court of law. I should like my voice to be taken into account. We are capable of considering the findings of fact by the commissioner, and I believe that we have got it right. Things would have been very different if this inquiry had received the same co-operation as the previous one.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House

(i) approves the Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (HC 260); and

(ii) accordingly suspends Mrs. Teresa Gorman, Member for Billericay, from the service of the House for one month.

Orders of the Day

Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

5.54 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill fulfils a commitment that I made in a written statement to the House on 5 November 1998 to introduce legislation as soon as the programme permitted. The Bill will give statutory authority to charges made by the Sea Fish Industry Authority for handling applications for fishing vessel grants. These charges were discontinued in May 1996, and the Bill does not allow for their reintroduction.

The Bill is very short and straightforward, but the background, as with many legal issues, is complex. Indeed, the background to the Bill is rather longer than the Bill itself. I hope that the House will find my introduction to the issues that required the introduction of the Bill helpful.

First, I should make it clear that the Bill is not a vehicle for introducing financial assistance to the fisheries industry. It is intended solely to deal with the charges levied in the past. In that respect, it is a very narrow measure. There will be further opportunities to discuss those issues.

The Bill's purpose is to ensure that the charges levied by the Sea Fish Industry Authority between 1 October 1981 and 3 May 1996 in connection with the administration of certain grant schemes that were made under the Fisheries Act 1981 were proper. It also ensures the validity of the charges made by the Sea Fish Industry Authority's predecessor, the Herring Industry Board between March 1972 and October 1981. The Herring Industry Board was abolished in 1981 but its liabilities were transferred to SFIA.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to expand on the background to the Bill before I take interventions.

The first charges that the Bill is intended to validate are known as technical charges. Those were levied by the Sea Fish Industry Authority to cover the costs of various checks and inspections that the authority carried out during the period from 1 October 1981 to 3 May 1996 in relation to applications under five different fishing vessel grant schemes. No other charges were made by the Sea Fish Industry Authority in administering the schemes during this period.

Under a succession of schemes made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981, grants have been made available to fishermen in the United Kingdom for the construction, improvement or safety of vessels. These have all been administered by the Sea Fish Industry Authority on behalf of Ministers, as provided by section 16 of the Fisheries Act 1981.

The SFIA has surveyors' offices in Hull, Plymouth and Peterhead, but grant payments have always been made from Edinburgh. The technical charges covered the costs incurred by SFIA marine surveyors in inspecting vessels at the application stage. Those inspections checked on what work was needed, including examination of technical specifications and plans, and inspection on completion of work so that the surveyor could satisfy himself that the work, which had been grant-aided, had been carried out properly. The charge was calculated on a sliding scale but on average was around 4 per cent. of the cost of the work, although a maximum ceiling was set to limit the charge applied to larger applications.

The charge was itself eligible for aid under the grant schemes, which meant that vessel owners bore only 70 per cent. of the charge. The SFIA levied its charges by deducting the total charge from the amount of grant paid to the beneficiary.

On Government charging, the guiding principle is that a public body may not generally make a charge for a service without statutory authority or the agreement of the "customer". Questions about the validity of the technical charges were first raised in 1995, when officials were examining material that the SFIA had produced to implement the Fishing Vessels (Safety Improvements) (Grants) Scheme 1995. Although section 3 of the Fisheries Act 1981 gives the SFIA power to charge for certain services, there were doubts as to whether this power extended to the SFIA levying its "technical charges". When the SFIA administers a fishing grant scheme, it does so, under section 16 of the 1981 Act, on behalf of Ministers. Its powers, therefore, are essentially those of the Ministers for whom it acts. Since Ministers had no automatic power to make charges in relation to the schemes, it seemed doubtful whether the authority had the power to charge.

Against this, it was noted that applicants had signed the SFIA's conditions of approval for the payment of grant, and those referred to the deduction of the technical charge from the overall level of grant. I emphasise that no objections about the deduction of the technical charge were ever received from grant recipients.

The issues were extremely complex and were given thorough consideration. The conclusion reached was that it was doubtful whether the SFIA had legal power to levy its technical charges. In the light of that, the authority was formally instructed to cease levying the charges on 3 May 1996.

It was then decided that the charge should not be reintroduced, because the nature of the grant schemes had changed and much less technical work was involved in processing applications. The Bill, therefore, does not give authority for technical charges to be levied for any period after 3 May 1996; it does not introduce retrospective charges.

My written answer on 5 November 1998, in *Hansard*, column 660W, announced the Government's commitment to legislate when our programme allowed. That announcement made it clear that MAFF did not intend to meet any claims that were brought before the legislation was in place. There were three reasons for that. First, the charge for administering the grants was reasonable. Secondly, it has never been challenged—no complaints about it have been received. Thirdly, the cost of repaying the charge would be disproportionate to the benefit that such repayment would confer on those who paid it.

There are precedents for the provision of retrospective statutory authority for similar charges. The Birds (Registration Charges) Act 1997 validated charges levied under sections 6 and 7 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for the registration and selling of certain dead birds. The Wireless Telegraphy Act 1954 also gave authority to past payments made to the Postmaster General for wireless transmission and receiving licences.

Background work on the Bill raised the possibility that similar charges levied by the predecessor body to the SFIA—the Herring Industry Board—in connection with the schemes of financial assistance made under the Sea Fish Industry Act 1970 and earlier legislation consolidated in that Act might also have been of doubtful validity. After careful consideration, it was concluded that the HIB also had no power to levy those charges. Consistent with the treatment of the SFIA charges, it was thus decided to extend the coverage of the Bill to the equivalent HIB charges.

Section 6 of the White Fish and Herring Industries Act 1953, as amended, enabled the HIB to make grants to persons engaged, or proposing to become engaged, in the herring industry for acquiring or improving fishing vessels under a certain size limit. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) might understand why I thought I should explain the background before I took interventions.

Acting under section 6 of the 1953 Act, as amended, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Secretary of State for Scotland introduced the Fishing Vessels (Acquisition and Improvement) Grants) scheme in 1967, enabling the HIB to make grants. A similar scheme to enable the HIB to make grants was introduced in 1976.

Charges levied by the HIB in relation to those two schemes were on the same sort of fishing vessel grant applications as those made to the SFIA and were calculated using a very similar formula to that later used by the SFIA. The same considerations as to the reasonableness of the charges and the disproportionate cost of any repayments applied to those charges just as they applied to the SFIA charges. Indeed, the difficulties of making any repayments would be even greater, given the longer time that has elapsed. The Government have therefore decided to legislate to validate those charges too, because the charges are equivalent to those levied by the SFIA. The Government would also not intend to meet any claims made before the legislation in respect of them is in place.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In order to ensure that the debate is not intelligible only to those who have participated on previous occasions, will the hon. Gentleman do me the good turn of assisting the House by explaining the formula—in some detail, if necessary—for the elucidation of right hon. and hon. Members?

Mr. Morley: As I said in my introduction, I realise that this is a complex, technical and narrow measure that relates to charges. I am presenting a full explanation to the House. With the leave of the House, I am willing to clarify any points that hon. Members raise in the course of the debate.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): From the hon. Gentleman's description, it sounds as though the charging

[Mrs. Jacqui Lait]

has come about through custom and practice, rather being made than on a statutory basis. He has traced it back to the HIB. Was it custom and practice then, or did the charging scheme exist before the HIB?

Mr. Morley: No, the charge goes back to the HIB—that is far enough for anyone. It was not based on custom and practice; it came about in relation to the administration of grants. When grants were paid out, the boats were inspected to ensure that the money was being correctly used—that the work had been done properly and that the grant conditions had been upheld. That is right in order to protect public funds, and is normal when any local authority or Government grant is made.

The question was whether the HIB and its successor—the SFIA—actually had the authority to charge for those grants. The Bill makes it clear that they did have that authority, even though it will be applied retrospectively under the measure.

Mr. Forth: The Minister will be aware of the Sea Fish Industry Act 1951. Section 15(2)(a) states that the then authority

shall have power . . . to raise by means of a general levy

the moneys necessary. It then refers to voluntary payments.

If I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to trace the history of the Act from 1951 to the present, because there is a continuum. Does the Minister agree that authority may arise from the 1951 Act—not to mention its successors?

Mr. Morley: In an earlier debate today, we heard of the benefit of engaging the best legal brains to give advice on such issues. I am advised that the matter has been examined carefully to find which provisions are applicable. The feeling was that, in order to ensure that there is no doubt about the situation, a measure could be introduced, because it would make it clear where matters stand—both to the industry and to the Government—and that charges were levied with the proper authority.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): The Minister referred to the legislation on the HIB. Will he tell the House how the White Fish Authority and legislation linked with the HIB are germane to the Bill?

Mr. Morley: It is germane because the HIB was the predecessor to the SFIA. The HIB administered charges that were, in essence, the same as those administered under the SFIA and for the same kind of grant administration. There was thus an element of doubt. If there is doubt as to the legal status of the SFIA in relation to charging, the same doubt must apply to its predecessor.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: I should like to make progress with my remarks. I realise that this is not one of the most scintillating speeches ever made in the House, but it is important that I explain what is at stake, and the technicalities of the measure.

The total amount of money levied in charges was £7.3 million; it covers 13,000 cases over about 30 years. On average, that amounted to about £560 per case. However, as up to 30 per cent. of the charge was offset by grant, the cost to the applicant was about £390. A small part of many of the charges was for technical advice—such as assisting applicants to choose the appropriate equipment—and was not directly connected with handling the grant application. The SFIA did, and does, have powers under the Fisheries Act 1981 to charge for such of advice, but it would now be extremely difficult to separate that from charges for the work that necessitated the Bill.

Because of the time delay, it is difficult to be more precise about the exact amount of the charge than the figure of £7.3 million. I am sure that the House realises that, even if we wanted to trace the owners of boats on which charges were levied, it would be impossible to do so.

The Bill's first main operative provision is in clause 1(1). It will ensure the validity of the charges levied by the Sea Fish Industry Authority between October 1981 and May 1996 in connection with its administering four fishing vessel grant schemes made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981 and also the 1976 scheme to which I have already referred. Under the 1981 Act, the responsibility for administering the latter scheme passed to the SFIA. The schemes are the five specified in paragraphs (a) to (e) of clause 1(2).

Clause 2(1) makes provision to ensure the validity of the same technical charges levied by the HIB between March 1972 and October 1981 in connection with its administering the two fishing vessel grant schemes specified in subsections 2(a) and (b).

Clause 3 cites the full name of the Bill. No charges were levied for the administration work after 3 May 1996 and clause 3(2) is necessary to make it clear that the Bill does not facilitate the reintroduction of any charges after that date. Clause 3(3) is necessary to establish that the Bill extends to the whole United Kingdom including Northern Ireland.

I appreciate that this is a narrow and technical measure. However, it will protect from any doubt the issue of the payment of public funds. I emphasise that there have not been any complaints from the fishing industry about the charges, which were levied fairly in relation to the services that were provided as part of the administration of grant aid that was claimed at the time.

6.11 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): In the light of the fishing industry's parlous state, it is incredible that, at his first opportunity to speak to the House since the Fisheries Council met in December, the Minister should have chosen to introduce a Bill that is at best obtuse, as he readily agreed: he also said virtually nothing about the industry's problems, and certainly proffered no short or long-term solutions to them.

Although I accept that the Bill is narrowly drawn—and I am sure that the occupant of the Chair will exert his responsibilities in that regard—I have to say that we have very few opportunities to discuss fishing in all its facets on the Floor of the House. The bulk of the legislation is a devolved European matter. At the time of the annual fishing debate in November last year, there was

considerable disquiet about the short time afforded for discussion. After the Minister made his contribution, only two Back Benchers were able to speak.

The problem was recognised by the Leader of the House at business questions on 19 January. The right hon. Lady was asked about the loss of this Bill on that day's business and she said:

> I was not pressed to find more time for the Bill that was debated this evening, I was pressed to find an opportunity to discuss fishing issues. My hon. Friend will know that one of the Bills that has been lost for today's business, as a result of the activities of Opposition Members, would have offered an opportunity to discuss fishing issues.—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 941.]

That was her view of the Bill.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend will be aware that the explanatory notes to the Bill refer to the Fisheries Act 1981, which is the key to the whole thing. Section 15 mentions schemes of financial assistance

> for the purpose of reorganising, developing or promoting the sea fish industry.

Does my hon. Friend not agree that the whole point behind the series of Acts—to say nothing of the statutory instruments—that lie behind the Bill was, among other things, to promote the sea fish industry? That should have given the Minister the opportunity to tell us how the Bill contributes to that broad purpose.

Mr. Deputy Speaker(Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I can help the right hon. Gentleman. The Bill does not provide the platform for the wider-ranging debate for which he had hoped. I cannot allow hon. Members to go down that path.

Mr. Moss: Such is the critical nature of the issues facing the fishing industry that I think that almost every Member representing a fishing constituency will have been lobbied hard about its difficulties. The industry is almost in despair at the increasing level of regulation and cuts. Such are its fears for the future that it has launched a most unprecedented attack on the Minister by demanding his resignation. It has set a six-point plan in front of him, and criticises him on two counts relating to the detail in the Bill.

The criticisms relate to the Government's lack provision of any grants for fleet modernisation, the very points that were made—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that I have to repeat my advice. Members cannot have a general debate about the state of the fishing industry, however much they crave one. It is a narrow and technical Bill.

Mr. Moss: I bow to your judgment, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I am an honorary president of the Clyde Fishermen's Association and the brother of the skipper of a big freezer trawler. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that no representations have been made to me about the Bill. That is because its focus is narrow.

Mr. Moss: The point that needs emphasising is that the Bill offers the Minister the opportunity to say something about grants and safety grants, which he has pointedly refused to do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is specifically not the case. I ask the hon. Gentleman to desist from pursuing that point.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not Question Time. The hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) has not said anything on which the hon. Gentleman can intervene.

Mr. Moss: Let me move to a separate part of my speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Atkinson *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should abide by my previous ruling. Nothing of substance has yet been said on which he can intervene.

Mr. Moss: As the Minister pointed out, the Bill's purpose is to ensure the validity of certain charges levied by the SFIA and by the Herring Industry Board and the White Fish Authority, which had their powers transferred to the SFIA in 1981. I asked the Minister to clarify the position of the White Fish Authority and he pointedly failed to do so. However, along with the HIB, it was a precursor of the SFIA.

At the heart of the matter is the Fisheries Act 1981, which set up the SFIA and, in particular, its role in administering various schemes of financial assistance under part II of that Act. When one delves into that Act, it is not apparent that any glaring oversight was made when it was enacted. The intentions of the original lawmakers were clear and unambiguous.

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend says that the Bill may be necessary to ensure that there is no doubt about the validity of the charges, but has there been any legal challenge to them? The Minister shakes his head, so I assume that there has not. That raises a serious question as to why the Bill is necessary. Fishermen, as they see their industry going down the tube, might wonder why the House is debating such a narrow Bill and why the Minister is like Nero, fiddling while Rome burns. The House is wasting its time when it should be discussing the real problems of the industry.

Mr. Moss: My hon. Friend makes a telling point, to which I was going to come later.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Moss: No, I shall not give way just at the moment.

Section 3(2) of the Fisheries Act 1981 states that the SFIA

> may charge fees for any services which it provides and may accept voluntary contributions to its expenses or to its expenses in respect of any particular matter.

[Mr. Moss]

The charges that the Bill seeks to validate, which are known as technical charges in the accounts of the SFIA, are those that are levied by the SFIA to cover the costs of various checks and inspections carried out by marine surveyors as part of the administration of the various grant schemes in the statutory instruments referred to in the Bill. Those grant schemes are essentially of two types: one relates to the purchase and/or improvement of fishing vessels, and the other specifically to safety improvements to fishing vessels.

In sections 15 and 16 in part II of the 1981 Act, Ministers were given powers to provide schemes of financial assistance and to delegate the administration of such schemes to the SFIA. For the avoidance of any doubt or confusion regarding those powers, section 15(1) says:

> The Ministers may, in accordance with a scheme made by them with the approval of the Treasury, make grants or loans for the purpose of re-organising, developing or promoting the sea fish industry or of contributing to the expenses of those engaged in it.

It is clear that Ministers can set up schemes to give financial assistance of the type described in the Bill.

To embrace earlier schemes that were already in the pipeline, subsection (5) includes those schemes administered by the White Fish Authority under section 49 of the Sea Fish Industry Act 1970. The interesting point is that the White Fish Authority seems to have had powers both to issue grants and to make charges for administering the schemes, including technical charges—or so it was believed when the White Fish Authority became the SFIA.

Section 16 of the 1981 Act covers the delegation of powers to the SFIA. It states that

> Ministers may require the Sea Fish Industry Authority to administer for them any scheme made by them under this Part of this Act and where the Authority has been so required it shall administer the scheme accordingly and may exercise any discretion vested under the scheme in the Ministers.

The purpose of that section is clear: if a Minister requires the SFIA to administer any scheme of financial assistance for the fishing industry, it is duty bound to do that for the Minister.

If I interpret the Act correctly, the SFIA is also empowered to exercise any discretion that Ministers had vested in themselves, either in the primary legislation or in the various statutory instruments relating to the individual schemes. As I said earlier, those statutory instruments are in two groups. The first includes the Fishing Vessels (Acquisition and Improvement) (Grants) Schemes 1976, 1981 and 1987, and the second includes the Fishing Vessels (Safety Improvements) (Grants) Schemes 1993 and 1995.

Let us examine those statutory instruments more closely: apart from the most obvious changes relating to rates of grant, each one provided an opportunity to tighten up the wording and widen the scope of the legislation. That was confirmed by the Minister in his speech. As the House is aware, neither of the schemes for grant aid is now available—the last to go was the safety improvement grant scheme, which the Minister chopped last May—and the SFIA was instructed not to make any further technical charges after 1995. However, there were and still are schemes being administered from that date and from May 1996, which was the date for the discontinuance of the safety grant scheme.

What were the technical charges composed of? We can obtain some idea of that from the relevant paragraphs of the statutory instruments. Let us consider, for example, the safety improvements grants scheme of 1995. At the beginning there is a simple statement that Ministers—meaning Ministers at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland—can exercise powers conferred on them by subsections 15(1) and 15(2) of the 1981 Act and administer the scheme on the safety improvement grants. Applications for grant are made to Ministers under paragraph 3 of the statutory instrument and decided by them under paragraph 6.

Paragraphs 7, 8 and 9 set down eligibility terms for grant payment, pre-work approval and minimum standards. Paragraphs 8 and 9 give the House an indication of the amount of work involved. On pre-work approval, paragraph 8(1) says:

> Where an applicant whose application has been approved under paragraph 6 intends to enter into a contract with another person for the carrying out of the whole or any part of a relevant improvement to which the approved application relates, the Ministers shall, before the contract is made, approve—
>
> (a) the specification for the improvement to be undertaken;
>
> (b) the tender for expenditure to be incurred; and
>
> (c) the form of contract to be entered into between the applicant and the supplier or other contractor.

Paragraph 9, on minimum standards, says:

> A relevant vessel to which an application approved under paragraph 6 relates shall conform to any standards laid down by or under the Merchant Shipping Acts 1894 to 1993 and shall be constructed or adapted so as to make such provision for the accommodation of officers and crew as, in the opinion of the Ministers, conforms to the best modern practice, after making due allowance for the age and kind of the vessel, for sleeping and messing accommodation, sanitary accommodation, medical or first-aid facilities, store rooms, catering facilities and other accommodation.

That is only part of the range of checks and inspections required to be carried out on each and every grant application, not only in 1995 but long before that, and probably as far back as the White Fish and Herring Industries Act 1953. That is work for experts such as marine engineers and surveyors, who would be drawn in the main from the private sector—certainly post-1981. Those people needed paying for the work done, and the question was, and apparently still is, who should pay them and through which Department or organisation.

Ministers made the schemes, invited applications, vetted and approved those applications and reduced or recovered grant in certain situations. That much is clear. Section 16 of the 1981 Act gave Ministers the power to require the SFIA to do all that necessary work for them. Furthermore, section 16 gives the SFIA the power to exercise any discretion vested in Ministers under the scheme. If Ministers could cover their costs of administering the scheme, why could not the SFIA, to which they had devolved responsibility, do so? Surely section 3(2) of the Act confirms the SFIA's authority to make charges, when it states clearly:

> The Authority may charge fees for any services which it provides.

Charges were made on the applicants who had to match the criteria and conditions for the grant aid which were set by Ministers. Ministers could hardly countenance grant being given without corroboration from the SFIA that all the conditions had been satisfied. That meant checks and inspections, and payment for expert services.

No one is suggesting or has suggested that the recipient of the grant aid should not be the person eligible for the costs of processing and administering the grant application. Since 1995, when the SFIA was told to stop levying charges, the organisation has had to find the money to pay for those services out of its own budget. I remind the House that the SFIA's income comes from the levy on all

persons engaged in the sea fish industry,

according to section 4(1) of the 1981 Act. It seems that the many are supporting the grant applications of the few who stand to benefit.

I return to my earlier statement that, on close scrutiny, there does not appear to be any glaring oversight by those who originally drafted the legislation with regard to the responsibilities of Ministers, the SFIA or its predecessors. Certainly, the SFIA interpreted the law as I have attempted to describe it to the House. It clearly believed that it was given full authority to administer the various grant schemes and to make charges for its services.

It should be emphasised that the conduct of the SFIA was impeccable and beyond reproach. I hoped that the Minister would make that point in his opening speech. Perhaps he will emphasise the fact when he winds up. The SFIA inherited the system from its predecessors, the Herring Industry Board and the White Fish Authority, and continued to make technical charges in good faith.

Even the explanatory notes that accompany the Bill, which were no doubt written by the lawyers who drafted the Bill, are less than convincing on the question of who had the real authority. On page 3, paragraph 11, the notes conclude, as justification for the primary legislation:

It is considered doubtful that the Authority—

that refers to the SFIA—

had statutory authority to make these charges.

What a monumental understatement—"It is considered doubtful". One is left wondering whether it is considered doubtful that the Bill deals conclusively with the problems that it purports to solve.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. My eye also alighted on that statement in paragraph 11 of the notes. As that doubt is the entire justification for the Bill, would it not have been helpful if the legal advice on which that doubt is based was vouchsafed to the rest of the House, so that we could form our own opinion?

Mr. Moss: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which should be addressed to the Minister rather than to me. Perhaps the Minister will deal with that important issue when he winds up.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I reinforce the comment of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). Does my hon. Friend agree that it is particularly important that the legal advice should be published, for it is not inconceivable that someone who disagrees with the Government's conclusion might seek to protect himself under the European convention on human rights? It is important that the House should know to what it is giving its approval.

Mr. Moss: I agree with my hon. Friend. No doubt the Minister will have access to the published guidance, which I am sure is at hand, and he could refer to that when he winds up the debate.

One cannot help but feel that the Bill is not the stuff of primary legislation on the Floor of the House, especially as it is taking up valuable parliamentary time, which I and many others believe could be put to more meaningful use.

The total charges levied by the Herring Industry Board and the SFIA since 1972—that is, over 24 years to 1996, when the last technical charges were made—were £7.3 million, covering 13,000 cases. To put that into perspective, the SFIA was approving safety grants alone at the rate of more than £1 million a year up to 1996.

The fishing industry will be dismayed to learn that, of all legislation seeking to help its parlous situation, the Government have produced this Bill. Yes, it purports to block a perceived loophole, but even the Minister was not convinced of the existence of the loophole. Yes, it deals retrospectively with the problem, and yes, ironically, it touches on the vexed and pertinent issue of grant aid to the fishing industry.

Given the content of the Bill and the promises made by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister to reintroduce safety grants for the industry, why did not the Minister do the decent thing this evening and table additional clauses to the Bill to right the wrong and reintroduce safety grants?

The fishing industry will yet again be incredulous about the level of commitment from the Minister and his complete lack of tact and sensitivity in presenting such an inconsequential Bill in a crowded parliamentary timetable. That says much about the Government's priorities and lack of understanding of the real issues.

6.37 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I begin by responding to the closing remarks of the hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss). We have an excellent Minister. There is no way that I can be described as a sycophant—

Mr. Forth: Grovelling.

Dr. Godman: I do not have to grovel—not when I am speaking about the fishing industry, about which I know something, as does the hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend), even if the Opposition's official fisheries spokesman knows little or nothing about the industry.

The industry has been badly served by both Tory and Labour fisheries Ministers down the years, but my hon. Friend is a good Minister.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Did I hear the hon. Gentleman correctly? Did he say that I knew little or nothing about the fishing industry?

Dr. Godman: I would not dare say that about the hon. Gentleman. He is one of the few Opposition Members who attends fishing debates. I am sure he will agree that we do not have enough debates about the fishing industry. In no way would I suggest that he knows little or nothing about the industry. I know that he is a committed supporter of fishermen and their families in his constituency. I have offered that compliment to him in the past.

[Dr. Godman]

My hon. Friend the Minister rightly said that the Bill is narrowly focused. I acknowledge that, while agreeing with the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire that the industry deserves a wide-ranging debate in the near future. As I said earlier, I speak as a member of a fishing family. We have served the industry badly in the House until recently, when my hon. Friend assumed responsibility.

I need to ask my hon. Friend a couple of questions, if he will forgive me for making him work. The Herring Industry Board was set up in 1927 or thereabouts, even when the herring industry—I speak as the son of a fisher girl—was in decline. The board had to be wound up many years ago.

According to the Minister, who referred to both the Bill and the explanatory memorandum, the relevant period is from 1981 to 1996. The sum that we are discussing is £7.3 million, relating to 13,000 checks and inspections conducted by officials of the Sea Fish Industry Authority. I have considerable respect for the SFIA's officials, who, I believe, are located in Young street, Edinburgh. Apparently, the original Herring Industry Board plaque is still on the wall.

I feel that I must comment on the absence of certain political day trippers—members of the Scottish National party who are Members of the Scottish Parliament, and who receive £20,000 over and above their normal salaries. Although the Bill is narrowly focused, it is of more than passing interest to all our fishing communities in Scotland. I need hardly remind hon. Members and others that, in terms of the overall economy, the fishing industry in Scotland is much more important than the industry south of the border. Anyway, the day trippers have gone back to Edinburgh.

What documentary evidence is retained by the Ministry, or by the authority in Edinburgh, concerning the 13,000 inspections? What power did the inspectors have in terms of recommending, say, that a fishing vessel should not be allowed to put to sea? What power was given to inspectors assessing safety equipment? Were they able to say that a vessel was so unseaworthy, or that its safety equipment had been so badly neglected, that it should not be allowed out?

The Minister may say, "Hold on: the arrangements ended in 1996." But who has the power now? I tabled three questions for answer on Monday 13 March, asking how many fishing vessels had been banned from putting out to sea because of inadequate safety gear, or because they were unseaworthy. Questions are now being asked in relation to the dreadful loss of the seven-man crew of the Solway Harvester, a vessel owned by a company in Hull. I believe that the House should be told who now has that power. I believe it is exercised outwith the Ministry, by the Coastguard Agency, but, in the context of safety checks, does the Ministry liaise closely with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions?

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Given his renowned knowledge of these matters, the hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the findings of the inquiry into sea fishing by the Agriculture Committee, which were published last year. I was fortunate enough to serve on the Committee during part of the inquiry. It visited Iceland and many other interesting places, but that is neither here nor there: I shall not test your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Committee made two recommendations—recommendations 37 and 38—in regard to prosecutions for fishing infringements. It recommended that the Government

> commission a review of how the prosecution process for fishing offences could be made more efficient, more speedy and more consistent,

and how the penalties for serious breaches of the regulations could be increased. The Committee was referring principally to regulations affecting the taking of fish—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr. Godman: Thank you for rescuing me from what seemed to be an interesting speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker. No doubt the hon. Gentleman will make his own speech later, but he will need to hearken to what is said by the Chair in regard to the narrow focus of the Bill.

I thought that the Agriculture Committee produced a very good report, but, although I am not a lawyer, I think I am right in saying that in Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland, the penalties for fishing infringements—this certainly applies to those who are dragged before the sheriffs courts in Scotland—are much heavier than those imposed on owners for failing to protect their crews in relation to adequate safety measures. There is a hell of a difference between the two, and I think that that is a scandal. I have said it often enough before, but I will say it again.

Mr. Hayes *rose—*

Dr. Godman: The hon. Gentleman is going to have another try.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) is going wide of what is a very narrow Second Reading debate.

Dr. Godman: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I was carried away. You know what I am like when I start talking about the fishing industry. I need to be more rational and logical.

Let me ask this in relation to the Bill, and in relation to the question of safety checks. Between 1981 and 1996, were the inspectors able to recommend to the SFIA the legitimacy of an application to buy survival suits for the crews of fishing vessels? Life rafts were purchased during that period, along with other essential safety equipment. Some of the provision for that was introduced by Albert McQuarrie, a famous Tory Member and an old friend of mine, in a private Member's Bill concerned with the safety of fishing vessels, which later became an Act. But were the inspectors allowed—in the context of the inspection referred to specifically in the Bill—to sanction the purchase of survival suits?

I remind the Minister, if he needs to be reminded, that in two recent cases men who have gone over the side have survived only because they were wearing survival suits. One lad who fell from an Orkney-based vessel was in the water for 20 minutes. Another fell from a vessel that was

burning, and was in the water for the same length of time. He suffered mild hypothermia, but because he was wearing one of the suits he survived. I want to know whether the inspectors were allowed to sanction their acquisition during the earlier period, and I want to know the position now in terms of safety grants.

Let me ask another question in the context of the Bill. I know that the Minister has established a concordat and a very good working relationship with his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament—although things are a bit different with the Northern Ireland Assembly at the moment—but what discussions took place about the Bill with those responsible for the Scottish fishing industry and the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Hayes: May I intervene, more briefly than last time and on that specific point? In their response to the Agriculture Committee, the Government said:

> the Sea Fisheries Inspectorate and the Ministry's Legal Department recognise the importance of dealing with suspected infringements promptly and issuing summonses through the Courts in good time.

Interestingly, they also noted that

> Separate legal systems operate in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

They made that point quite firmly, suggesting that the problems referred to by the hon. Gentleman did exist.

Dr. Godman: That was a remarkably brief intervention for the hon. Gentleman, who is always courteous. He makes an important point, but I do not want to drift off course, if you will pardon the expression, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Being the navigator that you are, you would sort me out.

We are considering 1981 to 1996, but our anxieties did not end in 1996. I appreciate that primary responsibility for safety rests with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. My hon. Friend also has a commitment to the safety of fishermen and the well-being of their families and communities. We need a debate during which we can not only discuss the need to make our industry more economically viable for all the fishing communities from the Shetland islands to Cornwall, but consider introducing regulations, which give greater protection to fishermen as they follow the most hazardous occupation in our islands.

6.51 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Like other hon. Members, I regret that we have no adequate opportunity to debate fishing matters. However, this debate does not present such an opportunity, because we are considering a narrowly focused Bill. We cannot therefore spend many minutes regretting that.

I appreciate the fact that the Bill is intended to be a tidying-up measure. For the reasons that the Minister outlined, it will clarify the powers of the Sea Fish Industry Authority by giving it the ability to levy administration charges for processing applications for grant aid. The Bill will apply retrospectively, and validate practice since the Fisheries Act 1981 was passed. Despite the comments and explanations of the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), it is not appropriate to debate whether the Government's legal advisers were doing their job properly.

Hon. Members have drawn attention to paragraph 11 of the explanatory notes. It states:

> It is considered doubtful that the Authority had statutory authority to make these charges.

We have to take that on trust. Perhaps the Minister will deal with the matter in his winding-up speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) rightly suggested that we should have access to that legal advice at a later stage. Apart from the bald statement that I quoted, we have no further evidence to go on.

Mr. Bercow: I note the hon. Gentleman's last remark. May I infer from his comments that he, as the representative of a fishing constituency, and in the absence of published Government legal advice, would not feel comfortable supporting the Bill in the Lobby for fear of the possibility that, despite the Minister's assurances, it might not be compatible with convention rights?

Mr. George: I am happy to support Second Reading. We will have an opportunity at a later stage to pore over the matter in more detail and perhaps resolve the matter. I do not believe that we shall store up problems simply by supporting the Government this evening. We intend to do that.

As the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) rightly pointed out, I represent a constituency that has a considerable fishing interest. It is appropriate to point out that when I realised that the Bill would be discussed, I attempted to consult the industry as widely as possible, not only in my constituency but nationally and, indeed, internationally in England, Scotland and Cornwall—

Dr. Godman: And Northern Ireland.

Mr. George: Yes, and Northern Ireland. Like the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), I found that the industry had no burning ambition for the measure to be reviewed seriously, or that the House should be detained with matters of detail.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: When the hon. Gentleman consulted the fishing organisations, did he explain that it was possible that they had paid £7 million that they should not have paid? In the current financial climate, £7 million would be most welcome to the fishing industry.

Mr. George: I am grateful for that intervention. The information about the 13,000 cases and £7.3 million was germane to the consultations and the industry knew about it. The hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) knows that if we examine the matter retrospectively, we must also consider Governments from 1981 who were responsible for overseeing the loss.

The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire was right to draw attention, within the narrow scope of the Bill, to the need for the Minister to tackle fishing safety grants. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made a statement in May last year in which he announced the withdrawal of those grants. Yet in June, on a visit to Cornwall and the south-west amid much fanfare, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions had found the money to reinstate the grant. However, in a letter in November, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to the chief

[Mr. George]

executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations to say that the grants could not simply be restored as he had originally understood.

We have covered that ground before, but the Minister knows that the industry is anxious to restore the grants. On a recent visit to Cornwall, which the *Western Morning News* reported, the Prime Minister stated we would get some news soon. We anticipate positive news that fishing safety grants will be reinstated soon. We are anxious for confirmation of that.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman shared experiences on fishing trawlers with me—[HON. MEMBERS: "Tell us more."] I remember that we were linking arms.

Safety grants came within the orbit of the 1981 discussions, with which the hon. Gentleman will be as familiar as I am. The Select Committee on Agriculture, on which we both served specifically referred to safety grants in the context of an ageing fleet. Will the hon. Gentleman comment on that in relation to the Select Committee's work and recommendations?

Mr. George: I am grateful for that intervention, which is relevant to the matter that I am considering. The Select Committee made important recommendations on the lines that I am outlining. I ask the Minister to tackle those points in his winding-up speech.

The explanatory notes state that the SFIA was told to stop levying charges on 3 May 1996. However, we can find no public statement on that date, or any reference to the fact in the authority's annual report. We should consider what constitutes appropriate action by a public body. It is surprising that the matter was not considered sufficiently important.

It being Seven o'clock, further proceedings stood postponed.

Opposition Day

[6TH ALLOTTED DAY—FIRST PART]

Tax Cuts and Public Services

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): I beg to move,

That this House notes the continued underfunding of the National Health Service compared to the European average, as recently highlighted by the Prime Minister, the continued underfunding of schools, with average class sizes rising for most age groups since the election of the Labour Government, that government investment in public transport is significantly below that provided by the previous Government, that police numbers are falling, and that the 75p increase in the weekly pension is grossly inadequate; and concludes that instead of tax cuts the Chancellor should give greater priority to further improvement in the National Health Service, schools funding, public transport, the police and a greater increase in state pensions.

The House should listen to these words:

Nobody wants to pay more taxes but cutting is another matter. What bothers me is whether the money that goes in tax cuts . . . would be better spent on areas of direct social need.

They are not mine, but those of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) in *The Daily Telegraph* on 5 February. They were bravely and, we believe, rightly spoken and they are the substantive reason for the Liberal Democrats initiating tonight's debate. The Government are failing to meet their election pledges to save the national health service, prioritise education, education, education and ensure that pensioners share in the growing wealth of the nation. Instead, the one thing that we know the Chancellor will deliver in the new financial year is an income tax cut, which is not mentioned anywhere in Labour's manifesto. Not only that, but it seems that rich business men will be the biggest gainers from the Budget.

All the briefings on the Budget, which now appear with monotonous regularity in the press, have one thing in common:

the government . . . is on the side of the risk taker;

there will be a "Budget for business"; and

the budget will introduce tax breaks for share schemes and new corporate ventures.

All of them say that the Chancellor is planning to cut capital gains tax. His previous changes, which were announced in the taper, saved the partners of Goldman Sachs in the United Kingdom alone £500 million, the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) £1.5 million, and Lord Sainsbury £200 million. In other words, they were tax breaks for the rich, but in his 1996 Labour party conference speech the Chancellor said:

While the Tories want a millionaire's tax cut for themselves . . . a Labour Chancellor will not waste money on boardroom excesses.

He attacked the Conservatives for introducing policies similar to his own.

We do not favour tax increases any more than the hon. Member for Walton does if there is no good reason for them, but let us consider Labour's case. Its first point is that it is spending more and taxing less—that is the argument in the Prime Minister's amendment—but that is not true. The question for public services is not the percentage of tax take in the economy, but percentage spending. It was 39.6 per cent. of gross domestic product in 1996-97, but for the first three years under Labour, including this year, it fell to 39.3 per cent. The Chancellor has announced that it will be only 39.6 per cent. even at the end of this Parliament so the public sector spending percentage will be exactly that which the Government inherited from the Conservatives. Conservative spending, not surprisingly, delivers Conservative underfunding.

Labour's second argument is that it is at least spending more on the priorities. Let us consider people's priorities, such as health. Waiting lists rose by 36,000 in December and now stand at 1,108,000, which does not fulfil Labour's so-called early pledge. Even worse, the number of out-patients who wait more than three months has risen from 248,000 to 512,000. Labour's NHS policy is not working. Why? Average spending under Labour will, over five years, be higher by only 0.01 per cent. of GDP than in the last five years under the Tories. It fell from 5.3 per cent. of GDP in the last year under the Tories to 5.2 per cent. in Labour's first year and was only 5.3 per cent. in its second year.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Liberal Democrats believe that the average taxpayer pays too little and should pay more?

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point of the motion and the debate. We are arguing that taxpayers should not pay less than now on average and that the Government should forgo tax cuts at this stage because they have not fulfilled their pledges on health, education, pensions and the rest.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow) *rose—*

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge) *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: I give way to the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), but then I must make progress.

Mr. Rammell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He may agree that there is a suspicion—I put it no higher than that—that the Liberal Democrats constantly commit themselves to more spending than they justify in terms of where the money would come from. When challenged, their usual defence is, "Refer to our Budget submission." Is he aware that when the Library contacted the office of the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and Liberal Democrat headquarters, neither was willing or able to provide a copy? Does not that show the degree of Liberal Democrat disingenuousness on this issue, and is not it about time that they justified where the money would come from?

Mr. Taylor: I can help the hon. Gentleman. First, I am now the spokesman on the issue and, secondly, this year's Budget submission has not yet been published.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: I have given way so will the hon. Gentleman let me make progress? He should perhaps be a little more careful in making his points. I want to discuss education.

Mrs. Campbell *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: I shall give way in a moment, but let me make a little progress.

Class sizes for the five to seven age group have fallen. The Labour pledge on that, although not yet met, is likely to be met soon—not because of extra funding, but because a transfer of resources has meant that class sizes for over-eights have risen every year since Labour came to power. The parents of five and six-year-olds who voted for lower class sizes for their children back in 1997 find that class sizes are higher. Nursery class sizes have also risen and secondary school class sizes are at their highest for 20 years. Why?

Average spending is 4.8 per cent. of GDP, which is lower than the 5 per cent. average in the last five years under the Tories. Even by the end of the comprehensive spending review period, spending, according to the pre-Budget report, will fail to meet the Government's 5 per cent. target, which was only set in 1998. That is the result of the cut in their first two years in office to 4.7 per cent. of GDP, which was lower than in any of the last five years under the Conservatives.

Mrs. Campbell: Is not the reality of the Liberal Democrats in local government different from the scenario that the hon. Gentleman describes? Is he aware that Liberal Democrats on Cambridge city council voted to cut not only the council tax, which was at a standstill, but £170,000 from neighbourhood planning in the ward in which they had recently conned people into voting them in at a by-election? Furthermore, is not it true that Councillor David Howarth, their leader on the council, is an economic policy adviser to Liberal Democrat Front Benchers?

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Lady may see the Liberal Democrats in control of Cambridge city council shortly, when she will learn for herself what the Liberal Democrats do to invest in education when in control. When Cornwall county council was under our control, we increased spending on schools year by year.

There is a similar problem with public transport. There are record numbers of complaints, the number of late trains has increased by 25 per cent., London Underground breakdowns are up by 30 per cent., and spending compared with that under the Tories has been cut. Indeed, on the Government's own inflated figures, they will spend £130 million less of Government funds than they did last year. Their public transport investment is simply going down.

The measly 73p increase for pensioners is outweighed just by the council tax rise, which has been predicted by the Government themselves, irrespective of any other

[Mr. Taylor]

cost-of-living increases. The Chancellor likes to boast of the free television licence for those aged over 75, which we argued for and welcome, but it is not enough to say to a pensioner that he can watch television but cannot feed or heat himself following the 1.1 per cent. rise in the pension.

What did the Labour manifesto say? It pledged to ensure that, like those in work, pensioners would benefit from growth in the economy, yet the income of those in work has increased by four times that of pensioners—so much for sharing the growth of the economy.

In response to all that, the Chancellor comes up with the mantra "£40 billion for health and education." It is there again in the Labour amendment. I hope that the Labour Members who are here and, perhaps more significantly, the much larger number in marginal seats throughout the country, understand that it is not true. It is funny money. A Labour Member recently asked me why people do not understand that it takes time. Perhaps that is because people thought that the £40 billion was true. Certainly, Labour keeps peddling the figure; it does so again today.

The reason people are not seeing the improvements in health and education that they would have expected with such massive investment is that that massive investment is not taking place. NHS spending of £20 billion is reduced to around £12 billion simply by stripping out inflation. Once we strip out triple- counting—adding three years together—the real increase this year will be only £2.3 billion. That is not negligible but, on average over the current Parliament, it is in line only with the investment that the Conservatives managed under the previous Prime Minister. This is a funny-money Chancellor.

Waiting lists are increasing. Labour Members should not be surprised if people are disappointed by the Government's approach. If they had said that it was a hard process that would take time, that we could afford this now but that we would do more when we could, they might have carried the public with them, but the truth is—Labour Members know it—that they raised expectations beyond anything they could deliver. They had not got out of the habits of hype and exaggeration that they had displayed in opposition.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The hon. Gentleman may know that I share his concern about the fact that the Labour Government have broken their promises on public expenditure, but will he answer the following question on behalf of the Liberal Democrats? Does he repudiate the Treasury clamp, which in turn depends on the Maastricht criteria, which determine the 3 per cent. deficit rule? Would they refuse to accept that? Would they renegotiate it, or would they accept it, in which case they would break promises in the same way as the Labour Government?

Mr. Taylor: I might have known that the hon. Gentleman would work Europe into the debate somehow. I congratulate him on his ability to do so in any circumstance, but we argued for that disciplined approach to economic management in advance of any European rules. We do not criticise the Government for taking that approach. It is the proper way to manage an economy. If the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), had followed such disciplines when he was in the Treasury team, the Conservative Government would not have faced the boom-bust problems and the huge and growing deficit which led to their being kicked out of office.

The £19 billion for schools is reduced to £13 billion when inflation is stripped out. There is only an additional £2.1 billion this year, but even that is an exaggeration as it counts local authority money that has already been spent. Most of those local authorities have already spent over SSA, so simply raising the SSA, which allows the Chancellor to come up with the phoney figures, does not deliver a single extra penny to schools.

The real comparison is with our 1p income tax pledge, which would have put more than £2 billion into education every year. Central Government investment in education is down to only £600 million extra this year. The cumulative real total is £4 billion over three years—if they prefer to do it on that phoney three-year basis. That is less than the average under the Conservatives. By comparison, the Liberal Democrat increase would have delivered more than £15 billion extra real money over a Parliament, not the funny money that the Chancellor likes to deliver.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Gentleman is making untypical sense for a Liberal Democrat, and I mean that in a kind way. He almost understates the case, if anything. If we take into account the funding of the teacher pay awards in the past two years, the financing of the standards fund and other initiatives, which have been borne by local authorities, the money that is going to schools at the sharp end—at the chalk face—is even less than when we scale it down in the way that he has done.

Mr. Taylor: The Liberal Democrats support the improvements in pay for teachers. We argued that they were needed, so I will not criticise that aspect of spending, but the hon. Gentleman highlights the fact that little discretionary expenditure in schools has flowed through. When hon. Members, from whatever party, go to schools and talk about revenue funding issues, they find the real problems that schools face. With the declining school-age cohort, which means that fewer pupils are coming into school, the pain will get greater because schools' funding will be lost and teacher numbers will fall. Schools in rural areas such as mine are small and have little discretionary expenditure. They will be particularly badly hit.

I turn to the final argument that the Chancellor and Prime Minister present, the latest pledge to nervous Back Benchers: they will deliver in the next comprehensive spending review. In other words, it will be all right on election night. Perhaps it will; we shall see. The Prime Minister promised an increase to European levels of health spending by the end of the second comprehensive spending review period, but did not define Europe, the average or spending.

Then the Treasury told the newspapers that it was not a promise, just an aspiration; but even if the Chancellor does announce that funding—I sincerely hope he will; I believe that he can do it—even another £40 billion, £50 billion or £60 billion will not do if it is funny money. If the same tricks are used as in the last comprehensive spending review, it will not save Labour seats, or schools and hospitals.

What happens on the ground will ultimately determine people's verdict on the success, or otherwise, of the Government. A promise of funny money for schools will not win a single vote if class sizes increase. A promise of funny money for the NHS will not hold a marginal if people cannot get a hospital bed when they need it, or their cancer becomes inoperable while they wait for treatment.

We have heard it before. We heard it from the Conservatives, the inventors of funny money. It is why they lost and it is a mistake for Labour to believe that hype and spin can overcome people's real experience, as the hon. Member for Walton clearly realises. They have failed to convince people over the past few Labour years. Inflated claims of extra funding deliver satisfactory headlines on Budget day, but do not deliver in schools or hospitals. People can see the unsatisfactory reality for themselves.

Worst of all from the point of view of nervous Labour Back Benchers, even real money—I hope and believe that the Chancellor will deliver that in the comprehensive spending review, because he can—will not have an effect until after the next general election. If the Chancellor offers tax cuts today, and jam tomorrow in the Budget and the spending review, it will not help someone with cancer who needs treatment now, or a child in an overcrowded classroom this year.

There is an alternative. The Chancellor has a huge war chest. He could start to spend it now, not on tax cuts but by investing in schools, hospitals and pensions this year, not next. That means that it has to be done in the next Budget, not the comprehensive spending review. An economically responsible programme for schools, hospitals and pensions could be delivered on 21 March if the Chancellor set aside tax cuts.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley) *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has a marginal seat himself, I think.

Mr. Leslie: It is not so marginal. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Liberal Democrat manifesto for 1997 said:

The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices?

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman fails to mention that it also said that we would give increases over and above that, and that we, unlike the Government, spelled out those increases in our costed programme. Our manifesto also pledged free prescription charges, free eye and dental tests and free television licences for the over-75s. In fact, our package was comprehensively more generous than the one that the Government have delivered. The Government offer pensioners a minuscule 73p increase, despite having the largest funding surplus in history.

Let us stick to health, however, as that was the subject on which I expected the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) to intervene. From among the 70,000 nurses outside the NHS and below retirement age, we could recruit enough to fill 17,000 existing vacancies. The Prime Minister's claim that we must wait because trained staff do not exist is simply untrue. New drugs such as beta interferon are available now for multiple sclerosis sufferers; all we need is funding, and the Chancellor has the money. Not one Labour Member—not even the hon. Member for Shipley—was elected on a pledge of income tax cuts. All of them pledged to save the NHS, prioritise education and give pensioners a fair share of rising wealth. Apart from Labour's hype, exaggeration and mathematical hyper-spin, the next CSR will include not a penny more for anyone until after the next general election.

The Prime Minister has conceded that the NHS is underfunded. He told us we must wait, but a March Budget that prioritised hospitals, schools and pensions would deliver results in April. Bigger pensions, better hospitals and excellent schools are what the country wants, what the Liberal Democrats want and what even members of the Labour party—including many Labour Members—want.

The question is whether the Chancellor will deliver. Labour Members with small majorities should hope so. Patients, pensioners, pupils and parents certainly hope so. But if the Chancellor's newspaper briefings are to be believed, the sad answer will be no. If that happens, the Labour party will throw away something important—the sense in the country in 1997 that the days of Tory lies about spending had gone, to be replaced by investment. To throw away that hope is to lose an opportunity for the Labour party, but also an opportunity to restore faith in politics, but I fear that that is exactly what the Chancellor will do.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for raising a point of order this stage, but it is an important one. A statement has been made to the media to the effect that the Home Secretary will issue a decision on General Pinochet at 8 am tomorrow. Are there any plans for such a statement to be made to the House, and can you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, ensure that the statement comes first to the House rather than the media?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have no knowledge of any statement to come before the House this evening.

7.23 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'welcomes the fact that the Government is making work pay and cutting taxes for hard-working families; welcomes the fact that, as a result, the tax rate on a typical family will be cut to its lowest level since 1972, and that, on average, families with children will be £740 a year better off; notes that the Liberal Democrats oppose the measures that made this possible, including the Working Families Tax Credit; further welcomes the fact that the Government is making record extra investment in public services, including an extra £40 billion in health and education; notes that this is far in excess of anything promised by the Liberal Democrats at the time of the last General Election; and notes the reckless and uncosted spending commitments made by the Liberal Democrats, which they have no idea how to pay for and which would take Britain back to Tory boom and bust.'.

I welcome the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor), who made his first speech in his new role as Treasury spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats. Frankly, however, he had a bit of a cheek talking about funny money and hype and spin because those words seemed admirably to describe his own speech. The hon. Gentleman was high on headline-grabbing statements, but

[Dawn Primarolo]

low on strategy and detail. I was grateful to hear him welcome the Government's disciplined economic management, but he failed—as his party continues to do—to appreciate how our strategy is developing.

Mr. Cash: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No, but if the hon. Gentleman can apply a little self-discipline and let me make some progress, I shall happily give way eventually to what will inevitably be his second Euro-question of the evening.

Any debate on tax and benefit reform and public spending must begin with the foundation of all modern economic policy-making—macroeconomic stability—and the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell seemed to agree with all that I am about to say on that. Our first priority, and our continuing commitment, is to deliver and lock in a platform of economic stability, leaving behind the boom and bust of past years. Our new, modern, monetary policy framework, with an independent Bank of England, is ensuring that interest rate decisions are taken in the best long-term interest of the economy, not for short-term political reasons.

Our modern fiscal and public spending framework, based on two clear fiscal rules—the golden rule that we balance the current budget over the cycle, and the sustainable investment rule that, as we borrow only for investment, debt is held to a prudent and sustainable level—is ensuring that public finances are on a sustainable long-term footing. The hon. Gentleman claims to be committed to that strategy, but his speech demonstrated that he is not. He continues to make commitments on behalf of his party without telling us how they will be paid for.

Our transparent policy making is building confidence and long-term security. In monetary policy, there is an open system of decision making through the publication of the Monetary Policy Committee's minutes, a system of voting, and full reporting to Parliament. Already, we are seeing the rewards of creating that new framework for monetary stability. Inflation is historically low and is set to remain close to target, and interest rates peaked at half the level of the early 1990s.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dawn Primarolo: If my hon. Friend promises not to ask a question on Europe, I shall be happy to.

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend tempts me, but I wanted to illustrate her contrast between the Government's policy and that proposed by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). We did not need to hear the hon. Gentleman's speech, because we can see Liberal Democrat practice. In Sheffield, the Liberal Democrats won last year on a platform of cutting council tax, increasing public spending on council services and reducing debt. In fact, there has been a 6 per cent. increase in council tax—three times the rate of inflation—massive cuts in libraries, leisure services and other vital services, across the board privatisation and a £120 million increase in Sheffield's debt, which every Sheffield council tax payer will have to pay for. We heard the hon. Gentleman's waffle, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dawn Primarolo: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and agree that the Liberal Democrats say one thing when they have no chance of power, but do something quite different when they have an opportunity to exercise it in local authorities.

We have the same openness and disclosure in fiscal policy as in monetary policy, with key fiscal assumptions independently audited and far more information published than ever before to ensure properly informed debate and scrutiny. On the basis of prudent and cautious assumptions audited by the National Audit Office, we are firmly on course to balance the current Budget over the cycle, and, therefore, firmly on track to meet the first of our fiscal rules—the golden rule.

We are also on target on our second fiscal rule—the sustainable investment rule. Under the previous Government, national debt doubled. In the past three years, under the Labour Government, debt as a share of national income has fallen from 44 per cent. to 42 per cent., and is estimated to be 38.2 per cent. by the end of this financial year, and 37 per cent. next year.

Over the economic cycle, we will keep debt below 40 per cent. of national income. As a result of falling debt and lower long-term interest payments, in this financial year we are projected to have almost £4 billion lower payments than in previous years. That is money available for investment in front-line public services.

Thanks to the steps that we have taken to achieve stability, sustained investment and low and stable inflation, more than 800,000 more people are in jobs than at the time of the general election. The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell made no mention of employment: of developing jobs and ensuring that people can work for their living.

That platform of stability, with the new deal and our measures for investment and regeneration, will enable us steadily to increase employment. Our aim is for a higher percentage of people to be in work this decade than ever before.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): Does my hon. Friend recall that the major package of delivering employment—the new deal—was opposed by the Liberal Democrats, who voted against it?

Dawn Primarolo: My hon. Friend is right. The then leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), with regard to the windfall tax—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Liberal Members may make noises but they always want to spend money without telling us where it should be raised, and when we make proposals on how it can be raised, they object to and oppose them. Their then leader said:

> While we understand and support what the Government are trying to achieve in . . . tackling long-term unemployment and exclusion, we disagree profoundly with their means of funding it—the windfall tax."—[*Official Report*, 2 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 326.]

[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Liberal Members who are sitting there sounding like sheep should understand that to replace the windfall tax to fund projects such as the new

deal they would need to put 3p on tax. They make no mention of that when they are telling us endlessly how they will spend their 1p. They have spent the magical 1p a breathtaking number of times.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I am happy to welcome Mr. 1p to the Chamber.

Mr. Bruce: Will the Minister acknowledge that we opposed the windfall tax in principle as a wrong tax, and not the new deal, for which we had our own package? How do the Government propose to maintain the new deal programme after the windfall tax yield has been spent? Does she have another windfall tax in mind, or some other tax that we have not yet heard about?

Dawn Primarolo: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman has noticed how successful the new deal has been in getting people into real jobs. Perhaps he was not here when I explained how we have created 800,000 new jobs—real jobs—since the general election.

Having come this far, we will not relax our grip. We are doubly determined to avoid the mistakes of the Lawson era, when growth got out of control in the late 1980s, which led to stop/go, and the Major/Lamont mistake of the pre-election public spending spree of 1991-92, which was followed by tax increases in the mid-1990s. Those were attempts to make policies for political reasons that were not sustainable economically.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I will when I have finished this point.

Our emphasis on stability and sustainable public finances has enabled us to introduce two momentous reforms that have made a significant difference to millions of families, children and low-paid workers throughout the country: first, the comprehensive reform of the British tax and benefit system that we are now developing; and secondly, our massive programme of reform in the public services.

I hope that, when I give way to the hon. Gentleman, he will finally tell the House whether his party is still opposed to the working families tax credit and the expenditure that we have committed to public services.

Mr. Flight: The Minister spoke of economic mistakes of the past and the Government's determination to avoid them. Does that include the equivalent of locking into the exchange rate mechanism and interest rates allied to those of continental Europe, which, going in the wrong direction, arguably had the biggest impact on our economy?

Dawn Primarolo: What always amazes me about Opposition Front Benchers is their ability not to be in tune with the public debate, or indeed debate in the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman would not clarify whether his party still opposes investment in the public sector—whether, for example, it believes in privatising the national health service—but seeks to take the debate in another direction. That may speak volumes to people outside the House.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The Minister talks about the hon. Gentleman clarifying his position on tax. Will she clarify her position on what the Liberal Democrats are proposing? Does she support extra investment in public services or the 1p off income tax that the Chancellor has announced for the coming Budget?

Dawn Primarolo: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his prompt, as I come to that part of my speech. I hope that I will be able to answer his question as I deal with tax and benefit reform.

Together, our reforms to integrate tax and benefits—the working families tax credit, which the Liberal Democrats opposed; the national minimum wage; the 10p tax rate; the cut in the basic rate of tax; the rises in child benefit, which the Liberal Democrats opposed; and the national insurance reforms—are for the first time tackling the causes of poverty and fulfilling our essential commitment to reform welfare to make work pay. Our commitment is that work will pay more than benefits for everyone.

The working families tax credit, introduced in October 1999, is already providing extra help for 1 million of Britain's hard-working families and increasing the minimum income guarantee for every family with children and with full-time earnings up to £200 a week—and 325,000 of those families were not in receipt of family credit at the time of the claim. The average gain to our poorest working families is £24 a week.

The Inland Revenue telephone lines, and the special working families tax credit telephone lines, have received nearly 2.75 million calls from people inquiring about the working families tax credit and the disabled persons tax credit; that is why most people will conclude that the credits are a worthwhile and necessary innovation. People will draw their own conclusion at the next general election when the Liberals and the Conservatives say that they will withdraw the working families tax credit.

As a result of our tax and benefit measures, families with children are an average £740 a year better off. Working households are an average £450 a year better off. No family earning less than £235 per week has paid any net income tax from October 1999. The national minimum wage has boosted the hourly wage of more than 1.5 million low-paid workers—two thirds of them women—by an average of 30 per cent. The introduction of a new 10p rate of tax has halved the tax bills of 2.3 million people, of whom 1.7 million are low-paid employees.

All those measures are opposed by the Liberal Democrats. They are opposed to the working families tax credit, to rises in child benefit, to a new low rate of tax, and therefore to lifting 1.25 million people out of poverty, of whom 800,000 are children. Our tax cut to 10p as the initial rate for savings will also benefit 1.5 million pensioners.

We now have a strategy, through the new deal, to give people new job opportunities and, through the working families tax credit, to make work pay. The child care credit makes it possible for people to work who might not otherwise have been able to; and the tax changes that we are making, including the cut in the basic rate of tax, make it possible for work to pay even more for those families.

[Dawn Primarolo]

In the Budget, we shall introduce further measures that will make it possible for people in areas that have in the past been hardest hit by unemployment to find work. The debate in this country is between fairness—our tax and benefits reforms for families and the low-paid—and unfairness.

On public services, by contrast with the commitments contained in the Liberal Democrats' 1997 manifesto, our three-year spending plans set out in the comprehensive spending review give Departments and our public services the certainty and stability they need to plan beyond a one-year horizon. Based on a platform of stability in the public finances, we have been able to commit significant extra resources to key public services, at the same time as meeting our tough fiscal rules. We have committed £40 billion extra over three years to education and health. That is £40 billion over and above what those services would have got if spending had continued at its 1998–99 level. It is £40 billion pounds of extra investment which our valuable public services would not have got under the Conservative party, or, indeed, under the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I shall in a minute, so that the hon. Gentleman can respond to the following statements. In their 1997 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats promised to spend £9.5 billion over five years on education. The Labour Government, over three years, are spending £19 billion. In their 1997 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats said that they would spend £3.5 billion over five years on health. The Labour Government are spending £21 billion.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful to the Paymaster General for giving way during her recital of funny-money figures. Will she tell the House how much more would be freed for investment in public services if, in April, the Chancellor did not go ahead with a penny cut in income tax?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman does not appear to understand, which surprises me. The Government do not take a pick-and-mix approach to policy. We have a co-ordinated strategy, consisting of stability in public finances, tax and benefits reforms to make work pay, and investment in public services. We have a poverty strategy, an economic strategy and a strategy of investment in public services. They go together, but the Liberal Democrats do not appear to understand that.

In the last three years of the previous Government, growth in education spending was £7 billion. We have committed additional education spending of £19 billion, which demonstrates our commitment to education as our number one priority. We are delivering a cash injection in health service funding of £21 billion pounds. That is more than double the cash put into the NHS by the previous Government in three years. Contrast that with the Liberal Democrats' manifesto commitment—it promised nowhere near the sums we are spending.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No. I have been generous in giving way, but I must make progress. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman wants to participate in the debate.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: Will the Paymaster General give way to me? I did give way to her.

Dawn Primarolo: No, the hon. Gentleman did not. I have not intervened on the hon. Gentleman, unless it was in some other place at some time that I do not now remember. I should make progress, because I am taking up valuable time in the debate.

The extra investment the Government are making in the NHS will help to deliver our 10-year modernisation programme for the NHS, so that there is equal access to high standards everywhere, and faster and more convenient services. Sixty-five per cent. of the population of England already have access to NHS Direct and more than 1 million calls have been received. We have also set up walk-in centres: there have been 36 successful bids, covering approximately 10 million people. The centres are due to open during the first half of this year.

In addition, the Government have committed £115 million to modernise every accident and emergency department that needs it; and we have introduced the NHS modernisation fund of £5 billion or more over the three years of the comprehensive spending review. In addition to that, new money is coming in under the private finance initiative. We have already signed £5 billion worth of PFI deals—that is more in two years than was achieved in the five years of the last Tory Administration.

After many years of neglect, the comprehensive spending review will provide new resources for the renewal and modernisation of the UK's infrastructure. After a $1\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. fall during the last Conservative Parliament, gross investment will total nearly £30 billion pounds a year by 2001–02. For transport, the comprehensive spending review committed £1.1 billion in extra resources to modernise local and public transport, providing more than 150 new integrated transport schemes in towns, cities and rural areas. To make sure that taxpayers get value for money, our public service agreements are a contract with the people—a promise of lasting improvements in public services. In this year's spending review, we shall continue to match investment with reform, increasing the resources available for the NHS, education and our public services.

The Liberal Democrats continually criticise the Government for not spending enough on public services, but the truth is that their figures do not add up—their figures never add up, although they always make interesting statements about their 1p. For example, for the 1992 election, the basic rate of tax was 25p in the pound. Guess what the Liberals promised to do? They promised to put 1p on the basic rate of tax. Before the 1996 Budget, when the basic rate was 24p, the Liberals again promised to put 1p on the basic rate of tax. After the 1997 election, the basic rate was 23p, and the Liberals promised to put 1p on the basic rate of tax. What is the purpose of tonight's debate? It is to discuss 1p on the basic rate of tax.

The Liberal Democrats do not tell us whether they are still committed to raising tax, or whether they now recognise that a necessary part of an anti-poverty strategy

is ensuring that people who are trapped in poverty are guaranteed an income that will lift them out of poverty. The Liberal Democrats have opposed every measure that the Government have proposed to ensure long-term sustainable funding of our public services. The House should compare their hype with our proven commitment to macroeconomic stability for the long term, with our commitment to tackle the causes of family and child poverty, and with the way in which we have steadfastly invested £40 billion in our priorities—the nation's priorities—of health and education.

The Liberal Democrats always state the same old message: "Elect us and we will spend more, but we won't tell you where the money comes from. We are committed to economic stability, but we won't tell you how we'll achieve it." The Labour Government are committed to the right reforms for the long-term prosperity of the country, and I commend our amendment to the House.

7.48 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Tonight, unusually, I feel a certain fellow feeling with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the other occupants of your Chair, in that you share with me, the Financial Secretary, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) a certain jadedness. I last arose from my bed 37 and a half hours ago and it might be because of that that I found myself less than entranced by the example of joined-up arithmetic—which, in the hands of the Paymaster General, becomes double-jointed—that was offered by the hon. Lady in her splendid, but entirely unilluminating tirade. She informed us that the Government have done nothing but good for everybody in all circumstances and with the greatest possible prudence.

Dawn Primarolo: He has got the message.

Mr. Letwin: I have indeed got the message—I could hardly fail to do so, seeing as it was repeated at roughly two-second intervals throughout the hon. Lady's speech. However, she could have saved her breath—not because anything she said was less than lovely and elegant, but because, like the nation, we in Parliament have become accustomed to such pronouncements and we no longer need them. I adjure the Paymaster General to ask her speech writer to write a different speech next time, or to get a different speech writer next time, so that her speech addresses the issues.

The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) raised an interesting and profound question. I am not sure that I believe that he is able to provide the correct answer; nevertheless, it is to his credit that he asked a good question. What is the Labour Government's policy on tax and spending and what ought to be our policy on tax and spending as a nation? That needs to be addressed and, if the hon. Lady will forgive me, I propose to do so, notwithstanding the fact that it has nothing to do with whether the Government are all things to all men or the miracle cure for life.

As I understand it, the underlying thesis of the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, which, oddly enough, is broadly the same as that in the Government's amendment, is that there is a choice between public spending going up in real terms along with the tax burden as a percentage of GDP, or the reverse of that. The hon. Gentleman broadly asserts that the Government claim to be raising the two but are really not doing much in either direction and that we should be raising the two.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: I think that I see where the hon. Gentleman is going, but we are talking about the Chancellor's choices in the short term—what he does about this year's spending. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman will talk about a successfully managed economy delivering extra funding, perhaps allowing us in the long run to cut the tax burden at the same time, with which I would not disagree. The issue at the moment is whether the Chancellor should deliver a tax cut now when that would necessarily mean the sacrifice of extra Government investment in public services.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is right in anticipating part of the burden of my remarks. I still want to dwell on them because it is of the utmost importance that we understand the facts before we discuss the value that we place on them. It is also true that we must address what is to be done this year, or, more particularly, the Chancellor must address that question. I am not convinced that the hon. Gentleman's logic quite works at that point. However, let me pursue precisely the point that the hon. Gentleman traversed.

The Chancellor has been preoccupied with prudence. He could be called "Mr. Gordon Prudence Brown". Prudence is broadly his motto. He is different from all previous Labour Chancellors because he is determined to ensure that his miraculous golden rule and all his other possible rules will be satisfied under all possible circumstances so that no one could anyone possibly accuse him of being anything other than prudent.

I can quite see why a Labour Chancellor wants to do that, but he ignores the deepest truths of economics. It is not just the case that, in the long run, one can reduce the tax burden on the economy as a proportion of GDP and increase public spending in real terms, particularly on essential services; it is also and much more importantly the case that the one cannot be sustained without the other. That is the point on which we have a genuine difference of view with the Liberal Democrats and which I want to address.

A side point, which deserves to be made in advance—the Labour party always seeks to present this as a matter of privatisation, but I want to lay aside the political rhetoric for a moment—is that the crucial public services need not be funded only by public money. Public money is a vital ingredient for certain, and it will need to go up in real terms to anything like fund them, but there are other sources.

One need no longer look to the Conservative party for that because that well known laissez-faire Adam Smithite group of radical lunatic visionaries, the British Medical Association, has now set up a study group to look into what that famous Conservative peer Lord Winston asked it to look into in effect when he made his now famous utterances, which is whether other sources of funding have to be brought to the aid of that particular crucial public service. That is one of the ingredients that needs to be considered.

Mr. Leslie: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is talking about private and independent money paying for

[Mr. Leslie]

health or whatever, but with regard to the amount of public funds raised through general taxation for public services, I understood that his guarantee was that the level of public expenditure would reduce year on year, Parliament by Parliament. Is that not the nature of the guarantee?

Mr. Letwin: No, it is not. I do not expect the hon. Gentleman to agree with our policy, or necessarily even to want to present it as it is in future, but I want to ensure that, at the end of my speech, he knows what our guarantee is, and, much more importantly, why it is that way.

In addition to the question—I accept that it is a different question—of bringing to the aid of the crucial public services extra funding from the private sector, which is a vital ingredient, we also contend that we shall continue to need, as we always did under the Conservative Government, to increase by considerably more than the rate of inflation spending on the crucial public services—not reduce but increase. Spending on all the central public services such as health and education needs to go up. I shall come to the rest in a moment, but I want to get the first point into the hon. Gentleman's mind, because it would be marvellous if one intelligent Labour Member knew exactly what we were asserting so that he can go away and work out whether, as a matter of fact, any economist in the world would challenge the propositions that I am about to make.

The first proposition is that public spending on those crucial public services can and should, before we come to additional funding from the private sector, go up by substantially more than the rate of inflation. Can that be connected with, and consistent with, two other things? First, there is "Mr. Gordon Prudence Brown's" prudence. Can one, in other words, sustainably increase crucial public service spending? Secondly, can it be made consistent with reducing the tax burden as a proportion of GDP? Can those three things be put together?

Let me perform a small piece of mental arithmetic which I hope will for ever liberate the hon. Gentleman from the supposition that this is a miracle when, it is, in fact, extraordinarily simple. It is so simple that it has entirely eluded Labour Members, I think genuinely.

Mr. Leslie: Borrowing.

Mr. Letwin: No, no borrowing is involved. Let us consider the arithmetic.

Mr. Leslie: Interesting.

Mr. Letwin: Yes, it is interesting. However, when one hears it, it is not quite so interesting because it is so devastatingly simple. Public spending is about £370 billion a year. If the GDP, of which it is a part, is growing on trend—I am talking about cyclically adjusted GDP—at about 2.5 percentage points in real terms, which is, roughly speaking, what the Treasury thinks is happening—

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): The hon. Gentleman has already sent the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) to sleep.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend has no doubt been asleep for some hours. He knows this already, but Labour Members do not, and it is important that they should. I apologise for using the debate to engage in a serious argument, but it is important to get the matter straight.

If GDP goes up by 2.5 percentage points in real terms each year, as the Treasury thinks it will—the Treasury thinks that the long-term trend rate of growth in the economy is about 2.5 percentage points in real terms compound per annum, as I think the Financial Secretary would agree if called upon to do so—and it is probably about right—give or take a quarter of a percentage point, which is what the economists argue about—and if the crucial public services, which take up about one-fifth of £370 billion, are going up at about the same rate, and if all the other public services taken together, the rest of the £370 billion, are increasing by slightly less than 2.5 per cent in real terms per annum—in other words, are increasing not just nominally but in real terms by 1,1.5 or 2 percentage points each year—it will ineluctably be the case that, without public borrowing increasing an iota across the cycle, there will be a reduction in the need to tax as a proportion of GDP. This is a simple piece of arithmetic.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I admire any hon. Member who uses the word ineluctably so beautifully. The hon. Gentleman gave away the Conservative position when he said that the crucial public services occupy one fifth, or whatever, of the total—by which he must have meant health and education alone. He must have excluded the state pension. Clearly, he does not regard that as a crucial public service. Given the demographic pressures on the state pension, which would eat up at least his 1 per cent. or so real rise, is he saying that a Conservative Government would never give pensioners more than the 75p that they got this year?

Mr. Letwin: No, I am not saying that and I will return to the subject. The hon. Gentleman is a serious thinker about pensions and social security in general and asks a serious question. As it happens, the serious dispute between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives concerns social security, not health and education. Before I deal with that question, I want to ensure that our friends on the Labour Benches, who have genuinely not understood what we or the world of economists are arguing about, are put in the picture so that, although they may not want to participate in the debate, they at least know what we are talking about when we are participating in it.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): The hon. Gentleman said that we would have a recession.

Mr. Letwin: Yes, yes. We made the most dreadful mistakes: we went into the exchange rate mechanism, we spent too much money in 1990 and we did many other things of which we are deeply ashamed. Yes, that is true. Alas, it does not alter the facts of economics that the Conservatives should have made a mistake at some time. I hesitate to mention this, but I warn the hon. Gentleman that at some time some Labour Government may also make some slight mistake. These things happen. What do not change are the laws of economics. They are governed by the laws of arithmetic, which we all understand. If Labour Members take out their pocket calculators, they

will find that every word that I have spoken so far is not merely true but incontrovertibly and uncontroversially true.

Therefore, we are facing the issue that was raised by the Liberal Democrats—most recently, by their spokesman on social security, the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), and well deserved that position is too. He asked the interesting question, which is not whether one can raise by a considerable percentage in real terms—indeed, by as much as or more than gross domestic product—spending on the critical public services. By those, I mean health and education when I talk about one fifth of the expenditure, and possibly also the police and defence if one ups the figure a little. One can increase that spending and do so sustainably, with a falling ratio of debt to GDP let alone a maintained ratio, which is probably a more sensible target, and one can increase spending on the rest of the services by 1 per cent. or 1.5 per cent. of GDP each year quite comfortably. I entirely accept the hon. Gentleman's argument. What one cannot do is also to allow the entire burden of social security spending, which broadly occupies £100 billion of the £370 billion a year, to rise by or faster than the rate of growth of the economy on trend—I leave aside the cyclical effects, which obviously complicate the picture on social security. One cannot do that; and that is as true as everything that I have already said.

The dispute between the serious hon. Gentleman on the Liberal Democrat Benches, the hon. Member for Northavon, and ourselves, in which the Chancellor has been an unwitting participant, actually concerns precisely how far it is or is not possible in time to constrain the growth of spending on social security in its various forms, and pensions are a major component—in such a way that one answers genuine social needs, bearing in mind all the lessons that some of us—not, alas, the Government—have learned from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who taught many of us much about this subject. We all accept that the social security budget will grow in real terms, but can one so constrain it that one does not end up either with imprudence or the need to raise taxes?

Before I say why the hon. Member for Northavon and the Liberal Democrat party are wrong on that subject, I have a further observation that undercuts any argument that they might like to deploy: in the end, one cannot fund the crucial public services that I have described, which it is the common aim of all three parties to fund, if one does not have the tax base with which to do it. That is uncontroversial. The Conservative party and I believe that having that tax base is a matter of being able increasingly, in a sort of global Laffer-curve effect, to compete on tax with the most successful economies in the world.

The new economy is changing the industrial paradigm. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition pointed that out vividly in a speech at the Confederation of British Industry not too long ago. The new economy is making it the case that geographical proximity to one's customers is no longer the advantage that it used to be. That is not true for every good or service, but it is true for an increasing range of them. That means that the factors of production are vastly more mobile than they were. Therefore, a highly taxed economy will not have the same level of economic production that it used to have because that production will have gone somewhere else where the tax rate is lower. One may increase tax rates—not merely income tax, but all tax rates throughout the economy—and yet, paradoxically, one may raise less and less tax revenue. That is not a basis for achieving what Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat Members want to achieve; it is a basis for going bankrupt.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: I appreciate the interesting approach that the hon. Gentleman is taking to the debate and the real issues with which he is dealing. However, I want to be clear about how much he speaks on health funding for those on the Conservative Front Bench. Clearly, the spokesman on health and the present shadow Chancellor have both argued that the increases in health service funding that we want cannot be achieved through public funding. They have argued that it is necessary to resort to encouraging people to take out more private health insurance to meet need. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that view?

Mr. Letwin: I shall explain exactly what that position is, although the hon. Gentleman will also profit from the definitive announcements on the subject that will be made by various of my right hon. Friends in the near future, which will tally with what I am about to tell him. As it happens, I rather agree with them, for unsurprising reasons.

Two propositions need to be separated here. First, can we and should we afford as a nation substantially to increase year on year in real terms public spending on health and education? The answer is yes—that is the view of the Conservative party. Secondly, will that spending in itself be enough to answer the legitimate demands placed in a modern and wealthy society by the consumer on the health service in particular, but also to a degree on the education service and perhaps some others? The answer is, probably not—a view that is shared by the Prime Minister, who made the remarks to which the hon. Gentleman adverted.

Consumers may want to spend more on health than would be implied by merely keeping pace with, or slightly exceeding the pace of, change in GDP. If they want to do that substantially, because they want new and fancier operations endlessly to get better results without the waiting lists that are caused by rationing, the services may need a lot more money than tax alone can comfortably provide if one takes the view of tax that I was taking—which is, that one must keep tax down as a proportion of GDP if one wants to sustain the tax base. Such an increase in spending may require what the BMA has described as infusions of cash from other sources.

Mr. Coaker: Privatisation.

Mr. Letwin: No, no, no! In a serious discussion of these matters, it is not helpful to bandy these slogans again. I have not made the slightest criticism of the Government in those febrile and juvenile terms and I do not intend to. Politics—in particular these matters, which are at the centre of our politics—deserve to be discussed, at least in this place, with a level of seriousness that transcends what goes on in *The Sun* and other newspapers that the hon. Gentleman may or may not read.

Mr. Coaker: Not the real world.

Mr. Letwin: We are talking about a very real world. We are talking about the world in which Britain is either

[Mr. Letwin]

successful and prosperous or impoverished and trouble struck and in which the services that the hon. Gentleman and I concur in wanting to be preserved fail.

Let me return to the serious argument—the question whether, given the necessity of keeping that tax base up—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I realise that the hon. Gentleman does not mean to do it, but he has had his back to the Chair for a considerable time, which is against the conventions of the House.

Mr. Letwin: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I assure you that the pleasure of seeing you, even in our mutually jaded state, far transcends any pleasure that I have in addressing the adversaries to whom I am speaking through you.

The serious issue is whether the burden of social security can be contained to a level of real growth that is consistent with all the other objectives that I described. That is a common problem for all parties in the House and for any Government who might be ruling the United Kingdom at present. I think that that is also the issue that the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell and other Liberal Democrat Members are rightly raising.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Does my hon. Friend agree that the recent analysis by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research is very revealing on that point? It said that, if the Government were to try in the lifetime of this Parliament to achieve an increase in health spending—to reach the European Union average—by an increase in general taxation, they would in the process crowd out 2 per cent. of manufacturing output—entailing the loss of more than 100,000 jobs—increase the inflation rate by 1 per cent. annually, and—in the words of the national institute—expose the economy to the "risk of emergency taxation" if their forecasts faltered by even a little.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend gives an accurate presentation of the NIESR's report. The NIESR is, if anything, probably still behind the curve in understanding the effects of the new economy. I agree with him that those are serious issues. As I said, although it may be perfectly possible to increase, as we must, public spending on health and education by something like as much as the trend rate of GDP growth, it will not be possible substantially to exceed that type of growth rate, if that growth is tax-borne, without it having the effects that he described.

There is a pessimism in the Liberal Democrat ranks on social security that is unjustified by the facts. We shall know the truth of the assertion that it is unjustified only in the long run. However, I think that three things have happened. The first is that there has been a significant shift in the structure of our economy. No one knows how profound the shift is, and no one knows whether the supply-side changes—the changes in the level of labour market regulation that the previous Government achieved so painfully in 18 years—have been compromised by the interventions of the current Chancellor and his colleagues.

The claim of the Government—who recognise, to their credit, the value of the labour market flexibility that they inherited—is that their current moves have not substantially affected that flexibility: the new-found flexibility that differentiates our economy from the economy of our European counterparts and makes it more like the economy of the United States.

Let us assume for a moment that the Government's manoeuvres in that respect have not damaged the flexibility of the labour market. If so, we may genuinely have achieved a position in which the long-term sustainable rate of unemployment—the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment of our economy—has altered. If so, there is reason for supposing that the long-term, cyclically adjusted rate of expenditure on social security in respect of its quasi-cyclical components—particularly income support and the other passported benefits of a means-tested variety, including housing benefit, so far as that affects income earners and the unemployed—may now quite naturally be inclined to grow rather less fast than we had become accustomed to, because there is a damped cycle to unemployment.

I think that we will find that that is the case, although I cannot yet prove it, because it has not yet happened—we have only the beginnings of the signs of it. There is nothing yet to contradict the thesis, and there is some hope that the thesis will be proved to be valid.

There is a second reason why we should be optimistic about the prospects for growth of the social security budget, which is that the age profile to which the hon. Member for Northavon referred is beginning to turn partly in our favour. Moreover, an increasingly substantial part of the population is subject to the benefit of occupational pension schemes and properly established personal and portable pension schemes. Therefore, on the whole, average incomes—not, of course, across the whole population—for the elderly are doing quite well.

I admit—to end my rather prolonged response to the intervention of the hon. Member for Northavon—that there is a major issue about the basic state pension. I do not believe that, as a country, we shall ever address that issue until we turn our minds to the question of funding the basic state pension so that, somehow or other, people are able to benefit from the growth of the economy. It is a great challenge which no party in the House has properly met.

By those means together—the advantages of our flexible labour market, the demographic shift and a proper approach to the basic state pension—we should be optimistic about the prospects of doing enough to constrain social security spending so that the proposition that I began with may obtain.

If it does not obtain, we are all down the plug-hole. If we cannot meet the demands of our voters and consumers in the essential public services, and if we cannot sufficiently look after those who most need looking after through the social security system without having either imprudently to borrow or to raise our tax burden to the level at which we can no longer complete with the world's most successful economies, we shall not be able to deal with those economies, but will instead end up with a reducing tax base and a vicious circle out of which we will find it very difficult to emerge.

It is therefore not only that I am optimistic, but that I think that we have to try to be optimistic. Otherwise, the pessimism—which is implicit in the view of the world held by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell—is profound. It is not a conclusion that I think that anyone

in the House should share. It is certainly not the Chancellor's view of life, but that is because he refuses to face most of the economic logic that I have just described.

8.16 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): It speaks volumes that, when Liberal Democrats Members finally get their place in the sun by securing a debate in the Chamber on the important issue of public services, only 10 per cent. of their total parliamentary strength turns out to support the important and incisive arguments that their Front Benchers are trying to make.

I have become worried about the tone of this debate—I was certainly concerned about it earlier—because, unlike other Labour Members, I quite like Liberal Democrat Members. Many of my colleagues are antagonistic towards the Liberal Democrats. Although they do not say so, many of them oppose their involvement in Cabinet committees. I not only think that the Liberal Democrats are okay: I think that every council should have one. They may be largely irrelevant, but they provide useful entertainment and a useful contrast between the real world and the fantasy world which their politicians inhabit.

Only this morning—as evidence of my fondness for Liberal Democrats—I was working with the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) on an important debate in Westminster Hall. I was a lot more supportive of him than his colleagues were in his abortive leadership bid. I see that the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) is leaving the Chamber—leaving us with less than 10 per cent. of Liberal Democrat Members attending the debate.

I should like briefly to contrast the taxation and public services record of Liberal Democrat councils with that of our Labour Government. Liberal Democrat politicians are quite happy to take a brave stance on taxation and to encourage other people from other parties to increase tax. But how do they react when council tax levels increase in their own local authority areas? They do not like it and are not necessarily prepared to justify it, and they whinge as only Liberal Democrats can.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. I draw his attention to the four years for which I led Hampshire county council, when we never once shied away from increasing council tax, sometimes by as much as 14 per cent., to pay for good services. In that time, we recruited and employed 600 more teachers, 200 more policemen—whom we paid for ourselves—and more than 300 more social workers. Before the hon. Gentleman starts to knock Liberal Democrat councils, he should consider the example that we have set everyone in Hampshire, and the way in which the country's largest local authority responded to the real world. We are not shy of tax increases: we are proud of them because they delivered the services in the real world that real people needed.

Mr. Salter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point so well. The Liberal Democrats' record in Hampshire was so successful that they were rejected by the people of Hampshire. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would care to reflect on that.

I can only speak about the councils that I know about and of which I have direct experience. The town of Reading has far outgrown its earlier boundaries. A third of my constituents had the misfortune to come under West Berkshire council. On the other side of town, a third of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) come under Wokingham council, which varies between primarily Conservative control and occasional bursts of Lib-Demery. It is worth looking at the level of public services provided by those councils.

In West Berkshire, which has been Liberal-controlled since 1991, a recent customer satisfaction survey found that more than two thirds of the population considered that the council had an appalling record on public services: they were dissatisfied with the level of services, youth facilities and road maintenance and felt that the council provided poor value for money.

The Liberal Democrats shed a lot of crocodile tears for public services and pensioner services, but what sort of concessionary fares scheme does Liberal Democrat-controlled West Berkshire council deliver for pensioners in my constituency? Reading, which has been Labour-controlled since 1986, provides a free bus pass at any time of the day or night throughout the Greater Reading travel area. What does the generous Liberal Democrat council deliver for pensioners in my constituency? A total of £26 worth of tokens a year. That is worth 50p a week. Someone from the edge of my constituency, which is not particularly large, who had to travel to the Royal Berkshire hospital to visit a loved one twice a week would use up their annual allocation of concessionary travel tokens in five weeks. What does the Liberal Democrat council say to those pensioners for the other 47 weeks of the year? They have to pay the full fare.

When we ran a campaign to extend a proper concessionary fares scheme throughout my constituency and into the urban areas of West Berkshire council, Sally Hannon, the chair of environmental services, said publicly that if those whingeing pensioners wanted to have Labour services, they could move to a Labour authority. That speaks volumes about how much Liberal Democrats care about public services for pensioners. I found it amusing, but sad. The Liberals whinge as only they can. They are blatant opportunists. Liberal Democrats can be easily defined: they are all things to all people.

It comes ill from the lips of people who have controlled local authorities with some of the worst standards of public service to criticise the good start that the Government have made on tax and the development and enhancement of essential public services. The Labour Government have introduced a new 10p rate of tax, helping the lower-paid and halving the tax bill for 1.8 million low-paid workers. They have also introduced record increases in child benefit, and the working families tax credit, which will mean an extra £24 a week for lower-paid families.

We cannot consider the Liberal Democrats as a serious party of Government. They are on occasion a party of local government, but they certainly could not be trusted to run our national economy. As was said earlier in the debate, they have spent their 1p in the pound many times over. In their 1997 manifesto, they said that they would spend an extra £9.5 billion on education and an extra £3.5 billion on health over five years. The Labour Government are investing £19 billion extra over three years in education, and £21 billion extra over three years in health.

[Mr. Salter]

The Liberal Democrat sums do not add up. We have seen their hypocrisy on spending and the treatment of pensioners. I shall end my short and friendly contribution—I could go on for a long time—with my favourite quote on Liberals. It was John Diefenbaker who said:

> Liberals are the flying saucers of politics. No one can make head nor tail of them and they are never seen in the same place twice.

8.25 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I have been caught by surprise being called so early, but it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), who obviously sees everything through rose-coloured glasses provided by Millbank Tower, which seem to distort most things, including most of the hon. Gentleman's speech tonight.

Let us talk about the real world. At Question Time today, the Prime Minister once again failed to grasp the issues of the day and respond with any authority. He talked about long-term planning for the NHS, but the real issues facing people today are waiting lists. Labour has been in power for nearly three years and people on waiting lists have died. Not everybody can afford to wait another five years for staff to be trained or for facilities to improve.

In the real world—outside the Chamber and away from Downing Street—people are suffering real illnesses. They do not go to the doctor for nothing. They do not say that they do not mind waiting for their operation. There are many people who have been examined by well-qualified doctors, sometimes with years of experience, and perhaps then seen by a second or third doctor as well and been told that they need an operation that could be life-saving. Sadly, they are not getting those operations.

We hear promises of more money being put into the health service, and talk about the money that has already been put in. If so much money had been put in, we would have seen dramatic improvements, but the real world tells us that there have not been dramatic improvements. There is not a hospital in the country that does not have a significant problem. There are shortages of nurses, doctors and consultants, non-existent accident and emergency assessment centres and overworked and overstrained staff—yet still the Government's complacency is beyond belief when they start to talk about what they have done for the health service. If it is so good, why are there so many problems? If they have put so much in, why is there so little to show for it?

It is no good the Prime Minister telling us that 37 hospitals are to be built with the help of the private finance initiative. Five years or more from now, a Government will have to pick up the financial consequences of the PFI bids going ahead today for hospitals and schools. Those projects will screw the health service and the education system and will ruin much of what we have. The private finance initiative may be seen as a short-term solution to get the Government off the hook, but it is not a long-term solution. In the end, the buildings will cost more and less will be done in them because of that. It is about time that the nation woke up to the falsehood of the PFI as a solution for most problems. It is nonsense.

It is the same with schools. I listened with great interest this morning to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment talking about the Government's commitment to failing secondary schools. By 2003, most schoolchildren should expect to leave secondary school with at least five GCSE passes at grade A, B or C. That does not help children now. Those failing schools were there three years ago—I have some in my constituency, sadly. Overcrowded, inner-city schools are desperately short of resources and the sort of assistance that we are told is coming. If it comes five years from now, however, that is no good for today's pupils. Their one chance of a decent education is evaporating, and yet another generation of kids will be served nothing but a second-rate education.

It is no good the Secretary of State saying that he will do more. It takes time. It is a cynical trick: the Chancellor of the Exchequer is known as the Mr. Prudence of the financial world, awash with money, with a money chest just waiting to be used to fight an election. Yet kids in school desperately need better resources, better-trained teachers and better provision of education, from pre-school to higher education. It is no good having the money available now but promising to make it available in the future. It is not good enough to suggest that the majority of people are clamouring to have 1p taken off their income tax. Most of the people whom I represent have never raised that issue with me, but many have cried out for money to be put into the resources that they need.

A constituent of mine, an elderly lady, blames the Prime Minister for the death of her husband. I do not know whether it would have been possible for an operation six months ago to have kept him alive longer, but she is convinced that something went fundamentally wrong in the health service, which allowed her husband to die—that he was failed by the health service. I have told her, "You can't say that. There are lots of unanswered questions." But she believes that the Government, awash with money, did not recognise what was destroying her family. Her tragedy is mirrored thousands and thousands of times across the nation.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): The proceeds of taking 1p off income tax are about £1.8 or £1.9 billion. Would the hon. Gentleman care to indicate how he would spread that money effectively to start to reverse the very bleak picture that he paints of a health service that costs about £45 billion a year and an education service that costs a similar amount in the current year?

Mr. Hancock: The hon. Gentleman asks an interesting and fair question. I am sure that he will be convinced of the merits of our alternative budget when it is announced in two and a half weeks' time. Indeed, I think that there is a good possibility that he will be so convinced that he might want to vote for it as an alternative to what the Chancellor will produce. I am sure that secretly, even the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) will have a nagging twinge in his heart come Budget day, suggesting that he might have voted for the wrong Budget.

The proceeds of taking 1p off income tax are not what the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) suggested. Taking 1p off income tax takes away resources. We need those resources. We have so much money in the kitty that we can give more and we

can also give money back to the public, but the public want us to spend more on the issues that they care about. Taking 1p off comes to more than £2 billion. There is a major difference in valuation here.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: £2.6 billion.

Mr. Hancock: £2.6 billion is the realistic figure. I am sure that when Labour was in opposition, that figure was closer to £4 billion, but it is now down to less than £2 billion. However, realistically, it is £2.6 billion.

I have lost count of the number of pensioners who have written to me in the past two months, unable to believe the announcement that they would get only 70p or so in their pensions. They thought that the press was downing the Government. They did not believe it until it happened and now they are in turmoil. It is an absolute disgrace that pensioners have had such a shabby deal from a party that pleaded with them to vote Labour for a better deal. Instead, the Government have stabbed them in the back, kicked them when they are down and are rubbing their noses in it. That is what 70p means to pensioners who do not have the ability to decide that their rent will not go up by more than the cost of inflation.

Dawn Primarolo: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm to the House that the manifesto on which he stood for election made a commitment to continue to raise pensions in line with prices, and that any resources were to be directed at the poorest pensioners? Is not that precisely what the Government are doing? Are not his comments a little disingenuous?

Mr. Hancock: Unlike the Minister, we have moved on from our manifesto. We realise that we have to do more. *[Interruption.]* We have to do one thing or the other. We cannot stand still. We cannot stop at the point on which we fought the election three years ago—that would be absurd. The Minister has her hand over her face—even she is embarrassed by her question. She must surely realise that Labour got it wrong.

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister would never have made a commitment to stick to Tory spending limits if they had known how much was in the kitty. They must be kicking each other around Downing Street.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend may not realise that the Minister and I share a local newspaper, the *Bristol Evening Post*. Is he aware that this week, night after night, that paper has published letters from Bristol pensioners who are angry at Bristol's Labour MPs for backing the 75p? Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister should accept that Bristol pensioners are right to be angry about that? Is the Minister saying that the pensioners are wrong to be angry?

Mr. Hancock: Bristol pensioners are right and Portsmouth pensioners are right but, even more important, the nation's pensioners are right to be ashamed of and disgraced by a Government who offer them such a pittance. Pensioners' outgoings are going up, and are more than the amount they receive from the Government. The overwhelming majority of them have no control over that.

I have discussed three matters—the NHS, schools and further education, and pensions. The fourth is transport. Over the years, going back to 1984 when I was first elected to the House, I have lost count of the arguments about how we could solve transport problems. We all dream that an integrated transport system is up there somewhere, but Judy Garland would have had more chance of finding it by going over the rainbow with the Tin Man and the Lion than we do with the Deputy Prime Minister and his transport team.

During the past three years, everything that has been done on transport has made matters worse. The Government have tinkered with the problems. I live in a wonderful part of the country—south Hampshire—with Portsmouth as the focal point for 500,000 people. During the course of a week, most of them travel to and from that city—for work, leisure, shopping or just for the sheer pleasure of being in such a great city—but our roads are a nightmare.

There are solutions. A rapid transport link has been proposed by the local authorities and the county council. It needs a large amount—millions of pounds—to give it a kick start. I have twice written to the Deputy Prime Minister begging him to support that scheme, if he is really serious about getting people out of their cars and into public transport. He has failed miserably: "Leave it to the private sector", he says.

What is happening with our railways? We are a ferry port. Every week, thousands of lorries come through our port, but instead of our having a railhead for freight, the rail yard is to be sold off. Railtrack cannot wait to dispose of it—probably for a shopping development. There will be no provision for a suitable railhead for freight. There will be no alternative to the lorries that come through the port from Spain and France.

As a Parliament, we have failed again over our commitment to people on transport. More important, the Government have failed.

Mr. Salter: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's contribution with the same care with which I am sure he listened to mine. I wish to ask him two questions. First, what is the difference between moving on from the manifesto and breaking one's promises or shooting from the hip? *[Interruption.]* Calm down.

Secondly, I would like the hon. Gentleman to consider a point that I raised. How should Liberal-controlled West Berkshire council treat its pensioners when it comes to concessionary travel? He has deliberately and disingenuously avoided that point.

Mr. Hancock: The difference between moving on and breaking one's promises is that we have moved on and the Labour Government have broken their promises. That is why the hon. Gentleman looked so guilty when he asked the question. I am sure that what he really wanted me to do was to say what I have just said, so that he would not have to say it and be accused of being unfair to his colleagues.

On concessionary fares, if I were elected to West Berkshire council, I would advocate that it levied a rate that addressed the issues that the people of that area faced. We would try to find out whether concessionary fares were a big enough priority for the people. Unlike the Labour party, Liberal Democrat councillors listen and try to understand what the people are saying. We would prioritise our spending around what the people want and we might be pleasantly surprised. With my intervention

[Mr. Hancock]

on the council—and possibly the support of the hon. Gentleman, who could encourage his constituents to vote for me—we might get a better deal on concessionary fares. That would be my ambition.

This debate gives the Government the opportunity to come off the fence. They should not sit there saying that they will give tax rebates and spend more. The majority of people cannot make that statement add up correctly and they do not believe it. That is why so many people are turning away from the Government. They feel that they have been let down.

The Government should have used the debate to say, "We have got it wrong, but we have the money to do more and to do the right thing in the real world for the people we represent." The Budget and the Chancellor's war chest will give him the opportunity in a few weeks' time to move in the direction in which Labour Members promised they would move in their 18 years in opposition and, more important, in the 18 months leading up to the 1997 election. That is why so many people voted for them. It also explains why so many people are disenchanted with them today.

8.43 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I shall make a short speech. I believe in electoral reform and, therefore, in the politics of partnership in the appropriate post-electoral circumstances. With the greatest respect to Liberal Democrat Members, if such an approach is to come to fruition, they will have to grow up as a political party. They must start being honest and straight with people and justify where the money will come from.

Month in, month out and year in, year out, the Liberal Democrats have consistently made spending commitments that go way beyond anything that they have said that they would raise in taxation. Let us consider what has happened since the general election. In debates in the Chamber and in Standing Committee and in those that take place at local level, they have promised extra money for pensions, health, schools, public transport and housing. They have promised an end to tuition fees and to the parental contribution—and so it goes on. That is all to be paid for by 1p on the basic rate of income tax.

On a conservative estimate, the spending pledges that Liberal Democrats have made in the course of this Parliament would mean at least 5p on the basic rate of income tax. That would cost the typical family £600 a year. Do we ever hear Liberal Democrats referring to that as the cost of their proposals? Not for one moment. We see a complete lack of rigour and of basic arithmetic and they fail to square the circle. That is endemic in their politics.

Although I did not know that I was going to speak in the debate, I thought that I would try to seek out the Liberal Democrat alternative Budget from last year. I contacted the House of Commons Library, which contacted the Liberal Democrats' party headquarters and the office of the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce). The Library was wrong because it should have contacted the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). However, I should have thought that given that the Commons Library was seeking that information from a senior Liberal Democrat, he would have informed the Library about which Member to contact, but he did not. The alternative Budget was not forthcoming, whether or not that was due to the Liberal Democrats' lack of willingness to make it available.

That suggests either that the Liberal Democrats do not think that their alternative Budget is significant in the conduct of their politics, or that they did not want to make it available because it would have revealed that the spending commitments that they have made this evening and throughout this Parliament were not included in the document. The truth is probably a combination of those two factors.

Those tactics are repeated at a local level. A couple of years ago, I received through my letter box a leaflet from the local Liberal Democrats which criticised the Labour-run local council for the level of its council tax and in the next paragraph called for an end to universal capping of council budgets, without suggesting that there was a contradiction between the two statements.

The Liberal Democrats' national projections are disingenuous. It has already been said that in the three-year spending review the Government are committing an extra £21 billion to hospitals and an extra £19 billion to schools. We can compare that to the Liberal Democrats' manifesto pledge of a five-year commitment of £3.5 billion for the national health service and £9.5 billion for education. I am repeating those figures because not once in the debate have Liberal Democrat Members intervened to challenge our claim that although they made those pledges at the general election, they are no longer making them.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is simply wrong, and he was not listening to my speech. I confirmed our policy position and pointed out that the real Government expenditure on education is nothing like as much as our commitment. The Paymaster General attempts to defend her position by giving cash figures for the Government and real figures for the Liberal Democrats. That should not fool anybody; it certainly should not fool the hon. Lady, whose job must be, if nothing else, to understand the difference between the two.

Mr. Rammell: Nothing in the hon. Gentleman's intervention denies the fact that at the general election, the Liberal Democrats' manifesto contained a commitment to spend an extra £9.5 billion on schools over five years and an extra £3.5 billion on the health service. That is what the Liberal Democrats said they would do; we have done significantly better in a three-year spending review.

There is also a complete lack of coherence in the Liberal Democrats' arguments, particularly on the new deal and the windfall tax. On the one hand, we hear that they support the principle of the new deal, but they oppose the principle of the windfall tax and voted against it. Let us follow that logic: if we had a Liberal Democrat Government, and they did not raise the £5 billion to fund the windfall tax and the repairs programme for schools, the money would have to come from elsewhere, and would cost the equivalent of 2p on the standard rate of income tax. We have never heard from the Liberal Democrats where that money would come from.

One of the Liberal Democrats' most hypocritical positions is on pensions, with their critique of this year's 73p rise, which has been levied in line with prices. I wish

that we had been able to do more, and I hope that we will be able to do so in future, but the Liberal Democrats' manifesto promised that pensions would rise in line with prices. If we had a Liberal Democrat Government, a 73p increase would still have been levied this year, so it is audacious of them to attack us on pensions.

A few weeks ago, the Liberal Democrats performed a parliamentary stunt when they voted against the uprating. If they had succeeded in their vote, there would have been no increase in pensions this year. They were indulging in gesture politics, and pensioners understand that.

Mr. Webb: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that if the Government had lost the vote that night, they would not have come back with a further uprating statement?

Mr. Rammell: I am saying that the Liberal Democrats have had an opportunity to present a fully costed alternative to that pension uprating proposal, and they failed to do so, as they consistently fail to do every time the issue is discussed.

There is a total lack of candour in the Liberal Democrats' spending plans. We hear their repeated attack on the penny that will come off the basic rate of income tax on 1 April this year. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the penny off the basic rate of income tax is to compensate for other tax changes in the system. Were the Liberal Democrats to succeed in denying that 1p cut, they would be imposing a burden of significantly more than a penny on the basic rate of income tax, because of other tax changes. However, we never hear that mentioned in debates.

I am a politician who believes in progressive taxation. I want us to build support for progressive taxation. With the greatest respect to the Liberal Democrats, one does not make the case for progressive taxation by constantly promising people more than one plans to raise through taxes.

Mr. Leslie: On the subject of promising more than can be delivered, does my hon. Friend recall the statement made by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) before he was replaced? The Liberal Democrats wanted to increase the income tax personal allowance to £10,000 per head at a cost of about £28 billion. Does he believe that the penny on income tax will stretch quite that far?

Dawn Primarolo: They have moved on again.

Mr. Rammell: Yes, the Liberal Democrats have moved on, but my hon. Friend exposes the fantasy politics that is always involved in their budget-making.

With regard to our plans for public spending, I do not pretend that everything is perfect in the funding of public services. When we came to power, we had to remove a huge budget deficit that we inherited from the Conservatives. Furthermore, there had been a consistent problem in the funding of public services over 18 years.

I do not pretend that that was due to year-on-year cuts under the previous Government. Instead, there was sporadic funding. In the run-up to a general election, public spending would be jacked up, especially in schools and hospitals, and immediately after the election, the funding would come down. In contrast to that, the Labour Government are introducing step-by-step improvements in the funding of public services.

Let us analyse an example of that step-by-step approach—the £21 billion settlement for the health service over the current three-year spending review period. I asked the House of Commons Library to carry out an analysis based on the percentage increase in real terms of health service spending over the past 25 years. That shows that the current three-year spending increase for the health service is the second best three-year spending commitment over the past 25 years.

I do not pretend that that is the end of the story, and that everything is perfect in the national health service. We never promised the country that we could turn the health service round overnight. We said that we would tackle the task stage by stage. I hope and believe that the current three-year spending increase can be carried forward into the future.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): From the research that the Library has done for him, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that in the first two years of this Administration, we had one of the worst settlements for the health service in probably 20 years?

Mr. Rammell: That was exactly the commitment that the Liberal Democrats made in their manifesto. They said that they would stick to the Tory spending limits for the first two years. Both parties committed themselves to that tight fiscal framework in the first two years in order to get rid of the budget deficit that we inherited from the Conservatives.

Let me identify some of the other areas in which we are making step-by-step improvements. Under the new deal, £3.5 billion has been allocated to fund the best quality training and job scheme that there has been in this country. The other £1.5 billion from the windfall tax is being used to double the budget for repairs in our schools.

In the first three years of the current Government, child benefit, which was frozen during all those Tory years, has been increased by 25 per cent. As for housing, which particularly concerns me in my constituency of Harlow, the release of capital receipts has made possible a 33 per cent. increase in expenditure in the first two years, and a 50 per cent. increase in the past three years. The working families tax credit has given an enormous boost to people on low incomes: 2,000 people in my constituency are, on average, £24 a week better off.

How have we achieved that progress? Most important, we have achieved it through sound economic management—by removing the budget deficit, not borrowing more than we could afford over the economic cycle, granting operational independence to the Bank of England and introducing transparency and openness to the operation of our public finances. That was crucial: without it, we could not gain the trust and confidence of the business community and investors that we need if we are to secure the economic growth that, over the longer term, represents the only sure-fire way in which we can obtain the extra investment in public services that we need.

Mr. Letwin: If transparency of public finances was the Government's prime aim, why did the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, throughout last night, resist the establishment of an independent body to set accounting standards?

Mr. Rammell: It is difficult to remember exactly what the Conservative party was trying to achieve during its

[Mr. Rammell]

filibuster last night. It is undoubtedly true, however, that our overall management of the economy—involving the operational independence of the Bank of England, and the release of the minutes of the central committee—is introducing a degree of openness and transparency. That creates confidence, which means that investors and businesses have the confidence to invest and which, over the longer term, will generate the economic growth that we need.

If we adopted the Liberal Democrats' approach, that successful management would be blown apart. In a short time we would have a huge budget deficit. We would not be funding our spending plans, and there would be a downturn in economic growth leading to cuts in public spending. However, I do not think that that would happen under a Liberal Democrat Government. If we had a Liberal Democrat Government—and I recognise that it is a big "if"—I do not think that they would act in that way. The spending commitments would not materialise, and that would undoubtedly lead to a degree of disillusionment among Liberal Democrat supporters.

What, then, are the Liberal Democrats doing? I think that they are indulging in that old practice of the politics of gesture and the politics of opposition. They are against everything wherever it occurs, whether it is done by a Labour or Conservative council locally, or by the Labour Government nationally. They have the answer to every conceivable public ill, wherever and whenever it occurs. How do I know that? How do I recognise the beast? Because this was the condition of the Labour party in the 1980s. We learned a long and hard lesson then. We learned that it simply is not possible to treat the public in that way: a party must convince them that it has the competence to deliver on its promises.

That returns me to the critique originally advanced by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). If I recall correctly, he said that during the 1997 general election Labour had promised the earth, exaggerated and over-hyped what it could achieve. Let me say emphatically that that was not my experience when I was a Labour candidate in a marginal constituency in 1997. We specifically said that we would not promise more than we could deliver, and we were criticised for our caution. It is a good spin and a good hype to say that Labour is not delivering on its promises, but the reality is very different. It is not very sensational and not very exciting; it is about bit-by-bit improvement. That is what the people voted for on 1 May 1997, and it is what the Government are delivering.

9 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Apart from those from Liberal Democrat Members, there has been only one thoughtful contribution to the debate, and it was made from the Conservative Front Bench. Shortly, I shall comment on the measured defence of the Conservative strategy on tax and public spending and identify the flaw in the reasoning.

I shall speak mainly about pensions, but it is important to respond to some of the implausible remarks that the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) made. He talked about irresponsibility and referred to the Liberal Democrat alternative budget. That document is produced every year and is publicly available. If the hon. Gentleman had contacted my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor), who is the Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman—a reasonable first person to approach for a Liberal Democrat Treasury document—he would have obtained it. However, the hon. Gentleman preferred to pretend that the document was not available. If he had asked the right person, he would have got a copy.

An alternative budget is the hallmark of a responsible Opposition party. We sit down and prepare such a budget every year. The Labour party did that only once when it presented John Smith's famous budget before the 1992 general election. It got its fingers burned because when the sums were spelt out, they were not popular with the electorate. The Labour party never produced a budget in opposition after that.

That shows the difference between the two parties. The Liberal Democrats cost and prioritise their policies each year. Our general election manifesto includes a volume of costings so that the price of every pledge is provided.

Mr. Rammell: Will the hon. Gentleman deposit the alternative budget in the House of Commons Library? We can then examine it line by line and add to it the other spending pledges that Liberal Democrat Members made in the Chamber, in Standing Committee and elsewhere but that are not costed in the alternative budget.

Mr. Webb: We would be delighted to place a copy in the Library. The document is published, and we hand it out to the press. It can hardly be regarded as a secret document. We are more than happy to make it available this year.

The hon. Member for Harlow outlined the Government's progress so far in fulfilling their pledges for public services. He kept mentioning three years: this year, next year and the subsequent year. However, the Government have been in office for nearly three years, of which the hon. Gentleman refers to only one. We are more than halfway through the Parliament—we are possibly almost three quarters of the way through—and it is legitimate to consider the Government's achievements. As my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell said, the record shows that the Government have spent pretty much what the Tories would have spent. Real-terms increases in spending on health and education are analogous to the Tories' achievements when they were in office.

When the Labour party took office, the mood was "Things can only get better; this is the dawn of a bright new era." However, the Government have more or less stuck to Tory spending plans. The electorate did not expect that from new Labour. People expected genuine improvements in public services; they are clearly not getting them.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), in a characteristically thoughtful contribution, explained the way in which he reconciled Conservatives' pledges on health and education spending with the so-called tax guarantee. He reasoned that if the economy grows at the rate of 2.5 per cent. in real terms, and one prioritises a fifth of public spending, one can provide more than 2.5 per cent, for that fifth, if one provides less than 2.5 per cent. for the rest. That is an arithmetic truth. The

hon. Gentleman prioritised health and education; he mentioned defence and perhaps the police in parenthesis. However, he did not mention social security, describing it in his characteristic fashion as not a priority public service.

The hon. Gentleman knows that the state pension accounts for approximately half the entire social security budget. To make his sums add up, it would be necessary to freeze the state pension in real terms, and simply provide for inflation-linked increases. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that occupational pensions are increasing, but that does not save the Government a penny on the basic state pension, which is not affected by such increases. The basic state pension depends only on the number of pensioners and, to a limited extent, on contributions records, which are improving systematically every year as more women retire on larger pensions. There is therefore a real-terms, upward pressure on the state pension over and above inflation. There are more pensioners and higher average state pension receipts. A state second pension is proposed as well as SERPS. There will be pressure on the state pension.

If the hon. Member for West Dorset believes that the only way he can justify decent increases in health and education spending is through squeezing social security but he is not prepared to squeeze the state pension, what else will he squeeze? That is the unanswered question when Conservative Members claim that they will pay for their goals out of savings on welfare. Other items of public spending could be squeezed, but the hon. Gentleman said that the money would come from squeezing the social security budget. Is he willing to cut the state pension?

The hon. Gentleman mentioned funding the state pension, but surely that is a matter not for the people who will be 60, 70 or 80 in the next few years, but for people years down the line. The circle will not be squared for many decades to come because the Conservative party would have to cut the state pension or not deliver on either health and education or its tax guarantee.

Mr. Letwin: Let us return to the figures. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that they stack up perfectly well if the social security budget is rising broadly by 1, 1.5 or 2 per cent. in real terms—that is, below the trend rate of growth of gross domestic product?

Mr. Webb: That will not happen if the biggest single social security item, which represents about half the budget, is rising substantially faster than that because of demographic pressures and the increased average retirement pension.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is one of the acknowledged experts in the House. Does he not agree that the trend in pension growth through demographic factors has been roughly 0.5 per cent. in real terms?

Mr. Webb: One of the key differences in the coming decades will be the shift in the age structure of the pensioner population from the young elderly to the old elderly, who place a particular financial burden on the pension regime through the minimum income guarantee—the means-tested top-up—and social and health services.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Webb: Will the hon. Gentleman bear with me for a moment? The pressures caused by the increase in the number of very old elderly people will mean that an increase of 1.5 or 2 per cent.—not only on pensions but on health—would not even allow standstill. That is the distinction. The hon. Gentleman says that the economy grows at 2.5 per cent., which provides leeway for good increases on health and education, but 2.5 per cent. on health does not even represent national health service inflation, leaving aside the growing number of very old elderly people. In my judgment he would need far more than 2.5 per cent. The Prime Minister talks of 5 per cent. Once those levels are reached—and the hon. Gentleman would not increase the basic state pension—the sums do not add up.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman's argument has shifted to a point at which it becomes true, but it is different from mine. If he is arguing that health and education increases—not only those in real terms, but ones that are much greater than the GDP trend rate—cannot be achieved without either raising tax or bringing in money from outside, he is right. He takes one view of the right way to solve the problem and we take another. Now we agree on the empirical fact and simply disagree about the policy choice.

Mr. Webb: To paraphrase that intervention, the hon. Gentleman is saying that delivering what the public want and expect from a health service in a growing economy requires beyond what the Conservatives are prepared to find in tax and that that has to come from the individuals themselves. The interesting distinction is that the Liberal Democrats say that health has to be paid for according to ability to pay, whereas the Conservatives say that private money has to come in through private insurance. Insurance, of necessity, is related to the risk of someone needing the service. Typically, older people would have to buy insurance. The non-urgent surgery to which the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) refers is older people's surgery and they would have to fork out because of their medical need. However, we think that people should pay for health care through general taxation according to ability to pay.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Webb: I have probably taken enough interventions from the hon. Gentleman.

The working families tax credit has been mentioned several times. Labour Members have been briefed on how many of their constituents benefit from it and the Paymaster General well knows the Liberal Democrats' views. We argued that the Tax Credits Act 1999, which introduced it, contained only one measure—the credit should be delivered through the pay packet. That is why we opposed it. None of the rates or the tapers were mentioned and the words "child care tax credit" did not even appear when the legislation was drafted. We would not remove the working families tax credit.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman attended the debate on the working families tax credit and knows full well that I gave the House a very full explanation of its design and intention. He led his party into the Lobby, on his recommendation, to vote against its introduction and he has to explain to the young families in his constituency why he wants to take that money away from them.

Mr. Webb: I shall be delighted to do so. It is a matter of record that we voted against the decision to pay tax

[Mr. Webb]

credits through the pay packet, and the Government have admitted that we were right. The new integrated child credit or whatever it is to be called will merge family premiums, family credit, child credits, the child care tax credits and all the rest of it. How will it be paid? Through the pay packet? No. It will revert to the parent with care. They have admitted that the central issue of principle on which we objected when they were reforming tax credits was correct.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman is a very active and respected hon. Member, but he seeks to rewrite history to get his party off the hook for the fundamental error that he made with regard to the working families tax credit, as he did when he voted against the child benefit increases for parents in his constituency.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady has performed a U-turn that she is graciously trying to cover up. She is right to say now that the child credits should be paid to the parent with care. She was wrong then to try to drive that measure through the House.

Pensioners are surely the group that feels most aggrieved at the Government. I refer to correspondence in my local newspaper, the *Bristol Evening Post*, from Bristol pensioners who are livid that their Labour Members have voted for the 75p increase.

One of our Bristol neighbours—the hon. Member for Bristol, South, I think—recently wrote what has proved to be a rather inflammatory letter to the newspaper, saying essentially that pensioners should stop complaining because they were £4.75 a week better off.

Dawn Primarolo *rose—*

Mr. Webb: Will the hon. Lady allow me to finish the point?

Dawn Primarolo: It was not me.

Mr. Webb: I am sorry. I meant the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston), the Parliamentary Private Secretary. Perhaps the Minister wants to disown what the hon. Member for Bristol, East wrote. She said that pensioners were £4.75 a week better off and cited the winter fuel payment.

Obviously, no one is going to say no to £100, but what is the money for? We are in March. We are talking about the April uprating. The Government appear to be saying that pensioners can look forward to the winter fuel money. Unless I am mistaken, has it not just been spent on winter fuel? Is that not what the money has already gone on?

This April, that money has gone. All that the pensioners are receiving this April is 75p. Some of them in October will receive free television licences, but, this April, they will receive just 75p. I will reveal something even more dramatic than the fact that the 75p is an overstatement of what pensioners are getting.

Mr. David Taylor: Is the hon. Gentleman not being a little disingenuous in relation to the income increases that pensioners will receive, because they and the Government are looking at the financial year that starts on 1 April 2000 and ends on 31 March 2001, which includes a range of extras to their income? Therefore, what my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) wrote in her letter was fair.

Mr. Webb: In the coming financial year, pensioners will get a winter fuel payment of £100. That is the same as they received this year, so it is not extra. They will get 75p extra. Some will get a free television licence so, next year, half the pensioners will get 75p more than this year. Some others will get the free television licence. That is what is happening.

I reveal a fact that has passed commentators by in all the discussion of the 75p rise. A quarter of the pensioners in the land will not get 75p. They will not even get 50p.

One million married women have such poor national insurance records that they get pensions not in their own right, but on their husband's contributions. They are category B pensions, which are worth the grand sum of £39.95 a week. When the Government trot along and say, "You can have 1.1 per cent. on that," a bit of mental arithmetic reveals that that is 45p, so 1 million married women will receive not 75p but 45p this April.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): You cannot buy a pasty for that.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend mentions the difficulty of buying a pasty for 45p. I am not sure about the Bristol equivalent.

Not only will 1 million married women receive only 45p, but another 1.5 million pensioners, mostly women—widows and single women—receive state pensions of less than £40 a week because of their poor contribution records. They will receive 1.1 per cent., and, since some get even less than £40—perhaps £30 or £25—they will not even see a 50p piece in April. A quarter of the pensioners in the land are affected by that.

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): What about the minimum income guarantee?

Mr. Webb: It is good to hear a Government Whip going on the record to stand up for pensioners. The 1 million married women who will receive 45p are almost certainly ineligible for the minimum income guarantee because they are married. A husband and wife will almost certainly rise just above the reach of the means test. The hon. Gentleman appears to be saying that it is all right to give married women 45p because their husbands will look after them, but they can have a few pennies of pocket money. Perhaps they can blow their 45p on two first-class stamps, if they feel extravagant and want to dip into next week's money.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The increase does not buy two first-class stamps.

Mr. Webb: That is why I said they would have to dip into next week's money.

Those women will not be entitled to any more support from the Government, and that is why my postbag groans every day with letters from pensioners complaining that we keep saying the increase is 75p but their pension books show that it is 45p. A quarter of the country's pensioners—250,000 pensioners in the south-west,

which has a particular concentration of older pensioners—are receiving only 45p. Is it any wonder that there is genuine anger about what the Government are doing?

The question is whether the Government could have afforded to do more about the basic pension. The answer, patently, is that they could. The national insurance fund has a record balance of £16 billion, and the rather cautious Government Actuary says that only £8 billion is required. In a year in which the Government have the money, they have chosen not to use it. Pensioners know that a sentence of death hangs over the basic state pension. If the money is not being put into the pension when the Government have it, it certainly will not be when they do not have it.

The basic state pension should reflect the cost of living for pensioners, and 75p does not do that.

Mr. Kevin Hughes: Absolute nonsense.

Mr. Webb: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that it is absolute nonsense to suggest that the basic state pension should reflect the cost of living for pensioners? Which part of what I am saying is nonsense? Is it the idea that pensions should reflect the true cost of living? In fact, older pensioners, who are often the poorest and who are currently being forced through a means test, should receive substantial rises over and above the cost of living.

Mr. David Taylor: To suggest that the basic state pension has gone into decline and become nugatory since 1 May 1997 is a simple mis-statement of fact. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the process began when the pension was decoupled from increases in pay, which was the meanest act of the Thatcher era?

Mr. Webb: I suspect that we could collect several hundred election addresses by Labour candidates berating the Conservative party for breaking the earnings link. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman's election address did so. Labour thereby raised pensioners' expectations that something better would come along. Specifically, the Labour manifesto pledged that pensioners should share in the rise in general prosperity, but 75p is not such a share. Pensioners are angry with the Government. They feel that they have been let down, and they are right.

9.19 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I had not intended to speak tonight but was so overwhelmed by the hypocrisy of Liberal Democrat complaints about the Government's spending plans—the Liberal Democrat manifesto clearly stated that that party's spending plans involved far less than ours—that I felt compelled to say something.

In my constituency, the Liberal Democrats habitually send out leaflets berating the Labour party for not spending more on education. The Liberal Democrat promises of £9.5 billion over five years, as compared with our £19 billion for education over three years, make a mockery of those leaflets.

The people of Cambridge should realise that if we had had that fantasy-land Liberal Democrat Government, they would not have got the increases in education that we have been able to produce. Cambridgeshire has had an increase in standard spending assessment year on year at more than double the rate of inflation. From April, the SSA per pupil will be higher in real terms than it ever was under the Tories.

It is true that schools are still feeling the pinch and feel that they do not have enough to spend on education, but while the Government have increased their spend on education, the Tory county council has reduced its contribution. Cambridgeshire education has lost £3 million overall, which has not been passported from the Government's generous increase. In 1998–99, the county council did not passport the full increase to education but kept back £1.6 million. In 1999–2000 it kept back £3 million. Next year will be the first in which the full increase has been passported to the education budget. Schools will certainly begin to see the benefit of that.

In addition to the increase in SSA, schools in Cambridgeshire have benefited from many other resources. This year, for example, we had £1.8 million for the reduction of infant class sizes, which delivered 11 new classrooms and 69 teachers, so now only 7 per cent. of infants are being taught in classes of 30 or more, as compared with 37 per cent. the previous year.

Cambridgeshire has had a huge programme to remove asbestos and update classrooms and has received £2.3 million from the new deal for schools and a massive £11.2 million from the standards fund, which has gone into numeracy, literacy, school improvement, school leadership, ethnic minority teaching and many other investments that all lead to much higher standards.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) said that the Liberal Democrats are all things to all people. That is true: they say one thing in one place and take an entirely different line in another. They appear to be opposing a tax cut here, and on Cambridgeshire county council they have proposed a 9.5 per cent. increase in council tax, but on the city council they propose a reduction in council tax. There is not much consistency.

It must be difficult for the Liberal Democrats in places such as Cambridge, where there is an excellent city council that has managed to keep council tax steady for several years running. Not only did they con voters in Arbury ward at the recent by-election, but they sent round a newsletter promising:

> All you have to do is tell us what you want to spend the money on.

What happened when the Liberal Democrat councillor was elected? At his very first council meeting he voted to axe the funding for much needed facilities—new basketball and BMX facilities and closed circuit television for improved security—amounting to £170,000 over the next two years. Residents had asked for all those things. All the proposals had been discussed with the residents and agreed, and then the Liberal Democrats, en bloc, voted against them.

Councillor David Howarth, economic policy adviser to the Liberal Front Bench and a great economic literate, was quoted in the *Cambridge Evening News* on 18 February as saying:

> We are only cutting the future investment, not the past.

What the Liberal Democrats will do once they get in a position to make decisions beggars belief.

I listened with great interest to the exposition by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) on the way in which the Conservatives would keep to their promise of reducing the total tax take while achieving increases in services. The weakness in his argument lay in the assumption that Conservatives could achieve a consistent

[Mrs. Anne Campbell]

growth rate of 2.5 per cent. It takes a big leap to go from "We've got 2.5 per cent. now," to "therefore, a Conservative Government would produce 2.5 per cent. growth year on year."

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not catch my phrase. I was talking about the trend rate of growth, which is measured across 15, 20 and 25 years and has been measured by the current Treasury as having been, on trend, 2.25 per cent. throughout the Conservative period of Government.

Mrs. Campbell: The hon. Gentleman will be lucky to find a Conservative Government that lasts 25 years. In view of the mistakes made by the last Conservative Government, any Conservative Government would be extremely lucky to achieve a growth rate of 2.5 per cent. even for five years. As a Member of the last Parliament, I remember a former Conservative Chancellor saying that unemployment was a price worth paying—that was the Conservative philosophy.

The Labour Government have got 800,000 more people in work and we have a great deal to be proud of. We have created pathways out of poverty for millions of people. Lone parents who were trapped on benefits throughout the Tory period in office are now being encouraged to return to work when their children start school. Work is being made to pay through the working families tax credit. The long-term unemployed—many of whom have not worked since leaving school—are finding a new life and new security with work that was previously unavailable to them. At the same time, we have introduced the national minimum wage, which also helps to make work pay. Family-friendly policies are helping people to manage work and home, as do increased child care facilities and investment in public transport—for millions of people, the only way to get to work.

The great advantage of all that is that more people in work mean more revenue for the Exchequer. All the Liberal Democrats talk about is 1p on tax, which would put more people into the poverty trap and do nothing to increase employability. They oppose the new deal and offer no long-term policies to keep our economy sound and stable while achieving steady increases in GDP. I think that the electorate see through the Liberal Democrats and know where a secure future lies—with the Labour Government.

9.28 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate. I start by focusing on the difference that has emerged during the debate between those who account for things in real terms and those who account for things in cash terms. That lies at the bottom of all the wriggling that Labour Members have been doing during the debate and which they have to do every day, every week, in every radio interview and in every press article.

The mess is entirely of the Labour Government's own making. At the start of the Parliament, they took the cynical decision that, for the first two years of the Parliament, they would leave in place Conservative spending plans. They did so in the hope that electors would blame the Conservatives for all the pressures and strains that emerged in public services—it would be the legacy of the Conservative years. They planned to switch the money into public services in the latter half of the Parliament so that, at the next general election, the good old Labour Government would have saved the day, with the result that voters would sweep them back into office out of gratitude for their policies. There has never been a clearer example of bust-and-boom policies.

The most uncomfortable point of a strategy of that shape is felt around the third year, when the public become cheesed off about the lack of improvement in public services and rather more doubtful that all the problems can be blamed on the previous Administration. At that stage, there is no sign of the improvements that the general election campaign led them to expect. They optimistically look out for such improvements every time they collect their child from school or suffer the misfortune of being put on a waiting list to go into hospital.

The Paymaster General either does not understand the difference between real terms and cash terms—I rather doubt that—or she hopes that the rest of the world is too stupid to understand the difference. However, it is not. People hear all about the Government's marvellous multi-billion pound expenditure, but when they go into hospitals they look around and wonder where on earth it has got to. They are beginning to suss that the £18 billion and £21 billion are funny money.

A doctor put the matter to me in this way: "Mr. Harvey, if my son grows three inches in one year, another three inches the second year and another three inches the third year, after three years he will have grown nine inches, but in the eyes of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, that child has grown 18 inches." That is the difference between the figures that are being bandied between one side of the Chamber and the during this debate.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto, which the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) is more than welcome to look at, talks about real terms increases in spending over and above anything that could be accounted for by inflation or growth in the economy. The Government are bundling together successive years' worth of inflation, adding them up in compound form and then comparing that with what we were committing to as a real terms pledge.

There was an interesting exchange between the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), who wanted to know the difference between moving on and breaking a manifesto promise. The difference comes down to whether one does more than one promised in a manifesto or less. We are saying that, in the light of the fact that growth in the economy has been much better since the election than we might have predicted at the time, it is only reasonable that people should be doing more than they said they would do in 1997. The Government are doing much less than they were going to do then and they are resorting to spin, confusion and trickery to put people off the trail.

I listened with great interest to the Secretary of State for Health when he introduced the finding of the NHS beds inquiry. Everyone knows that we have far fewer beds than we had years ago. We now have 95 per cent. bed usage, whereas 20 years ago, it was 75 per cent. During a winter crisis such as we have just had, the strains are all

too clear to see. That inquiry compared the number of beds per head of the population here with the figures in every other civilised country, from which the Secretary of State concluded that Britain is making more efficient use of its beds than any other country. If I have ever heard new Labour spin, that is it. It is a fine way of explaining that we have far too few beds and that the situation here does not stand comparison internationally in any shape or form.

If we focus on the health service, many announcements have been made in just the past couple of weeks. One fifth of patients are waiting four hours or more in accident and emergency departments, and 57,000 operations were cancelled on the day last year. Those on in-patient waiting lists rose by 36,500 in January. In my region, the south-west, there are more people on in-patient waiting lists than when the Government took office. The Government's usual con is to try to pull the wool over people's eyes on the difference between out-patient and in-patient waiting lists. But for all the Government's trumpeted achievements, in the south-west there are more people on in-patient waiting lists than there were when the Labour party took office three years ago.

The number of people waiting more than 13 weeks for their first out-patient appointment—the true measure of how long people have to wait—has grown from 248,000 in March 1997 to 512,000 in March 1999, and those are the Department's own figures.

Returning to the efficient use of beds, it is worth remembering that each year in the national health service more than 100,000 people catch potentially fatal infections, 5,000 die of such infections and they are implicated in a further 15,000 deaths. That is the efficient use that we are making of beds in the NHS—we are pushing people through hospitals so quickly that the places are filthy and infections spread.

I have no doubt that that is a further example of the efficiency that the Secretary of State for Health will proclaim, but the cost to the NHS may be as high as £1 billion a year, according to the National Audit Office.

In the midst of confused recruitment policies, the bill for agency nurses stands at £344 million. It has increased from £264 million in one year—extraordinary growth for a completely unnecessary budget head.

During the national beds inquiry it was concluded that more intermediate care beds were needed, for example, in cottage hospitals. However, the Government have been going full steam ahead to close down such hospitals. Two have closed in Lincolnshire, two in Oxfordshire and two in Devon, including one in my constituency, which is theoretically still open, but when one visits one finds it closed—although it is still being paid for, heated, lit and cleaned. Once again, all that is being done in the name of efficiency.

People who go to hospital, or indeed to schools, see only too clearly that, for all the billions of pounds that the Government so lavishly trumpet as having been spent, there is not much improvement. Head teachers ask why the £19 billion for education is not reaching their schools. They are fed up with hearing: "Trust me, I'm a politician. The cheque's in the post. There'll be more money in your budget because the Government have allocated £19 billion." The fact of the matter is that head teachers can all see through that. It is no wonder that Labour Members are wriggling—they have not got away with the con on which they embarked at the start of this Parliament.

For all the Labour talk of fair funding, in education in particular the Government have not put right some of the grotesque geographical anomalies as between funding in different areas. It cannot be right for a primary child in Derby to be funded at £1,000 less than a primary pupil in Lambeth, or for there to be a gap of £1,370 per pupil between the best—Kensington and Chelsea—and the worst funded, Bradford. Even in two adjacent Labour-controlled London boroughs—Tower Hamlets and Hackney—there is a difference of £300 a head between secondary pupils. However, we hear that the Government are taking national initiatives: the national curriculum, national tests, national league tables, and inspection of schools according to a national framework.

Funding disparities that have become grotesque remain in place and the Deputy Prime Minister says that he intends to do nothing about it for three years. There is a distinct lack of equity, in addition to the lack of transparency to which I referred, in the Government's presentation figures.

I listened with interest to the contribution of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who spoke for the Conservatives. I did not agree with his prescription, in particular for the health service, where the Conservatives seem determined to ensure a large increase in the number of people who take out private health insurance. I am not sure which of the three strategies that I can identify they will pursue. The first would be to compel everyone to do it; the second, to use taxpayers' money to bribe everyone to do it; and the third, merely to continue to run the health service as the Labour party is doing and to drive them to do it out of sheer desperation. It must be one of the three.

However, the one thing on which I did agree with the hon. Gentleman was that, unlike those on the Government Front Bench, he was ready and willing to accept the difference between cash-terms increases and real-terms increases. He had a different estimate from ours of what we would be able to afford out of economic growth, but at least he recognises the figures for what they are and has his own response.

Throughout the debate we have also heard from the Government that the Liberal Democrats make spending commitments, but never say from where the money will be paid. For goodness' sake, the point of today's debate is that we have tabled a motion to say exactly where one could get £2.6 billion for whichever public service one chooses. The Government are in power and they can decide which are the highest priorities. I have given examples of the state of the health service, and every hon. Member will appreciate the accuracy of my description of the situation in schools from visits that they have made to schools in their own constituencies. The Government will have to decide which matter to make their top priority. Can anyone really doubt that our public services require investment of £2.6 billion?

There is also absolutely no evidence that the public want a tax cut now—the very opposite is the case. All recent polls have produced the finding that 80 per cent. of the public would prefer that sum to be spent—now, in the coming year—on public services to a tax cut.

It is also interesting that, month after month, the Bank of England is having to increase interest rates, partly because of its great concern about a consumer spending

[Mr. Nick Harvey]

spree. So how on earth could it make any sense whatever to put £2.6 billion into consumers' pockets? A tax cut makes no economic sense, the public does not want it, and an array of tasks in the public service are waiting to be done.

Labour Members made other untrue statements about the positions adopted by Liberal Democrats Members on various issues. It is absolutely nonsense to say, for example, that we opposed the minimum wage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) explained particularly accurately not only why we voted against the legislation introducing the working families tax credit, but why we have no objection whatever to the principle of it. The Paymaster General replied that, in the debate on the legislation, she had explained in great detail how the system would operate. Undoubtedly she did so, and did so very well. However, when the votes on the legislation were cast, they were cast simply on the system that it proposed as the method of payment. The Government themselves have now accepted that that system was a mistake. They have also said that they will make new payments by a different system.

The Paymaster General was therefore expressing the hope that, at the next general election, Liberal Democrat Members will be going round the country arguing for removal of the working families tax credit. She could not be more wrong about that. We have not opposed it in principle at all.

The Government are in a bit of a bind. They have a comprehensive spending review coming out in July, but the sum that that review will produce—which undoubtedly will be exaggerated, compounded, multiplied and goodness knows what else—will not be available before the general election, if it is held next spring. Their problem—assuming that opinion polls are still propitious for a general election next spring—is that, if they have only a four-year Parliament, and if the electorate examine the boiled-down, hard reality of the results of their year-on-year public expenditure increases, they will have barely achieved the public expenditure increases that the Conservatives achieved in their years in office.

If the Government manage to include a fifth year in this Parliament, they will manage to surpass by only a short nose the previous Government's achievements in public expenditure increases. On current expenditure, however, the Government will struggle even to be able to boast that.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: It shows.

Mr. Harvey: It does show; it shows in all the public services. I have already discussed health at length, and mentioned the problems in education. Other Liberal Democrat Members talked about transport, which is another issue on which the public—in opinion polling and, as all hon. Members will know, based on anecdotal evidence—are grossly dissatisfied. The public believe that transport has become appreciably worse since the general election. Although they are disappointed that there has not been more progress in many other spheres, they believe that transport has become worse.

There we have it: a Budget coming up; an opportunity to reverse a £2.6 billion tax cut that people do not want and for which there is no economic justification; an opportunity to put money into any of the public services that the Government choose: and Liberal Democrats saying where the money should come from. The Government are not so much guilty of having made exaggerated claims at the previous general election—the promises that they made were very modest: progress in health, in education and for pensioners—as of proposing to deliver a tax cut. They never said that they were going to do that. People did not want it then and they do not want it now. The Government will be judged on polling day not on the tax cut that people did not want, but on the state of hospitals, schools and the pension. On their record so far, I am certain that they will be deemed to have failed on all three.

9.45 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The Government's vision for the public services rests on the new foundation that we have built—the new platform of stability in our economy that is almost without precedent in our history. What a contrast that is with the position that we inherited after the general election. The Tory legacy was £28 billion of debt after 18 years of boom and bust. We have turned that round. The Conservatives said that we could not do it, but we have. The Tories tried and failed, but we have succeeded. Our challenge now is to lock in that new stability for good so that we can build on it for the long term. We are determined to do that.

That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to set out with optimism in November's pre-Budget report our new ambitions for the coming decade. We should be catching up on productivity with our major competitors after decades of slipping behind under the Tories. We should have a higher proportion of people in work than ever before. After less than three years of this Government, we have more people in work in Britain than we have ever had, but we are aiming even higher to achieve the highest proportion ever, and to do so on a durable basis.

We want to halve the number of children in poverty in the next decade, on the way to achieving my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's target of the abolition of child poverty within 20 years. Another aim is that, for the first time, more than half of our school leavers should go on to study for a degree.

All those ambitions are achievable if we lock in the new-found stability and build on it for the long term, as we are determined to do. We cannot afford to abandon swathes of our people, as the previous Government did. Younger people and older people were dumped on the scrap heap when they could have been providing for themselves and contributing to the economy. We are building a fair society with employment opportunity for all, where everybody has the chance to develop to their full potential and nobody is left out.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman is customarily courteous in giving way. On a matter of genuine interest, will he tell me whether he believes that he and his colleagues have abolished the economic cycle?

Mr. Timms: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has asked me that, because I wanted to ask him about the economic cycle. We have had an interesting debate—

much more interesting than the one that he and I participated in during the early hours of this morning, together with some of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's presentation of his party's tax guarantee and the mechanics of how it would work—setting aside cyclical effects, as he added in an aside.

That brings us to the point that the hon. Gentleman has just put to me. What about the cycle? The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the former Prime Minister, will have made the calculation that the hon. Gentleman put to the House during the debate. It may have been made with the advice of the hon. Gentleman—I do not know what his role was in the 1992 election campaign. On that basis, the former Prime Minister promised that there would be no tax increases under his Government. That is the same basis that the hon. Gentleman has spelled out in the debate. Within a few months of that promise being made, we had 22 Tory tax rises. The failure to achieve stability in the economy caused a huge problem for the previous Government. Our success in securing stability over the past three years has made all the difference and allows us to plan for the future with confidence.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Timms: I shall not give way again, because I want to make progress. I am encouraged by the article in *The Times* on 10 February about the Tory tax guarantee, which said:

> Mr. Portillo's economic team is working on proposals to make the guarantee more believable.

We look forward to hearing those proposals. No doubt we shall return to the subject before too long.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) made a telling contribution, for which we were grateful. He pointed out the reality of what often happens with Liberal Democrat administrations. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West, along with other hon. Friends who spoke in the debate, pointed out that Liberal Democrat representatives take entirely contradictory positions in different parts of the country. Their sums frequently do not add up—my hon. Friend is absolutely right on that score.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) also made an interesting contribution. He said that people cannot wait for doctors to be trained. Well, new doctors have to be trained, and that is what we are doing. It is a necessity when it comes to improving the health service. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that it takes time. There is no short cut, however—we want high-quality staff in the health service and we are taking steps to ensure that we get them.

The hon. Gentleman also criticised the Government's programme of hospital building. I do not agree one jot, and I do not believe that the country does. We have the biggest hospital-building programme in the history of the national health service, and that is what the people of this country want.

The hon. Gentleman made a very interesting point—one of the most telling contributions to the debate, in fact—when he told us that his party had moved on since its manifesto. We will deliver on all the commitments in our election manifesto, and that is what we are doing.

Mr. Hancock: The Minister is extremely courteous in giving way, despite being on dodgy ground. I am not against building hospitals—I just think that they should be built the right way. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously saying that private finance initiatives are the best and only way that we can build the hospitals that we need?

Mr. Timms: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is hedging on what he said before. The PFI is a very successful mechanism, which is why we have secured the biggest hospital-building programme in the history of the health service.

Our commitments are to economic stability and sustainable public finances. That is what has provided us with a foundation for two hugely significant programmes, modernising our public services and integrating tax and benefits. On public services, which we have said a lot about in the debate, the new stability has allowed us to make record extra investments in our public services, including the additional £40 billion for improvements in health and education provision. That is new investment for the future, reflecting our priorities and the nation's priorities, to build a modern Britain and a decent society. It is far in excess of anything that was promised by the Liberal Democrats' manifesto, even though they have since moved on from it.

Health spending is improving every year. There are real-terms increases of 5 per cent. every year of the comprehensive spending review. Spending on health is now 10 per cent. higher in real terms than it was in 1997. We are building more than 30 new hospitals, the biggest hospital-building programme ever. We have introduced modern delivery channels, such as NHS Direct and walk-in clinics, and we have set up the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to take the lottery element out of health care. Every accident and emergency unit in the country that needs it is being upgraded. We are employing more nurses and doctors. There is an immense programme of investment and improvement in the health service. People using the health service and working in it would not recognise the grim picture painted by the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey).

On schools, with our 16 per cent. real-terms increase over three years, we are getting 6,000 more teachers into schools and 800,000 more students into further and higher education. We are modernising 15,000 schools with extra money from the new deal and connecting every primary and secondary school to the internet. This is very telling: in 1997, barely one school in 10 was connected to the internet. Now two thirds of them are, the highest figure in any G7 country. The number of primary schools connected has increased fourfold just in the past year. By 2002, every school in the country will be connected to the internet. That is the scale of our commitment, and we are delivering on public services.

On tax and benefit reforms, we are cutting the taxes of hard-working families across the country and making work pay so that it pays to do the right thing and get a job. Too often in the past, people have faced unemployment traps and poverty traps. The Tories built them into the system; we are designing them out. Our policies are tackling those problems; we are raising the incentives to do the right thing and building a fairer society, with employment opportunity for all.

The national minimum wage—the first in our history—was opposed by the Liberal Democrats. It is boosting the hourly wage of 1.7 million low-paid workers and helping to ensure that it is worth their while to be in work.

[Mr. Timms]

We have introduced income tax reforms; the 10p starting rate and the cut in the basic rate increase the rewards for work, especially for the low-paid. That is our priority and it is right. We are improving incentives for work.

National insurance contributions are being reformed to lift the burden on the low-paid and on employers. The working families tax credit is helping to make work pay for about 1.4 million working families—giving them, on average, £24 a week more than they would have received under family credit.

Together, those reforms are guaranteeing a minimum income of £200 a week for families with a full-time earner. No family earning less than £235 a week—that is about £12,000 a year—will pay net income tax.

That is why the unemployment total has been falling month after month. The claimant count is down 30 per cent. The employment rate in the UK is now higher than in almost any other OECD country. We have a strong economy and there are vacancies in every region of the country. Work incentives are being sorted out. People are able at last to move off welfare and into work.

The new deal was opposed by the Tories; the financing mechanism for it was opposed by the Liberal Democrats, as they confirmed today. The new deal focuses on helping our youngsters to build the future that the Tories always denied them. Long-term youth unemployment—of more than six months' duration—has fallen by a staggering 70 per cent. since the election. It is lower now than it was at any time under the Tories. If any Tories were in the Chamber, they should be listening—as should the Liberal Democrats—because they opposed the policies which made that fall possible. Of course, youth unemployment is lower than it was during the Tory busts, but it is also lower than it was in any of their booms—lower than at any point during the 18 years of Tory government.

Tens of thousands of young people who, in the past, would have been dumped on the dole for years—quite often for ever—have now been given a hope for the future. They are able to get used to the idea of going out to work every day, and have been given the chance to build a decent life for themselves and for their families.

Julie Haydock is from my area in East London, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor visited yesterday. After 15 years of unemployment, she is now in a job thanks to the Government's initiatives. She was quoted in a newspaper today. She said that she has a

new sense of self esteem.

She is speaking for thousands.

We have not finished yet. There is more to do. As my hon. Friend the Paymaster General said, there is more help to come for unemployed people so that they can make the most of the opportunities that our economy is creating. About 1.25 million people are being lifted out of poverty by our reforms—800,000 of them children. We are building the fairer and more modern society that we all want to see.

Nearly three years ago, we inherited a pattern of large budget deficits, a steeply rising burden of public debt and massive neglect of public services and public investment. At present, we are delivering what Britain has been crying out for years. After the cynicism of the past, there is a new conviction that we can change things for the better in our nation and in our time. Our ambitions—the nation's ambitions—are for enterprise and fairness and for a decent and modern Britain. Those are no longer hopeless pipe dreams; they are being delivered in every part of the country.

Of course, there is more to be done, and in the coming weeks, in visits to every region of the country and then in the Budget, we shall be setting out the next steps in our programme. There will be more jobs; more opportunities; better services and a better future. That is our pledge and we are going to keep on delivering it.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 39, Noes 280.

Division No. 93] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Robert Smith and
Mr. Tom Brake.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette

Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mrs. Anne McGuire.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the fact that the Government is making work pay and cutting taxes for hard-working families; welcomes the fact that, as a result, the tax rate on a typical family will be cut to its lowest level since 1972, and that, on average, families with children will be £740 a year better off; notes that the Liberal Democrats oppose the measures that made this possible, including the Working Families Tax Credit; further welcomes the fact that the Government is making record extra investment in public services, including an extra £40 billion in health and education; notes that this is far in excess of anything promised by the Liberal Democrats at the time of the last General Election; and notes the reckless and uncosted spending commitments made by the Liberal Democrats, which they have no idea how to pay for and which would take Britain back to Tory boom and bust.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill and the Nuclear Safeguards Bill *[Lords]* may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill

Postponed proceedings on Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *resumed.*

10.10 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives, North): It is surprising that a matter that was not considered sufficiently important for the annual report at the time is now considered important enough for primary legislation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Will hon. Members who are leaving the Chamber do so quickly and quietly, so that we may proceed with the Second Reading debate?

Mr. George: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The question that I raised earlier was whether it was appropriate for a public body to behave as the Sea Fish Industry Authority had done in not referring to the concern about the grants issue in the annual report. It was considered not important enough for the annual report, yet the Government consider it important enough for primary legislation.

This is a narrow issue, and the House should move on as quickly as possible so that at a later stage we shall have the opportunity to examine the legal advice that the Government receive. We must not put the future of the SFIA, it charges or its grants in jeopardy, as it is important, especially for sea safety, that we get the matter right.

In view of recent tragedies at sea and the fact that the Wolfson report has raised questions about the stability of beam trawlers, those issues need to be properly investigated. Concerns have been raised about single-handed fishermen and about whether it is appropriate for single-handed fishing boats to go to sea without those fishermen wearing life jackets. There are still questions pertaining to the Government bringing forward a code for under-12 m vessels.

Liberal Democrats will support the Government if the House divides on Second Reading, and we hope that our questions relating to a narrow and retrospective Bill will be addressed.

10.15 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I do not think that the Minister did full justice to the Bill when he introduced it. Although he took great pains to explain the details and the technicalities, I was disappointed that he did not refer at any length or in any depth—indeed, he may have mentioned it hardly at all—to the element of retrospection that is hidden in the Bill.

In fact, it is not all that hidden. In a written reply on 5 November 1998, the Minister himself said:

> The Government intend when the legislative programme allows, to introduce legislation to provide retrospective statutory authority for technical charges levied.—[*Official Report*, 5 November 1998; Vol. 318, c. 660W.]

The Minister, then, has told us that the Bill has retrospective effect—and, indeed, clause 1(1) says that

> The Sea Fish Authority shall be taken to have had power to make . . . charges.

This is an explicitly retrospective measure—a Bill that looks backwards, in which the Government are saying, "We want to ensure that what has been happening is now legitimised."

I believe that, in normal circumstances, that principle would deserve a considerable airing, but on this occasion I simply cite it as an element that I think may have to be explored during the Bill's subsequent stages. I am putting down a marker: I am saying that I do not think that that element should be allowed to pass unmentioned or unnoticed, or, indeed, unjustified.

Traditionally, retrospective legislation is frowned on in the House. When I first came here, not all that many years ago, I was told that in parliamentary terms it was taboo, or forbidden. Here it is, however, sliding into the practices of the House—and certainly those of the Government—without so much as a by your leave, and with barely an explanation.

Paragraph 17 of the explanatory notes states:

> By ensuring that these charges were validly levied the Bill will secure a possible saving in public expenditure—

which I would normally support—

> in avoiding any obligation that might otherwise arise to fund repayments.

In fairness to the Minister, he made some reference to that, but I think we may want to explore—perhaps in Committee, or perhaps later—the question of what the Government are trying to slide away from in that seemingly innocuous phrase. It is not in itself a sufficient justification; it is a statement avoiding any obligation—which makes me rather nervous in any event—and I feel that it requires a much fuller explanation.

I was surprised by one aspect of the Bill. I shall not dwell on it unnecessarily now, but I want to make the point. As far as I can tell, the Bill's legislative origins date back to at least the Sea Fish Industry Act 1951 and its successor Acts: I think that there have been seven or eight.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): No.

Mr. Forth: I should appreciate a brief explanation from the Minister of why that is not the case.

Section 15 of the 1951 Act explicitly refers to the charging of "fees for services rendered". I should have thought that it would be at least possible that—given the way in which the measures have appeared over the years, one succeeding another, setting up a succession of authorities—authority for charging might have been carried forward from the explicit reference to fees in 1951 to current legislation. In our short debate, some doubt has been expressed about whether the problem described by the Minister really exists to that extent, and, consequent to that, whether the Bill would solve the problems.

A number of questions have arisen which the House will want to examine properly and in detail. It is perhaps not appropriate to air them at great length now, but there is more to the Bill than the Minister wanted to reveal in his opening remarks. The Minister understandably wanted

to portray the Bill as a technical measure, which blocks a loophole. My view is different. The Bill raises important issues of principle, which will require more careful examination. I hope that the Minister will be able to deal with those matters subsequently, if not now, and to satisfy the House for the purposes of Second Reading. We can then consider these matters in much more detail in Committee and on Report.

10.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I want to answer some of the points that were made about a narrow and technical Bill. The hon. Members for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), for St. Ives (Mr. George), my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) dealt with the thrust of the Bill and understood the purpose of the measure.

The Bill will make legal charges that were levied under the previous Administration. The main period of time that the Bill covers is 1981 to 1996. It includes the Herring Industry Board, but that is inevitable in a catch-all Bill that applies retrospectively. I accept that retrospective legislation is not desirable, but the Bill applies retrospectively to tackle a problem that we inherited from the previous Administration.

Questions were asked about the White Fish Authority and whether it had the authority to make charges. The White Fish Authority had that ability, but it was the predecessor of the Sea Fish Industry Authority. There is no problem with the charges that were levied before 1972.

I was also asked about the ability of the White Fish Authority and the SFIA to make charges. They were deemed to have made charges on behalf of Ministers. I dealt with that point in my opening speech. Ministers may require charges to be made on their behalf, but if they give an agency the authority to levy charges, they must initially have the authority to grant the agencies power to do that. We have been advised that there was some doubt about whether Ministers had the authority to do that in the case that we are considering.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): As someone who does not expect to be invited to serve on the Standing Committee, I remind my hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* He is nodding at me; he has me worried. However, we are considering a serious matter and I remind my hon. Friend that the White Fish Authority distributed millions of pounds in grants to Humber trawler companies to enable them to build vessels. Those companies treated their men abysmally when they lost their jobs.

Mr. Morley: Those comments stray wide of the Bill, but my hon. Friend makes a pertinent point, which the National Audit Office has picked up.

The Fisheries Act 1981 has been mentioned. The power to charge, for which section 3(3) of that Act provides, was subject to detailed consideration. The power to charge was covered in part I of the Act, but some schemes were established under part II. Advice suggests that it was doubtful that part II provided for the power to make charges.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Section 3 of the 1981 Act refers to charging for any services; it does not specify services under part I, part II or part III of the measure.

Mr. Morley: I understand that. However, Ministers must grant the power to make charges, and they must initially have authority that they can pass on to agencies that subsequently make the charges.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) asked about legal advice and whether the Ministry would publish it. According to precedent, no Government have ever published the legal advice that they received on legislation. However, having said that he may want to raise that issue during consideration of the Freedom of Information Bill.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I was a member of the Freedom of Information Bill Committee and I pressed the Minister's colleagues strongly for that to be included. It was, of course, resisted by the Home Department. Can he provide as much clarity as possible? All that we seek—in much more explicit terms than he has been able to use in either the explanatory notes or the debate—are the outlines of the advice that was given. That would satisfy all Members that the Bill is necessary. We are not satisfied simply because we have not received the outlines.

Mr. Morley: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and will consult my officials to see whether there is any scope for providing more information, although he must bear in mind what I said about the accepted precedent on legal advice.

I was asked about the HIB's role in inspecting vessels and deciding whether they were seaworthy. I understand that it could refer a boat that it thought to be unseaworthy to the relevant authority, which was the Department of Transport. That is the case for its successor—the Sea Fish Industry Authority—and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde rightly said, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is now the relevant authority. I understand his point about survival suits. He has great experience of the fishing industry and has made his case before. I was also asked whether Scotland has been consulted. The Scottish Executive are content to support the Bill being passed as United Kingdom legislation and it might be useful to remember that the charges are a pre-devolution measure.

Safety grants have also been mentioned and I say to my hon. Friend that the Bill deals with them and with past inspections. Safety and a safety culture in the fishing industry are of paramount importance and, although it is easy to make political points about the safety grants situation, these are serious issues. Incidentally, the old safety grants scheme did not apply to all fishing vessels and the majority of the smaller ones were completely exempt. There are questions to ask, such as why, despite the scheme, the fishing industry's safety record is so bad compared with that of the Merchant Navy, whose record has improved.

[Mr. Morley]

The Government have to address those issues and we in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are doing so. We are considering the possibility of establishing a successor scheme to the safety grants system or a safety scheme system under European Union structural funds. The old system was financed under structural funds, but I do not think that it delivered its objectives. We need a better scheme.

My hon. Friend referred to lifejackets, survival suits and training. We must consider those issues.

Mr. Moss: Can the Minister tell the House unequivocally whether he is giving a commitment to reintroduce safety grants for fishing vessels?

Mr. Morley: The debate is very narrow and we are not dealing with that. However, I can give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that we take safety seriously.

We are considering the Government's role in working in partnership with the industry, which also has to take responsibility, and ways of improving the safety culture.

Mr. Moss *rose—*

Mr. Morley: I am about to conclude.

The measure is narrow and technical, but we have to take safety seriously. I was asked why we have to introduce it if no one has taken legal action against the Ministry. No one has taken action, but I must point out what happened when the previous Government introduced the Merchant Shipping Act 1988.

The Factortame judgment followed. It was illegal legislation that was poorly thought through. It means that the taxpayer is liable for large sums of money, which will have to be paid in compensation. Those are issues that the Government have inherited, are addressing, will resolve and sort out properly.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time tomorrow.

ADJOURNMENT (EASTER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 20th April, do adjourn till Tuesday 2nd May 2000.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 20th April, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until she shall have notified the Royal Assent to Acts agreed upon by both Houses.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That:

(1) the draft Appropriation (Northern Ireland) Order 2000 be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee:

(2) the Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 9th March at half-past Two o'clock, to consider the instrument referred to it under paragraph (1) above; and

(3) in respect of the sitting on Thursday 9th March, Standing Order No. 115 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (delegated legislation)) shall have effect with the substitution of the word 'three' for the words 'two and a half' in paragraph (2) of the Order—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Petition

10.31 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I present petitions on behalf of my constituents in Vale of York, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). There are more than 40,000 signatures from the whole of north Yorkshire. Almost 7,000 come from Vale of York.

The petition is raised in view of the threat to post offices and sub-post offices in rural locations and market towns from making payments of benefits and pensions by automated means only through banks, when most banks in north Yorkshire villages and small towns have already closed. The petition states:

I beg to submit to the House of Commons the petition of residents of the Vale of York constituency, of the Richmond constituency and of the Ryedale constituency in the names of myself and right hon. and hon. Members, declaring that we are concerned at the Government's plans to pay benefits directly into bank accounts instead of over the counter at post offices as this will have a serious impact on local post offices and endanger a mainstay of village life.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to rethink these proposals

And the petitioners remain, yours faithfully, Mrs. Caroline Patmore and others.

To lie upon the table.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 2 March 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Orders for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 9 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Links (Bulgaria)

2. **Mr. Kevin Barron** (Rother Valley): What his assessment is of the prospects for improved trade links with Bulgaria. [111531]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): A number of developments suggest that there are likely to be good prospects for improving trade links with Bulgaria. The European Union formally opened accession negotiations with Bulgaria on 15 February. That move was strongly supported by Britain. British Trade International, in co-operation with other organisations, is involved in a number of initiatives, such as the London chamber of commerce business mission in May, which will promote commercial opportunities in the market to the UK business community.

Mr. Barron: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. There are increasing opportunities in Bulgaria, particularly since the currency stabilisation. She will know that Bulgaria is currently off cover with the Export Credits Guarantee Department. If British businesses want to export to Bulgaria, will the Government consider cases individually until the advisory council says that Bulgaria should be on cover and we have a stronger trading relationship?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend has an extensive knowledge of Bulgaria and he is right to say that it has not had long-term ECGD cover since April 1990, when it declared a unilateral moratorium on debt repayment and servicing. However, the provision of ECGD cover for Bulgaria is under review. A decision should be reached within the next month.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): What undertakings did we give Bulgaria during the war against Serbia and are we implementing them?

Mrs. Liddell: As my hon. Friend knows, that is a matter for my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence. When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister visited Sofia in May last year, he said that in view of the progress that Bulgaria had made towards democracy and attempts to secure a properly operating free market, the EU should consider it as part of the next wave for accession.

East Midlands

3. **Liz Blackman** (Erewash): What measures his Department is taking to promote enterprise in the east midlands region. [111532]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): We are supporting the East Midlands development agency; we are creating a new regional venture capital fund; and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade will today announce a planning charter for the east midlands that will make the region's planning system the most efficient in the country.

Liz Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Erewash Partnership is a successful enterprise agency in my constituency that supports local businesses well and receives discretionary funding from the local training and enterprise council. Will my hon. Friend do all that she can to ensure that such organisations continue to be resourced during the transition leading to the setting up of the Small Business Service?

Ms Hewitt: I know that my hon. Friend is active on the board of the Erewash Partnership, which is doing excellent work. I understand her concern and I assure her that my officials are working with other Departments to see how we can sustain essential activities after April 2001. In the meantime, the Department for Education and Employment is making up to £41 million available nationally to support discretionary activity that might otherwise be in jeopardy.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): What difference exactly has the East Midlands development agency made to employment, inward investment and other enterprise in the east midlands? Most of us find it just another of the bureaucratic measures that have been heaped on the country by the Government. The hon. Lady talks about her colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and planning-friendly guidance, which we all support up to a point. Will she ensure that no further enormous swathes of countryside in the east midlands are concreted over and that the planning-friendly guidance will lead to buildings on brownfield sites in cities, not in my constituency which does not need any more building?

Ms Hewitt: The business people in the east midlands whom I talk to regularly are working closely with the

EMDA and welcome its support for greater activities to promote exports from and inward investment to the region. The success of the agency is illustrated by the fact that it has taken a lead in creating the new planning charter, which will allow councils to give advance information about planning applications with job-creating potential so that developers and proposed inward investors can create and implement plans much more quickly.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): The business people in my constituency support the establishment of the EMDA. There are already many examples of the impact that it has made in its first few months of operation, particularly a £3.5 million investment in one site. Although the EMDA strategy is of great benefit to the majority of sectors in Leicestershire, one sector worries me, as I am sure that it worries my hon. Friend the Minister—the textiles sector. What measures can she offer, including working with the EMDA, to ensure that the textile sector has a prosperous future?

Ms Hewitt: I entirely share my hon. Friend's concern about the textiles industry. I recently met Paul Gates of KFAT—the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades—for discussions and I am working closely with the new textiles and clothing strategy group which our Government established. Its draft paper on a strategy to make the industry more competitive is out for consultation. I welcome the East Midlands textiles and clothing partnership, which has brought employers and others in our region together to promote and improve training, marketing and export promotion.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): We continue to receive letters from manufacturing and horticultural companies in the east midlands. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the climate change tax in that region? There is great concern, particularly in the clothing industry, among firms that have already invested capital to improve the efficiency of their factory systems. The Government were forced to modify the original formula for the tax. Has the Minister made an assessment of how east midlands sectors such as clothing will be affected by what is still seen to be punitive tax on their profits and viability?

Ms Hewitt: We have been working closely with all sectors of industry throughout the country to develop a climate change levy that will be good for the environment and will not damage but will improve the competitiveness of industry. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be making further announcements on the levy in due course.

Information and Communication Technologies

4. **Mr. James Plaskitt** (Warwick and Leamington): What action he is taking to ensure that the UK's manufacturing sector improves its performance relative to overseas competitors in the area of information and communication technologies. [111533]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The Government's policies on new ICT are based on ensuring business success in the new knowledge-based economy. That applies to manufacturing as to other sectors of industry.

Mr. Plaskitt: Many of the thriving small and medium enterprises in my constituency are manufacturing companies and owe their success to operating at the leading edge to information technology. What steps can my right hon. Friend take to encourage the spread of that technology into traditional manufacturing sectors?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is clearly a deficit in some traditional manufacturing sectors in embracing new technologies. Just before Christmas, my Department published a document that showed by example how traditional manufacturing sectors could benefit from new technologies. By best practice, benchmarking and demonstrating how manufacturing can benefit from new technologies, we will make the case and ensure that more manufacturing sectors embrace them.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): What arrangements are the Government making to measure the loss of mobile IT skills through IR35—especially as their loss will immediately accrue to the advantage of the overseas competitors mentioned in the original question?

Mr. Byers: There are no indications that skilled people are leaving the United Kingdom as a result of the introduction of IR35, which was introduced to clamp down on tax evasion. I am confident that it will be successful in achieving that and that it will not have the detrimental effects to which the right hon. Gentleman referred.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): How will my right hon. Friend encourage schools, universities and colleges to work with industry, so that companies such as ABB Alstom in Lincoln can meet their needs in terms of the people and skills they desperately need to improve their performance in the manufacturing sector?

Mr. Byers: There is no doubt that we need to break down the divide that all too often exists between a child's experience in school and the world of work. Many companies have exciting and attractive programmes that demonstrate what the world of work is actually like. The more we encourage such links, that will benefit not only individual children but companies and the UK economy.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I welcome the Government's recent announcement of increased competition in the telecommunications sector. It will clearly benefit both manufacturing and residential users. I have two specific follow-up questions. The Government have announced their intention of accelerating the phasing out of the British Telecom monopoly on local loop. When will that happen? Secondly, since announcements were made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, could the Secretary of State set out the respective roles of the Chancellor and himself in determining policy in this area, as it is causing considerable confusion in the industry?

Mr. Byers: The Government have a view, shared by the Chancellor and myself, about the importance of

opening up access to the internet. By July 2001, we will have established competition. The regulator at Oftel will be responsible for the discussions that take place. It is a policy that the Government agree with, and it is important that it is delivered because it will be one of the most positive ways of ensuring that the country and individuals benefit from the new technologies that are available.

E-commerce

5. **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): What action he is taking to ensure that changes in the price structures for high bandwidth telecommunications encourage the rapid development of e-commerce. [111534]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): We want fast cheap internet access to be available to everyone. That is why I welcome the recent announcements from BT and Telewest. We are promoting greater competition in fixed and mobile telephones, which will give consumers more choice and lower prices.

Dr. Turner: I thank the Minister for the progress that is being made. Does she recognise that in the past, rural areas, which in many cases could benefit most from good IT communications, compensating in part for poor physical communications on occasion, have often been the last to see improvements in IT structure? Does she acknowledge that there is a strong case for the Government to put pressure on the regulator and on the companies to ensure that rural as well as urban environments have ready access to fast internet speeds?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. I believe that when we release spectrum for fixed wireless access, as we will later this year, that will be of considerable benefit to rural areas, as will the development of new satellite services. Of course I will consider whether there is further action that we can take to roll out broad band quickly in the most remote rural areas.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Can the Minister confirm that the unbundling of the local BT loop before 1 July 2001 cannot take place without the agreement of both Oftel and BT? In the light of that, can the Minister tell us whether such agreement has been forthcoming?

Ms Hewitt: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made quite clear, it is a matter for agreement between Oftel and BT. The date of July 2001 has been agreed for local loop unbundling, and the Director General of Oftel has made it clear that if the practical problems can be resolved more quickly, that date will be brought forward.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My hon. Friend referred to recent announcements by BT. In fact, BT has promised nothing. It insists on maintaining its high charges for local calls; it says that it may be prepared to reduce them at some stage in the future. What are we doing to make BT reduce its charges for millions of people in this country for internet use? It is blocking development in this area and should be stopped.

Ms Hewitt: BT has made two announcements recently, the most recent of which concerns an unmetered internet access subscription for £9.99 a month, giving unmetered access for evenings and weekends.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: When?

Ms Hewitt: It was available from yesterday. The other announcement is about the Surftime package. I am confident that BT and Oftel will be able to agree an early date for the introduction of Surftime on both a wholesale and a retail basis.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Events this morning are unfolding which show that the Secretary of State is presiding over a Department in a complete and utter shambles. It is no wonder that word has it that he wants to leave. The first draft of the Electronic Communications Bill was the unsatisfactory product of a turf war between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Home Office. We are now seeing communications move rapidly from fixed wires to wireless technology. There is now a turf war between the DTI and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on who will regulate high bandwidth telecommunications.

Telecommunications has been taken out of the Utilities Bill, which is collapsing in disarray. Who will oversee high bandwidth telecommunications, and why were telecommunications removed from the scope of the Government's Utilities Bill?

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Gentleman is talking nonsense. If he had read the joint statement made by my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and for Culture, Media and Sport, he would know that the two Departments are working closely on a White Paper that will deal with future regulation of the converging industries.

Business Start-ups

6. **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): What new measures he plans to introduce to assist entrepreneurs to set up new businesses. [111535]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): The new small business service will offer information and advice to anyone who wants to set up a new business through an internet-based gateway. We are creating a volunteer business mentoring programme, and we will support community finance initiatives to help people start businesses in disadvantaged areas.

Mrs. Ellman: Will my hon. Friend meet me and others to discuss proposals for a community-based investment fund in Toxteth, Liverpool? Does she agree that every possible effort should be made to support entrepreneurship in the inner city?

Ms Hewitt: I entirely agree, and I should be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and her colleagues who have

taken an important initiative. I cannot make a prior commitment, but we shall establish this year a £30 million phoenix fund designed to back business start-up and community finance initiatives in disadvantaged areas.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): One of the most important contributions to the start-up of new businesses is made by information technology consultants who may be employed on an occasional basis. Does the Minister share the view taken by the Secretary of State that consultants who order their affairs so that they accumulate capital in their business rather than paying out money as salary are tax dodgers and evaders, against whom, presumably, criminal sanctions should apply? Are those people not in fact exactly the sort of entrepreneurs we should encourage rather than driving them overseas?

Ms Hewitt: IT contractors and others who are genuinely self-employed will continue to be treated as such. Those involved in tax avoidance will, however, be dealt with under anti-avoidance measures, and I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not support that.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Does my hon. Friend agree that young people are the future of businesses in Britain? What words can she offer those leaving colleges and schools in Stourbridge to encourage them to go into business and, in particular, to go into business for themselves or set up new businesses?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The new national enterprise campaign, which will be launched by the Confederation of British Industry and British Chambers of Commerce, will, I hope, attract many young people leaving college or university into self-employment and business start-up by showing them shining examples of entrepreneurs who have done just that?

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): What extra costs does the Minister believe that highly regulatory and interventionist measures such as the Utilities Bill will impose on entrepreneurs, particularly in the IT and telecoms sector? The Government have today announced the embarrassing withdrawal of all the telecomms sections of the Utilities Bill; would they also consider withdrawing the plethora of regulations that are costing business £5 billion a year and stealth taxes on business costing £25 billion?

Ms Hewitt: No. Let me remind the hon. Gentleman of what the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), said recently. She said on regulation that:

> as a Minister under the previous Government . . . We would be the first to say that we did not do very well.—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 250.]

The fact is that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development concluded in its report last December that after two and a half years of Labour Government, the United Kingdom had less economic and administrative regulation than any other OECD country, including the United States of America. We are continuing to improve the regulatory environment and to simplify conditions for businesses.

Airbus

7. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): When he will announce his decision on Government aid for the new Airbus project. [111536]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): Discussions with BAe Systems on launch investment to secure UK participation in the Airbus A3XX project are well advanced.

Mr. Pike: The Minister will be aware that the project is of importance not only to British Aerospace, but to the aerospace industry in my Lancashire constituency and, indeed, throughout the whole country. It is important that the project should go ahead; the industry is waiting for a decision on that and on two major military projects, which are essential for its future success.

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend is right. I have met representatives from BAe Systems and from the work force and am well aware of the ramifications, and of the fact that 20,000 jobs depend on the success of Airbus. Incidentally, last year the company secured more than 55 per cent. of the market for large, civil aircraft. We hope to make an announcement soon. We are well aware of the valid points made by my hon. Friend.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to Airbus and its contribution to employment and to the aviation industry? Will he please make an early decision on support for the new Airbus project? Will he also condemn practices pursued in other countries—notably the US, where the fly American policy means that all American personnel have to fly on American carriers?

Mr. Johnson: I agree with the points made about the value of BAE Systems and the success of Airbus. Last October, we announced DTI funding of £2.45 million for an important competitive initiative of which Airbus is an important part. There should be fair competition rules and we hope to make an announcement on the Airbus project soon. We realise that A3XX is crucial to the future of Airbus and to BAe Systems.

Madam Speaker: Questions 8 and 11 are deferred until 12.30.

Businesses (North-west)

9. **Mr. Colin Pickthall** (West Lancashire): What assessment he has made of the impact of industries set up in the north–west with the help of his Department on similar enterprises in the same area. [111538]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): A key element in determining regional selective assistance is an assessment of the impact of the investment on national and regional economies and on relevant industrial and commercial sectors.

Mr. Pickthall: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the case of Europanel in Skelmersdale? It was a thriving

manufacturing concern until a foreign firm opened up in a neighbouring town with the help of the DTI and of DTI grants. Does she agree that we must be much more thorough in assessing the impact on neighbouring firms when we put public money into supporting much needed inward investment in the north-west? Does she further agree that it is unacceptable that the taxpayers of Skelmersdale should, ironically, contribute to the removal of jobs from the town?

Mrs. Liddell: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to ensure that no displacement occurs as a consequence of regional selective assistance. I am aware of the case to which he refers. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade met the company in October last year. Should the company want to consult the Government office of the north-west about the possibility of further assistance, officials are ready to hold discussions and will do everything that they can to help the company.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Does the Minister agree that the Government too can take important decisions? Does she agree that the Synchrotron project in Daresbury has given a massive boost both to business and to the academic community in the area? Does she understand the importance of allocating the Diamond project to Daresbury and that it should not go to Oxfordshire? People throughout the north-west—of all parties—want to see that. When shall we have a decision?

Mrs. Liddell: When I visited Runcorn a few weeks ago, the point about Daresbury was powerfully made to me. I realise the strength of local opinion—not least on the part of my hon. Friends who have fought well for the Synchrotron project. A decision has not yet been made, but it should be made shortly.

Grant Aid

10. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): If he will make a statement on his Department's policy for giving grant aid to areas of England outside those with assisted area status. [111540]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Dr. Kim Howells): Under European Commission law, regional state aid can be paid only in assisted areas approved under article 87. It is also possible to grant aid under other provisions. For example, the new enterprise grant areas have been proposed under the small firms guidelines, and SMART—the small firms merit award for research and technology—operates under the research and development guidelines.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The Department closed the partnership investment programme at the end of the year. I was told that the reason was that the EC had decided that gap funding to private sector developers, outside assisted areas and above aid intensity limits, was in breach of state aid rules. That raises the alarming spectre that no state aid, however much it is justified, can be paid outside assisted areas. Can my hon. Friend assure me that schemes such as those he described can be funded throughout the country when the circumstances are justified?

Dr. Howells: I can certainly confirm that the Government have a comprehensive package of measures to tackle need in the regions effectively. The proposals for new assisted areas are part of that package. The single regeneration budget, in particular, supports a wide range of regeneration schemes run by local partnerships in England to target pockets of deprivation in urban and other areas. I note that Partnership in Staffordshire was awarded substantial funding to promote the regeneration of rural communities. In addition, third tier is a flexible measure to aid regional development and to respond to local economic crises. That will be reviewed after an initial period of 12 months in conjunction with regional partners.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I understand that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry recently met the Commissioner in charge of assisted area status. Can the Minister possibly give us some idea of the representations that the Secretary of State made and what steps the Department of Trade and Industry will take to make sure that any distribution that comes from the European Union or the Government will be made fairly and equitably and—I look the Minister straight in the eye—on the basis solely of need?

Dr. Howells: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post; it is always good to see him. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will meet Commissioner Monti this afternoon and will, no doubt, discuss these very matters.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): May I ask my hon. Friend to ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to impress on Commissioner Monti the fact that the issue of state aid to Rover-BMW at Longbridge has been with the Commission for several months? That state aid is of vital importance to retaining strategic production inside the European Union and it is not unreasonable to expect the Commission to come up with a positive decision on that aid by the spring, as has been indicated before.

Dr. Howells: I am absolutely sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State heard those words and that that will be a subject for discussion with Commissioner Monti this afternoon.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does the Minister recognise that, between the over-hyped and overheated regional shopping centres and the assisted areas, which are quite rightly receiving support, there are small market towns throughout the country that are dying on their feet? Will he target support at that sector? In particular, will he talk to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about the iniquitous uniform business rate and its effect on small businesses in market towns?

Dr. Howells: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will himself want to make those points to Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the

Regions. We recognise very much the difficulties of isolated pockets of deprivation and need throughout the country and we are addressing them in all the proposals that we have for regional regeneration.

Steel Industry

12. **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): What assessment he has made of the impact of the strength of sterling on the United Kingdom steel industry. [111543]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The Government are well aware of the concerns of the steel industry in relation to the strength of sterling. However, the steel industry itself has worked hard to improve its competitiveness. Although exports fell in 1999, the prospects for increasing exports in 2000 are much improved, especially in the light of recovery of the south-east Asian market.

Mr. MacShane: I am grateful for that answer, but my right hon. Friend will know the very great fear in the steel communities of the United Kingdom about the loss of jobs as a result of the over-valued pound, which was inherited from the previous Government. Will she—and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State if he is available—agree to meet a delegation from the steel communities to discuss this very great concern?

Mrs. Liddell: I am very happy to agree to meet representatives of the steel industry. I represent a steel constituency, so I am well aware of the issues. The Government's priority remains to put economic management on a stable, long-term footing by reform of both monetary and fiscal policy. The worst thing that could happen for the steel industry would be to return to the short-term fixes of the previous Government, bringing the boom and bust that so unsettled the industry over the past 20 years.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister not accept that in steel plants, such as Llanwern and Ebbw Vale, there is great concern that the high value of the pound will undermine their on-going viability? Will she give a categoric assurance that her Department will take up with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in the context of the forthcoming Budget, the question of getting a fair parity for the pound that will give some chance for the plants that I mentioned? Their closure would be an absolute disaster for those areas.

Mrs. Liddell: Hon. Friends who represent those constituencies have made representations about the steel industry in that area. Approaches to Corus have revealed that speculation about Llanwern is based on press speculation. It would be unfortunate—and I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would not seek to do it—to spread fear in those communities about the possibility of further unemployment.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is well aware of the need to ensure a stable economy in the United Kingdom. We now have one of the strongest economies in the world. What we must seek to do is to ensure that all our industries benefit from the competitive advantage that can be brought about by increases in productivity and increases in output across the board for those industries. My right hon. Friend's main priority will be to ensure a stable economy and a stable exchange rate in the medium and long term.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The pound is strong against the undervalued euro, but we do not see such discrepancies so much in terms of the pound's valuation against the American dollar. Given that the right hon. Lady and her friends are proponents of scrapping the pound and taking us into the euro, what in her view is the optimum exchange rate between the pound and the euro?

Mrs. Liddell: I am sure the hon. Lady knows rather more about how exchange rates work than her question appears to suggest. The Government believe that the decision about the single currency and sterling should be based on the best economic performance of this country, not on some arbitrary date that seems to have been dreamt up by the hon. Lady and her friends to try to heal divisions within the Conservative party. The main priority on the Government Benches is to have a sound economy whereby competitive businesses can ensure further growth, not just in Europe, but in competing against other economies such as the United States and Japan.

Internet

13. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What measures he is taking to encourage greater use of the internet. [111544]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): We are driving through competition, to get internet access prices down; we are helping small businesses get the advice and training they need; and we are connecting schools, libraries and community centres to the internet.

Mr. Bruce: I am surprised that the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce does not know that the Government are not responsible for any of those things. What the Government do know is that they are responsible for the Electronic Communications Bill, and I have congratulated the Department of Trade and Industry on taking out the worst parts of that Bill. Is the hon. Lady aware that her colleagues in the Home Office are busily reinforcing in spades those very developments which will help close down our internet access? Is she also aware that her colleagues in the Committee considering the Utilities Bill said this morning that they are taking out all its telecommunications regulation, and that in this Parliament we shall not end up with any revision of such regulation, which is probably going over to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport? No doubt water is going to the Department of the Environment, Transport—

Madam Speaker: Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman to put his question.

Mr. Bruce: Is not the Minister going to resign, because she has nothing left to do?

Ms Hewitt: No.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is my hon. Friend aware that to date the United Kingdom has been a very positive environment for e-commerce, but will she look at consumer issues related to e-commerce and proper protection of consumers against concealed information being taken from their computers when they are using the net and buying things over it?

Ms Hewitt: I recently launched Trust UK, a system of hallmarks for accredited codes of practice, which will enable consumers buying from accredited British websites to know that they are dealing with reputable organisations and that they can deal confidently. I am hopeful that we can get a similar set-up at the European level in order to give consumers the trust and confidence they need in electronic commerce.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

14. **Mr. Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot): What discussions he has had with other departments on the review of the remit of the Export Credits Guarantee Department. [111545]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I asked Cabinet colleagues to advise me of issues that they wished to see covered by the review of ECGD's mission and status, and this was reflected in the terms of reference for the review.

In addition, I shall discuss the recommendations of the review team with colleagues.

Mr. Howarth: I hope that the Secretary of State will acknowledge the extremely important part played in British industry by defence exports. Britain is the second largest exporter of military goods in the world, and this enables us not only to help our friends, but to ensure that we have economies of scale in the production of defence equipment for our own forces.

Can the Minister assure me that ECGD support will continue to be available to major British companies such as BAe Systems, and that there will be no plans for the Government to curtail exports as the Chancellor of the Exchequer has sought to in respect of 63 countries, only one of which has been a beneficiary of ECGD support for defence exports in the past 12 years?

Mr. Byers: The ECGD's role is very important to many major exporters in the United Kingdom, including the defence industry. I think the hon. Gentleman will find when we announce the outcomes of the review that the defence industry will, where appropriate, continue to receive export credits as it does now.

It is always a question of striking the right balance. I believe that when we present our proposals in the light of the review, the right balance will be struck—a balance that recognises the importance of the export licensing regime, which is entirely different from the export credits guarantee regime. The two should not be married. In my view, export credits have a distinct role to play, and they will continue to do so.

We need to change the system to reflect the needs of particular sectors. I do not think that the small and medium-sized enterprise sector uses export credits as much as it might, but I do not believe that any issues arising from the review will cause concern to those of us who feel that export credits have an important role to play in supporting British exporters generally—and that includes the defence sector.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that most export credits are non-defence credits? On a wider issue, will he confirm that we are taking on a new role in relation to debt relief for emerging markets and third-world countries, while also lowering tariffs to facilitate market access? In that context, do not export credit guarantees hold the key to enabling countries that have suffered severe poverty to catch up with the western world in terms of economic growth?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the positive role that export credits can play in helping countries to develop their own economies. The Government certainly intend to do that, which is why we have concentrated on productive expenditure, especially in the case of the least-well-developed countries. Such countries need to commit their finance to projects that will make economic growth possible. That will form a crucial part of the ECGD's role in the future, and can, I think, be compatible not just with supporting British business, but with our development objectives.

I hope that, when we announce the outcome of the review in a few months' time, the House will see that we have struck the right balance between our two aims. They are not in competition with each other: we want to unite the interests of British business with countries' development needs.

World Trade Organisation

15. **Mr. Oliver Heald** (North-East Hertfordshire): What discussions he has held with his international counterparts on future progress with WTO negotiations. [111546]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): Since Seattle, I have been in contact with a number of my international counterparts from both the European Union and the rest of the world to discuss reform of the World Trade Organisation and the launch of a new round. Most agree on the need to launch a new round as soon as possible, and the need for reform of the WTO.

Mr. Heald: Does the Secretary of State agree that almost nothing is more important than for Britain to fight for global free trade, and to lower European Union tariff barriers? Is he aware that the Secretary of State for International Development has said that his Department will take a strong lead in trying to reform the WTO's procedures following Seattle? Can he report any progress

at all? He has told us that he has had meetings, but has any progress been made? This is a very important issue for Britain and British trade.

Mr. Byers: I agree that it is an important issue, and progress is being made.

Mr. Heald: What progress?

Mr. Byers: If the hon. Gentleman can wait, I will tell him.

The reform programme will now have two parts. There will be some specific and rather technical changes, which are being discussed in Geneva; we hope to conclude those discussions by the end of this month. We also see a need for more fundamental WTO reform, which will take longer, because the WTO operates on the basis of consensus: an individual member can block progress. The more radical reforms will take time, but I think that engaging in a dialogue—which is what we are doing—will give real opportunities for substantial reform, hopefully within a year or 18 months.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Is the Secretary of State aware that only a small percentage of the money that changes hands internationally from day to day is for trade in goods and services, and that the great bulk is concerned with capital speculation? Is that problem discussed with equivalent Ministers at meetings of the World Trade Organisation? We should begin to propound the idea of an international tax on capital speculation; then we would be able to tackle some of the problems faced by third-world nations.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend has always had interesting ideas. The WTO has been considering the question of investment in the context of its rules. Issues of international capital exchanges are more correctly the remit of the International Monetary Fund, and my hon. Friend will be aware that the IMF has adopted procedures to try to restrict sudden flows of capital in and out of particular countries. That has been successful over the past 12 or 18 months, and that is probably a more appropriate path than the one suggested by my hon. Friend, which I would not want to follow.

EU Structural Funds

16. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What progress has been made in completing funding negotiations for EU objective 1 regions; and if he will make a statement. [111547]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Dr. Kim Howells): The UK's objective 1 programmes were submitted to the Commission last year, and the Commission has now formally responded to some of them. Discussions are continuing and I hope that the programmes will be agreed to.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but is he aware that even the enterprise grant fund referred to in an earlier reply will deliver only £75,000 per annum to the objective 1 region of Cornwall? Does he accept that rather than encouraging unemployed people to apply for non-existent jobs in objective 1 areas, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer is to do, it would be far better to invest public money to ensure that we can draw down the available funds in objective 1 regions to generate jobs and regenerate those economies?

Dr. Howells: The Government are concerned to ensure that productive employment is retained in areas such as the one that the hon. Gentleman represents. I understand that the Government are working with all objective 1 areas to help them to identify match funding. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said on 3 February:

> All departments and Government offices will work closely with the areas to benefit, to ensure that they get the match funding that they need.—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 1191.]

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Although I accept that the Chancellor cannot make a final announcement about match funding until he has the results of the comprehensive spending review, will the Minister's Department put maximum pressure on the Treasury to make sure that match funding exists, and ask whether the Treasury can give any early indication on it? Most importantly, does the Minister agree that, in objective 1 areas, the emphasis must shift to devising schemes for infrastructure, skills training and improved opportunities for the work force, so that when the objective 1 funds are available, we can take maximum advantage of them?

Dr. Howells: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am very much in favour of the projects to which he has referred. I am confident that the funding will be found, and that we will proceed with that important aid. However, I am interested in the quality of the projects, and it is no use propping up projects or ideas that are not of sufficient quality to be sustainable or to make a difference to the areas that they seek to help.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Can the Minister assure the House that in meeting the match funding for Cornwall's objective 1 status, other counties in the south-west will not suffer?

Dr. Howells: We cannot move the assisted areas map east to Dorset, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would like. He will know that certain criteria have to be met; we will stick strictly with those criteria and ensure that, within them, assisted areas are helped properly.

Recycling

17. **Dr. Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test): What steps his Department is taking to encourage use of recycled materials. [111548]

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): On 31 January, we made a call for proposals under the DTI's recycling programme. The programme can provide funds to support research,

development and demonstration projects that have the potential to create substantial new demand for recycled materials.

Dr. Whitehead: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does she consider that at just over £1 million, the DTI recycling programme will have great impact? Does she agree that a greater impact could be achieved by a programme of deposits at the point of sale of consumer goods, which could be redeemed on presentation of the goods for recycling or disposal?

Ms Hewitt: I am indeed confident that £1 million worth of pump-priming money will have a helpful impact. I am aware of my hon. Friend's support for a deposit system for white goods. We will consider that when we see the draft European directive on electrical and electronic waste, which is likely to propose a collection and recycling target.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Department considering whether it is technically possible to recycle orimulsion?

Ms Hewitt: I am sure we are.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): On a different subject from orimulsion, will my hon. Friend consider encouraging drinks manufacturers also to operate a deposit and return schemes? Not only would that help to encourage recycling and reduce landfill, but it would help to clean up the streets.

Ms Hewitt: I well remember as a child collecting bottles with the intention of getting the deposit back on them, and very popular that was, too, so of course I will look into that.

Business Failures

18. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What assessment he has made of the trend in the number of business failures in the current financial year; and if he will make a statement. [111549]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): Business failures in October to December 1999, the third quarter of this financial year, were lower than in either of the two previous quarters. The figures are well below those seen as a result of the 1991 recession.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his answer, which is reassuring as far as it goes, to the end of the last calendar year. Can he assure the House that the disparity in the economy between the potentially overheating south-east and the rather more depressed midlands and north will not get worse? Will he, with the Treasury, ensure that the Government do not rely on interest rates set by the Bank of England alone to keep the economy in balance, and that the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises will be borne in mind, as they have a great burden of regulation and form-filling to cope with?

Mr. Johnson: It is good of the hon. Gentleman to join us. I can give him an assurance that the trend is good. In the same period, 26,000 more small businesses started than were made insolvent, which is one of the best records that we have seen. Because of the economic cycle, the trend for insolvency does not feed through for a while, so the upturn in the last quarter will be reflected more fully in the economic position in the year to come.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Are not more businesses likely to fail if 30,000 skilled IT workers are driven abroad by IR35?

Mr. Johnson: No.

Manufacturing (East Midlands)

20. **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of manufacturing industry in the east midlands region. [111551]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): Some traditional sectors of manufacturing in the east midlands have continued to suffer, particularly in the clothing and textile sectors. Many other sectors of manufacturing, including those in higher technology and higher value added areas, are faring much better. Overall, the regional economy is improving, with business confidence and profitability growing.

Mr. Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend. Contrary to earlier remarks, may I say that the East Midlands development agency is doing a first-class job in trying to stimulate the economy in the region? There is a mixed picture, with some parts doing very well. I urge my hon. Friend to take particular note of the problems experienced by the clothing and textile sector. Will he meet representatives of that sector and do what he can to stimulate those industries?

Mr. Johnson: We are aware of the problems in the textile sector. We are meeting representatives of the textile industry on a continuing basis. We are consulting about setting up manufacturing centres of excellence around the country. That will help all manufacturing industries, especially the textile industry.

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. Michael Connarty.

Hon. Members: Where is he?

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. Mark Todd.

Hon. Members: Where is he?

Domestic Energy Policy

24. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): What part his domestic energy policy plays in eliminating social exclusion. [111555]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): Fuel poverty affects about 5 million households in the United Kingdom. It leads to thousands of extra winter deaths annually and is a significant cause of ill health among some of the most vulnerable people in society. It therefore represents an important facet of social exclusion. The Government's energy policy tackles the problem in several ways. Promoting competition in energy markets leads to reduced prices; the energy regulator's social action plan will help poorer consumers; and the problem of poor housing is being tackled through the improved home energy efficiency scheme and the home investment programme. I have also set up a ministerial group to ensure better co-ordination of issues that relate to fuel poverty across Government.

Mrs. Gilroy: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most difficult challenges in tackling fuel poverty relates to the private rented sector? Will she congratulate companies such as PowerGen, Transco, TXU and Eastern Energy on some of the imaginative projects that they have introduced recently? In her discussions with those companies, will she urge them to do as much as they can to tackle the problem?

Mrs. Liddell: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating companies that have taken action on affordable warmth. They serve as leaders to the industry. I have asked the Electricity Association services task force to act to ensure that the highest possible standards are met, not only for those in the private rented sector, but for all those who are affected by fuel poverty, especially those who pay for their fuel through pre-payment meters.

Madam Speaker: I call Mrs. Margaret Moran.

Hon. Members: Where is she?

Madam Speaker: I call Mrs. Helen Jackson.

Hon. Members: Where is she?

Madam Speaker: I call Mrs. Maria Fyfe.

Hon. Members: Where is she?

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. Gordon Prentice.

Hon. Members: Where is he?

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. Anthony Steen.

Hon. Members: Where is he?

Infotech 2000

32. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on the activities of Infotech 2000 Ltd. in relation to the promotion of Islamic fundamentalist causes overseas. [111563]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): It is not the Department's policy to comment on the affairs of particular companies. If my hon. Friend has any information that he believes should be brought to the Department's attention, he should do that as soon as possible.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend knows that the activities of Infotech 2000 have caused some concern. It probably exploits company law to raise funds for fundamentalist, extremist and terrorist causes overseas, and to recruit volunteers to fight in those causes. Will the Department examine company law to ascertain whether the abuses in which the company has been involved can be reviewed? I refer specifically to the laws on fundraising for political purposes, especially overseas.

Dr. Howells: A comprehensive review of company law is currently under way. The Department has an efficient and active companies investigation section. I am sure that its staff will have listened to my hon. Friend's words.

Milk Marque

33. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): What recent representations he has received on the future structure of Milk Marque. [111564]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being here. [HON. MEMBERS: "Unlike your lot."] It is a close-run thing.

Since 4 November 1999, when the members of Milk Marque voted in favour of the board's proposals for the voluntary break-up of Milk Marque, the Department has received nine letters from hon. Members and members of the public on anxieties about the dairy industry. Two parliamentary questions have also been asked.

I welcome Milk Marque's decision, which gives the industry the opportunity to form new, closer and beneficial relationships between milk producers and other industries.

Mr. Paterson: How can breaking up Milk Marque help to establish efficient producers of dairy products when continental competitors such as MD and Arla are already twice as efficient as our own dairy producers?

Mr. Byers: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I shared the concern about the compulsory break-up of Milk Marque, which was the recommendation from the Competition Commission. For that reason, I did not agree with that recommendation, but the members of Milk Marque themselves decided that, on a voluntary basis, they would agree to breaking Milk Marque up into three successor organisations. That was a decision for the members of Milk Marque and that is wholly appropriate in the circumstances.

Madam Speaker: We now return to Questions 8 and 11.

Regulation

8. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): What plans he has to reduce the burden of regulation on business. [111537]

11. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): What steps he is taking to reduce the regulatory burden on business. [111541]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): We keep under review all measures that may increase the burden of regulation on business. As a result, we have been considering the views expressed by the telecoms operators in relation to the provisions in the Utilities Bill. We intend to publish a communications White Paper later this year. I believe that there is a powerful argument for dealing with the reforms needed in one measure. I have therefore decided to remove the telecoms provisions from the Bill. In addition, we shall remove the provisions relating to water, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will instead introduce measures covering those matters in a draft water Bill, which it intends to publish later this year. That will enable Parliament to consider proposed changes to the water regime alongside other proposals resulting from the review of competition in that sector.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am staggered that the Secretary of State sees fit to hang his important statement to the House on my equally important but somewhat unrelated question. Is not the truth that he has just butchered a flagship Bill because it is ill thought out? Returning to my question, what has his announcement done to reduce the 2,700 regulations introduced under his Administration, 17 of which alone, it is estimated, will cost British industry £10 billion in the lifetime of this Parliament?

Mr. Byers: The Conservative party's problem is that it is unable to distinguish between red tape and the need to provide decent standards for people in the workplace. Conservative Members regard the working time directive, paid holidays and the national minimum wage as red tape, but Labour Members know that they represent decent conditions for working people. Conservative Members oppose those measures, although we heard recently that their party now supports the national minimum wage. It would be interesting to hear the views of Opposition Front Benchers on that matter. We have in Committee a Bill that will cut the cost of electricity by 10 per cent. That is an important measure and we shall introduce the other proposals elsewhere in a more appropriate way.

Mr. Fabricant: I can see why the statement has been linked to my question: the Secretary of State recognises that the Utilities Bill is indeed a burden on business. He has now decided to scrap about half of it, despite the fact that BT made the recommendations over a year ago. The Bill was 170 pages long. Precisely how much has it cost the taxpayer to prepare it? How much has it cost the taxpayer to have civil servants sitting in during consideration of it? Why does not he accept that it is a burden on business and dump the whole lot?

Mr. Byers: I must warn the hon. Gentleman that a London telephone directory is about to be brought into the Chamber and we shall be interested to see whether he can tear that in half as well.

There is an important issue here. The Government received strong representations from the telecoms operators after announcing on 3 February that there would be a communications White Paper. That announcement came after the debate on Second Reading of the Bill. Therefore, we listened to industry and its genuine concerns. We make no apology for saying, following its representations, that we believe—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Byers: The proposals that were in the Bill received representations from the telecoms operators. We have listened to those. We feel that it is more appropriate to deal with the matter in the communications White Paper, which we have announced since Second Reading of the Utilities Bill. We will introduce it in the autumn. In the light of that, we feel that it is wholly appropriate to deal with the matter in that way. By doing so, we will reduce the regulation on the telecoms industry because it will not have two sets of regulations.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): On the general question of regulation, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a question of quality as well as quantity? No one is arguing for increased bureaucracy, but does he agree that, in certain circumstances, quality is at the heart of the issue? For example, in view of the recent report by the nuclear installations inspectorate on the safety record of British Nuclear Fuels, does he not agree that there is an overwhelming argument for improving the quality of regulation in many industries?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Where regulation is necessary—there will be circumstances where it is—it must be clear and precise and, wherever possible, produce the least burdens on business. There are clear issues to do with regulation of sensitive industries. I agree with him. Often, a combination of appropriate regulation and good, effective management is needed. In some cases, the two have not come together very often.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the synthetic anger of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) illustrates in its entirety the attitude of the previous Government: if we listen, we are damned, if we do not, we are damned, so why listen—and the previous Government did not listen? In not only listening but acting, will my right hon. Friend ensure that we carry forward the parts of the Bill that will help to reduce prices for all consumers, to tackle fuel poverty and to achieve regulatory certainty? In particular,

will he listen to the opinions of PowerGen, which, in a briefing to members of the Utilities Bill Standing Committee, said:

> PowerGen supports many aspects of the Bill, including the objectives of improving the consistency, predictability and transparency of regulation, and bringing the regulatory framework up to date with the competitive markets that have developed since privatisation?

Mr. Byers: It is interesting that the Conservative Opposition have gone on record as being against the electricity and gas provisions in the Utilities Bill, measures that will reduce the wholesale price of electricity by at least 10 per cent. and address the whole question of fuel poverty—a point that was raised on the Opposition Benches. Those measures will remain in place.

I make no apology for listening to the concerns of business and industry. The Bill will be a better Bill because we have listened to the views of telecommunications operators. We will introduce measures in the communications White Paper. We are a listening Government, putting the interest of business first.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): If I hear the Secretary of State say once more that he makes no apology, I think I shall puke. It is an outrage to the important global businesses involved in the four important sectors that are covered by the Bill, and an affront to the democratic process of the House that he did not have the guts to stand at the Dispatch Box and give a proper statement, with proper scrutiny by the House.

The Secretary of State talks about consultation. I refer him to his own words, 31 days ago at that Dispatch Box on Second Reading:

> Our first action was not to rush into legislating, but to consult widely on the structures that would fulfil the needs of consumers, be good for business and provide a stable framework for utility companies.—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 788.]

He may have consulted, but listen he did not.

We warned the Secretary of State on Second Reading and we have warned him consistently in Committee that the Bill was flawed from the start. We warned him when the so-called flagship Bill from the Queen's Speech was put before the House, and I warn him again today, that he will come back to the Dispatch Box to answer questions on the issues because we will no longer put up with lectures from him about the utilities industries that have benefited from the way in which the Conservative Government privatised them.

It is incredible that the Secretary of State and his colleagues did not make the connection between telecommunications and broadcasting before they brought the Bill to the House. It is incredible that, apparently, he had no discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister about the future of the water industry. Goodness knows what will happen in the mêlée that will now ensue.

This morning, I listened to proceedings on the Bill in Committee. Clearly, there is no timetable yet for the part of the Bill that deals with the water industry. We are now told that we have a White Paper, but that will not help the telecommunications industry. The Government must have known about the White Paper before they drafted the Bill. What will happen to part IV, which deals with the Competition Commission and all four utilities sectors?

Why can the Secretary of State not do the decent thing and come to the House to answer detailed questions that are important to businesses not only in this country, but globally, which have now been thrown into disarray because of the shambles of the way in which he runs the Department and the pseudo way in which the Department and the Labour party are supposed to consult? It is about time that he started listening to people who know about these issues. He would not have done badly to listen to my hon. Friends in Committee—it was good advice, freely given—but he did not. Instead, he gave us arrogance and no apology. I warn him that his reputation and that of his Department is that they are unbusinesslike and do not know what they are doing. The Bill is a shambles. He should withdraw it and bring it back a second time.

Mr. Byers: It was interesting that the hon. Lady referred to advice from Conservative Members that was "freely given". I have to say that that is a rare occurrence. I make no apology for the way in which the Bill has been amended to reflect the interests of business. Let me take Opposition Members through the sequence of events since it was considered on Second Reading. On 3 February— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I will not have questions put from a sedentary position.

Mr. Byers: On 3 February, we announced that there would be a White Paper on communications policy. As a result of our announcement, of which the telecommunications operators were unaware until it was made, there were further representations to the Government from the industry in the light of the fact that there was to be a White Paper. There had been consultation before, but at that stage the telecommunications operators were unaware that there was to be a White Paper on communications. Further representations were made by the sector and, in the light of those representations, we decided to remove telecommunications from the Bill. As for the water industry, there is to be a water Bill to deal with provisions affecting that industry.

We still have a measure that will radically change electricity and gas trading. It will benefit millions of people and businesses. Therefore we make no apology for introducing a Utilities Bill that will benefit business and individuals. We make no apology for listening to the interests of business. We will put practical policies before political dogma, unlike the Conservative party.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is paying so much attention to business, but he will be aware that both those major industries are not ones that enjoy the unequivocal support of all consumers. Could he, therefore, tell us why it would not have been easier to have left them both in the existing Utilities Bill, and, subsequently, to table amendments on them in the interests of consumers—who, after all, may not have the same view of privatisation as Opposition Front Benchers?

Mr. Byers: In relation to the four areas that were considered in the Utilities Bill, and certainly in cases that are being considered, we shall have to ensure that the interests of consumers are effectively represented. I am confident that, when the measures on water and telecommunications are introduced, a strong voice will have to be given to consumers' interests. There will be such a voice on gas and electricity in the Utilities Bill.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Is not this a case of joined-up chaos, rather than joined-up Government? The Secretary of State talks about the communications White Paper, but has he only just found out about it? The Government have been talking about it for months. Liberal Democrat Members warned him that it was sensible to deal with telecommunications in a telecommunications Bill, but he included provisions on telecommunications in the Utilities Bill. He has now discovered that they will have to be withdrawn.

Is there not a pitched battle between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how to regulate water—with the DTI favouring a light touch and the DETR favouring a heavy one? Is not the truth that the Deputy Prime Minister has taken his ball home because he has not been able to get his way on water regulation in the Bill?

The Utilities Bill is a shambles, and the Secretary of State will have to answer the question whether its remaining threads hang together at all.

Mr. Byers: We have a Bill dealing with gas and electricity that will make a very real difference to many thousands of people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He needs to be aware of that. If he is saying that the Bill should be withdrawn, he is saying that those benefits should be denied to his constituents. It is interesting—it is on the record—that that is his approach. I think that he will be condemned on that particular issue.

There is no disagreement between the Deputy Prime Minister and me on the need to deal with water within a water Bill: it is a sensible place to deal with it. As I said, on 3 February we announced that there will be a telecommunications White Paper. In the light of that, the operators themselves have made further representations. Our view is that we should take account of those representations, reflect on the issues and include them in a White Paper later this year.

Business Questions

12.47 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 6 MARCH—Second Reading of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill.

TUESDAY 7 MARCH—Second Reading of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial)(No.2) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 8 MARCH—Opposition Day [7th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "Financial Provision and Clinical Distortion in the National Health Service" followed by a debate entitled "Regulatory Burdens on Small Business". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

Supplemental Allocation of Time Motion relating to the Representation of the People Bill followed by consideration of any Lords amendments which may be received.

THURSDAY 9 MARCH—Second Reading of the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*.

FRIDAY 10 MARCH—Private Members' Bill.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 MARCH—Progress on remaining stages of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill.

TUESDAY 14 MARCH—Conclusion of remaining Stages of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed Private Business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

WEDNESDAY 15 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Terrorism Bill.

Motion on the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 (Continuance) Order.

At 10 o'clock the House will be asked to agree the Spring Supplementary Estimates, Supplementary Vote on Account, Excess Votes and Defence Votes A.

THURSDAY 16 MARCH—Opposition Day [8th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 17 MARCH—Debate on safeguards for children on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for details of next week's business and an indication of the likely business for the week after. I know that the whole House will welcome the fact that the debate on the Waterhouse report on child abuse will take place on the Floor of the House in Government time.

The right hon. Lady has announced a day and a half for the remaining stages of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. Is she aware that that is a challenging timetable? It is a long constitutional Bill. During its passage, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office has been characteristically generous in volunteering to revisit large sections of it and possibly amend it. Does she believe that the House can give adequate consideration to that Bill in the allotted time?

Given that fact and the exchanges that we have just heard, is it not clear that the Government are trying to push too much ill-considered legislation through the House? The House is littered with the debris of Bills that seem to have been abandoned, such as the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill, those that are seriously damaged, such as the Utilities Bill, and others, such as the Freedom of Information Bill, which came out of Committee on 10 February and has not been seen since. Is the programme outlined in the Queen's Speech on track?

Will the right hon. Lady confirm that we shall have a debate in Government time on the intergovernmental conference White Paper? We still await a debate on the Wakeham report on reform of the House of Lords. Might we expect a statement next week from the Deputy Prime Minister on the Crow report, which has caused serious alarm in Hampshire and the rest of the south-east? As I am sure that the right hon. Lady knows, next Wednesday is international women's day. We normally have a debate on women's issues, which is of interest to the whole House. Will that take place?

Finally, does the right hon. Lady recall that, at the last business questions, I asked for a statement on the BBC licence fee? She replied:

> I cannot tell him when an announcement on the licence fee will be made, although it will not be next week.—[*Official Report*, 17 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1105.]

On the next sitting day, the Government made a statement on the licence fee. Does she feel a pang of remorse at her reply?

Mrs. Beckett: I believe that there is adequate time for the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. It has some constitutional implications, but the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have been very generous with the time allocated for discussions so far. We expect that to be taken into account.

It is plainly not the case that there is too much legislation or that the programme in the Queen's Speech is not on track. We already have a substantial number of Bills in Committee, on Report, being prepared and on their way through the House. There is no question of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill disappearing. The Government intend to pursue it, as we are pursuing the Utilities Bill. The Opposition are showing every sign of not learning from some of the mistakes that they made during the 1980s and 1990s. When I was first a Member of Parliament, it was an expected and normal part of the process of legislative scrutiny—indeed, it was the purpose of legislative scrutiny—that Governments listened to representations from other bodies outside the House and from the Opposition on the effect of legislation and might even change Bills as a result. It was only during Lady Thatcher's period that that became seen as a sign of weakness and incompetence. We see the consequences of that attitude in the diminished number of Conservative Members. Far from our legislation being ill-considered, the processes of the House are acting as they should.

The right hon. Gentleman asks for time for debate on issues such as Lords reform and international women's day and for a statement on the Crow report. It is clear from his remarks that he agrees that the Government have

to give priority to their legislative programme. He will be well aware of the way in which Opposition Members have sought to exploit the time and the means available to them. It is perfectly legitimate that they should do so and I make no complaint about it. However, the Government's priority is our legislative timetable. If he wants time to debate other issues—I have a great deal of sympathy with that—I suggest that he does something to prevent his hon. Friends from making undue and unnecessary use of time.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned my comments about the statement on the BBC licence fee. I made those comments in good faith. He must have forgotten that he and a large number of other hon. Members made strong representations on that occasion, as they had on previous occasions, about the importance of an early statement on the subject. I am sorry that he apparently does not appreciate the power of his advocacy.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will be shocked to hear that, within the past hour, TRW has announced 450 redundancies at the former Lucas factory in my constituency. Does she see any prospect of debating the motor and motor components industry at an early date?

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry to hear of that announcement and I understand and share my hon. Friend's concern for his constituents. The Government have done a great deal to improve the way that we respond when such announcements are made. I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a special debate on the motor industry but, as my hon. Friend was one of the strongest advocates of the extra time found for discussion and debate in Westminster Hall, he will be keenly aware of the possibilities that presents.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): When does the Leader of the House intend that the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill will return to the parliamentary programme? Following the withdrawal last night of the Nuclear (Safeguards) Bill, will the right hon. Lady confirm that that measure does not appear in the business programme for the next two weeks? Can the right hon. Lady give the House an assurance that technical but important Bill will reappear?

As to the Utilities Bill, does the Leader of the House agree—as Chairman of the Modernisation Committee—that the Government have a lesson to learn? A formal process of pre-legislative scrutiny might have been more appropriate, and it might have meant that one arm of government would have known that another arm was going to produce a White Paper. Then the telecommunications industry might have known the Government's intentions prior to publication. The tension and adrenalin that has flowed today could have been avoided by following the sensible procedures established in this parliamentary Session.

Mrs. Beckett: We have not withdrawn the Nuclear (Safeguards) Bill—it was not moved last night. It is an important technical measure.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important and worthwhile point about pre-legislative scrutiny and the Modernisation Select Committee. Perhaps understandably, the hon. Gentleman has not wholly taken on board the point made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—who was of course aware of, and involved in, discussions about a White Paper. As was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), there are two slightly different processes.

The Utilities Bill as originally conceived was intended to bring a degree of consistency to the approach taken to regulation across those sectors, which is why the telecoms and water sectors were in the original Bill. When an announcement was made of further work on the telecoms sector not related to those patterns of regulatory approval, there were fresh and different representations from that industry suggesting that the effect would be one round of probably perfectly worthwhile regulatory change, succeeded in different circumstances by another round relating to a business that is fast moving. In those circumstances, the representations made by the industry were considered and changes were made.

It is intended that the water sections of the Bill, where different issues arise, will go through a pre-legislative scrutiny process with the water Bill. Such a process has already been announced. So the hon. Gentleman will get exactly that for which he asks.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): Will my right hon. Friend find time as soon as possible for a debate on the welcome measures announced yesterday to improve road safety? Although I would like those measures to go further, such a debate would allow the House to contrast them with the answer that I received from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 29 June 1999—that the Opposition would like to see the removal of bumps, chicanes and speed cameras as an impediment to cars. Would that not increase danger for the majority of pedestrians? As 103 child deaths a year are too many, may we have a debate on how to reduce that number as much as possible?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I well remember the exchange to which he refers and the statement he elicited from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). It is again a matter of creative tension between sensible regulation and red tape—and of the inability of the Conservative party to distinguish between the two.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Representing the interests of the House rather than the Government, does the Leader of the House think that it was appropriate for a Minister—in this case the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—to use a parliamentary question to announce a major change in a piece of legislation?

Secondly, thousands of redundancies are being announced in the textile and clothing industry, in which I have taken an interest in all the 29 years that I have been in the House. Those redundancies are the result of companies locating their manufacturing capacity overseas, encouraged, very often, by our major retailers, and of the costs in this country, which are caused by Government regulation and action. Will the right hon. Lady therefore allow a debate about the crisis facing the textile and clothing industry, particularly the strategy document that has recently been published and put out for consultation by the textile and clothing industry trade organisations, including the trade unions?

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of the hon. Gentleman's long-standing interest in the industry and, indeed, in all

[Mrs. Beckett]

aspects of manufacturing. He knows that I share that interest. I recognise the concerns of the clothing and textile industry. I am aware of how successive Governments have sought to work with it to solve those problems. Knowing the hon. Gentleman, I am quite prepared to believe that he does not solely lay at the door of this Government the problems that the industry faces.

Mr. Winterton *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Beckett: I am pleased to see that he agrees. However, I cannot undertake to find time for a further special debate on the industry, although I recognise the concerns that he identifies. I know that he and other hon. Members with similar interests will keep the matter under close scrutiny.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether it was appropriate for the Secretary of State to announce the changes that have been made in the way that he did. We are in a somewhat difficult position. As he will appreciate, the Bill is being considered by a Standing Committee Upstairs. I do not think it unreasonable for me to share with the House the information that it was the very strong advice of the Clerks that, when a Bill is in that stage of its process through the House, it is the property of the Committee which the hon. Gentleman, given his long-standing contribution to Standing Committees, will understand. It was therefore felt that an announcement had to be made first to the Committee, and it was then a matter of getting the timing right so that the House was not deprived while the Committee was informed. Since it coincided with Trade and Industry questions, this was thought the best possible way of dealing with the slightly difficult technicality of the Committee being in existence and the Government wishing, as always, to show full courtesy to both the House and the Committee.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): When the Wakeham commission was established, it was asked to work to a very tight timetable so that we could make rapid progress on reform of the other House. It worked to that timetable and delivered its report against all the odds by the end of last year. Since then, nothing seems to have happened. We have not yet fulfilled our pledge to remove the hereditaries because nearly 100 remain. It is now urgent for the House to debate this issue and for a Joint Committee of the two Houses to be established, as promised, so that it can begin to work and we can move from an incomplete stage 1 to a proper stage 2.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is remembering only half of what was said about Wakeham. We wished the royal commission to meet, discuss and come to a speedy conclusion so that the Government could then judge whether it was possible to see an emerging consensus which could be followed by further speedy action. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Opposition Members groan but, if they look at the record, they will find that that has always and consistently been the view expressed from the Dispatch Box. It is well within my hon. Friend's memory, I am sure, that the Conservative party claimed that no such consensus would emerge, and has indeed done its best to ensure that it does not. The question of who wants to see progress on this is a different one.

I do not agree with my hon. Friend's remarks about the remaining hereditary principle. No one sits in the House of Lords on the basis of heredity any more. The procedures have been changed so that people are there through some mechanism related to their record and not to the record of their forebears.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I seek to follow the Government's logic by asking whether, if the water provisions had been first withdrawn, the Leader of the House would have withdrawn the telecommunications provisions, even if there had been no elusive White Paper on telecommunications?

Mrs. Beckett: The point that the right hon. Gentleman was seeking to make was, uncharacteristically, not entirely clear. The issues are separate and slightly different, but as proposals for change were to be made on each matter, it was sensible to make them together.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Has the Leader of the House read the exchanges at column 1381 of *Hansard* on 22 February regarding rail safety? Is she familiar with the expression that something is "like painting the Forth rail bridge", which means that some process is going on and on and will never stop? Well, the painting of the bridge has now stopped because of an acrimonious dispute between Rigblast and Railtrack. Both as Leader of the House and as an engineer, has my right hon. Friend read Magnus Linklater's damning comment in *The Times* today that the whole business is a disgrace to our country? Much of the responsibility for that lies on The Mound, where today is being spent on a discussion of Gaelic, a language that only two Members there speak—and one of them badly. They are paying for simultaneous translation rather than attending to urgent engineering problems.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand, as the whole House does, my hon. Friend's proper concern for the Forth bridge, which is an important international monument. I am familiar with the expression—now a cliché I suppose—to which he drew attention, and I have read both the exchanges between my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the comments in *The Times*. I well understand my hon. Friend's concern, and shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend, who I believe is looking into the matter, and will write to my hon. Friend on it. Other than that, I am conscious of the courtesies required between fellow legislative bodies.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to the negative prayer in my name against statutory instrument 239, which introduces changes to jobseeker's allowance regulations? The purpose of the change is to increase the benefit penalty sanction to 26 weeks if an 18 to 24-year-old refuses a new deal option over 12 months. The Advisory Committee on Social Security has made helpful suggestions that would mitigate some of the adverse effects of that change. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices through the usual channels to seek Committee consideration of the regulations before their implementation, which, I understand, is intended to happen early in March?

Mrs. Beckett: I have seen the hon. Gentleman's prayer, and I understand his point. I shall draw his remarks to the

attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. The hon. Gentleman asks me to see that the issue is raised through the usual channels; having been a usual channel himself, he will be well aware of how that process operates.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate early-day motion 2?

[*That this House applauds the Government's intention to ensure that all pensioners entitled to income support receive it, making it a genuine minimum income guarantee; notes that, although the minimum income guarantee was introduced in April 1999, the promised national programme of measures to maximise take-up is still awaited; and urges the Secretary of State for Social Security to announce that claims made by pensioners after the date of that announcement will be treated as having been made on that date and that arrears of benefit will be paid accordingly.*]

According to the Government's figures, 700,000 of the poorest pensioners will lose out on the so-called minimum income guarantee to an average of £18 a week. When will we begin the campaign promised in our manifesto? It was promised for April 1999 but, on 6 February 2000, the Minister of State, Department of Social Security promised that it would happen by the end of that month. He repeated that promise in Westminster Hall on 9 February, but we are into March and nothing has happened. Can we have a debate in which the Government can reassure the poorest pensioners, who were promised, but have been denied, a minimum income? It is worth recalling that the minimum income guarantee is the Government's main excuse for not restoring the link between pensions and earnings. We need a debate to make sure that the Government guarantee that the great losses suffered by the poorest pensioners because of delays in the take-up campaign will be backdated.

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of the long campaign that my hon. Friend—with other Members—has run on that issue. I do not entirely share the view that there has been no action and that no measures have been taken by the Government to promote the minimum income guarantee—although I am not even sure whether that is his proposition. However, I understand his point; despite the efforts made by the Government, we acknowledge that there are still too many people who do not take up their entitlement. I regret the fact that action might not have been taken as speedily as my hon. Friend had hoped and as Ministers had indicated. I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security. I understand that a campaign will be mounted soon. I hope that my hon. Friend will understand that, after my recent experience in the matter of television licences, I am reluctant to offer a date.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I should be obliged if hon. Members would put direct questions to the Leader of the House.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Tomorrow, I shall present my Food Labelling Bill for Second Reading. In the light of the sympathy of the Prime Minister, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for better food labelling, may I expect Government support for the Bill—and if not, why not?

Mrs. Beckett: Offhand, I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman whether we will support his Bill. However, I can tell him that the Government have consistently promoted and pursued the cause of food labelling—in contrast to the party that he represents, which fought it all the way.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I realise that further statements can be made as developments take place in Mozambique. However, should not the House hold a debate on the crisis there? Our constituents expect a debate in the House so that we can all apply our minds to the massive problems in that country.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand and sympathise with my hon. Friend's wish to keep the matter before the House. As he is well aware, we have already discussed the matter on several occasions. However, as he appreciates, action is being taken to assist people in Mozambique—that is the most important thing—even though it is logistically difficult. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will keep the matter under review, but I cannot promise time for a further debate in the near future.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): As I am a non-smoker, the Leader of the House will appreciate that I do not advocate smoking. However, on a day when those who represent the tobacco industry are lobbying the House, would she remind the Chancellor of the Exchequer that it would be helpful for manufacturing industry if he did not continue to increase the taxation on tobacco? That hits not only an industry but many shopkeepers throughout the Province.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the difficulties that arise over the taxation of tobacco, but the hon. Gentleman will understand that the matter also relates to health and that, too, is a burden on the economy. The Government have to try to balance both those important issues.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I know that the Leader of the House will be well aware of the extreme disquiet among the Indian community in this country over the proposal for a visa bond pilot scheme. Although that anxiety was engendered by a mendacious piece of journalism that linked asylum seekers with a £10,000 bond, it is important that there should be discussion of the matter in the House at the earliest opportunity, so that it can be clarified for members of the Indian community who are extremely concerned.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. I am aware of the concerns on those issues. I am also aware—as is he through his involvement in the Labour Friends of India organisation—of the need to air those concerns. I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate in the near future, but I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the fact that Home Office questions will be held on 13 March, when he may find an opportunity to raise the issue. Hopefully, he will hear a statement then that will ease the concerns of his constituents.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): The right hon. Lady will recall that, on 13 January, I asked whether she

[Mr. John Townend]

would consider providing time for a further fishing debate. We had only half a day for the annual fishing debate. A long statement from the Prime Minister before the debate, and long speeches from those on the Front Bench meant that only one Opposition Back Bencher was called. She was not able to accede to my request, but I was encouraged when, in a reply to the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) about the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, she said that it would offer an opportunity to discuss fishing issues.

The Bill was debated yesterday and I prepared a speech dealing with the problems of the British fishing industry, which is in a serious and desperate state. However, I was horrified when, at the beginning of the Second Reading debate, the occupant of the Chair indicated that it was a purely technical Bill and that he would not allow a general debate on fishing issues. Clearly, I agree that it might have been unwitting, but the right hon. Lady misled the House. I ask her to apologise for that and to make amends by offering a full day's debate on fishing, so that the vast majority of Members representing fishing communities have the chance to debate an industry that is in crisis and to speak for their fishermen.

Mrs. Beckett: I say this with respect, but I do not take lightly the use of the words "misled" or "apologise". I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that, at least in my view, those remarks were disproportionate. Of course, I accept the concern that he has expressed and I regret the circumstances in which he found himself. He will know that I do not speak for, and cannot bind, the Chair, so I regret that he did not have the opportunity that he expected.

Equally, I regret that it has not been possible to find time for a debate on fishing. However, the hon. Gentleman will know that we might have had more time on the Bill yesterday had not time been taken up on other matters. That was perfectly proper. However, I repeat what I said to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) at the outset. I understand the concerns, and that is why the Government, through Westminster Hall, have provided opportunities for 200 extra debates. I understand the great desire in the House to discuss all manner of issues, but that means that we have to use our time wisely. The Government must give priority to legislation, and Conservative Members might like to bear that point in mind.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the important role that home helps play for vulnerable people? Is she aware that a dispute in Derbyshire means that many home helps have had their low wages reduced by 15 per cent? Will she use her efforts in the House and as a Member representing a Derbyshire constituency—although I accept that she is not on the county council—to see that this unfortunate dispute is brought to an end?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not exercise powers over social services authorities. I always regret it when disputes arise and hope that they can be speedily resolved. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate in the House on this matter.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The right hon. Lady always treats the House with great courtesy, but this afternoon she has repeatedly been unable to give clear answers to questions because she has given the House legislative indigestion. In response to the initial questions of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), will she tell us whether it is her intention, as she has suggested in the past, to give us a debate on the Wakeham report, for which the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) has also asked? Is it her intention to give us a debate on the intergovernmental conference White Paper and will we have a statement on the Crow report, which touches on the consistencies of many Members on both sides of the House? Can we please have a clear affirmation on those three points?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I think that I have given the House a very clear steer indeed. I said nothing to the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire that suggested that the Government were not perfectly prepared to have a debate on the Wakeham report. I am very mindful of the pressure from Conservative Members for a debate on the IGC report, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the number of occasions in recent weeks in which the Government have allowed one or two days for business and, because of the perfectly proper activities of Conservative Members, that business has not been concluded within the expected time. That has been a repeated pattern.

The Government have every intention of seeking to find time for some of the issues that he has raised, and for others that Members have perfectly properly mentioned, but there is a creative tension between these things, and the Government's priority is their legislative programme. Hon. Members who wish to debate other matters might like to have that in mind.

Madam Speaker: We shall now take the first statement.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order—

Madam Speaker: Order. Points of order always come after statements.

Senator Pinochet

1.20 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the case of Senator Pinochet, former Head of State of Chile.

This morning, I informed the House by written answer that I had discharged Senator Pinochet from the Spanish extradition request, on the grounds that he was unfit to stand trial and that no significant improvement in his condition could be expected. I also reported my decision not to issue an authority to proceed in the competing extradition requests from Belgium, France and Switzerland, because none of those disclosed an extradition crime. A detailed explanation of my reasons is included in my answer.

The House will also now be aware, from the written answer given earlier today by my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General, that the Director of Public Prosecutions has decided, on the material available to him, that there is no realistic prospect of a conviction in this jurisdiction, and that in any event, in the light of the medical condition of Senator Pinochet, no court here would allow a trial to take place. My hon. and learned Friend will be making a statement to the House immediately after mine.

Senator Pinochet departed from his bail address at Wentworth, Surrey this morning. He was driven under police escort to RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. A plane provided by the Chilean Government and carrying Senator Pinochet took off at about 1.10 this afternoon. The senator has now left the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom.

Let me now give the House a full account of what has happened in this case, as I said I would once the proceedings were concluded. I begin by making some general observations. My role under the Extradition Act 1989 is a quasi-judicial one. Although not generally incorporated into our domestic law, both the European extradition convention and the United Nations torture convention place important obligations on the United Kingdom, but I have to discharge those obligations within the powers and responsibilities placed upon me by United Kingdom law.

All the decisions which I have taken have been mine alone, and have not been decisions of Her Majesty's Government. Throughout, I have been keenly aware of the gravity of the crimes allegedly committed by Senator Pinochet and of the desire for justice by those who suffered at the hands of the former Chilean regime.

This has been an unprecedented case. Both I and the courts have had to navigate in uncharted territory. Two judicial Committees of the House of Lords took different views about what offences constituted extradition crimes. More recently, Mr. Justice Maurice Kay ruled that my refusal of Belgium's request for disclosure of the medical report which I had commissioned was correct. Shortly afterwards, a full divisional court, while acknowledging strong arguments on both sides, came to the opposite view.

The following is the chronology of the significant events. Senator Pinochet landed at Heathrow airport on 22 September 1998, for a private visit to the United Kingdom. On 16 October, the Metropolitan police received an extradition request from a Madrid court for the provisional arrest of Senator Pinochet for serious offences, including the murder of Spanish citizens. The police were advised by officials of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that Senator Pinochet did not enjoy diplomatic immunity from arrest. Bow Street magistrates court then issued a provisional arrest warrant, and Senator Pinochet was arrested that evening.

Senator Pinochet's solicitors made representations to me on 21 October 1998, asking me to cancel the provisional arrest warrant. I declined to do so, on the basis that the issues raised at that stage were a matter for the court. Senator Pinochet's solicitors challenged my decision. A divisional court, headed by the Lord Chief Justice, rejected that challenge and awarded me my costs. The court nevertheless quashed the warrant on the grounds that Senator Pinochet did have sovereign immunity as a former Head of State and that the warrant did not disclose an extradition crime.

The Crown Prosecution Service, acting on behalf of Spain, then entered an appeal to the House of Lords. In a unique feature of the case, the issue was considered twice by the House of Lords, first in November 1998 and then, after the first judgment was vacated, in March 1999. The key majority finding of the second court was that torture was an international crime over which the parties to the torture convention had universal jurisdiction, and that a former Head of State did not have immunity from such crimes. That ruling was a landmark judgment in human rights law, whose impact has been felt far beyond our shores. It will be a permanent legacy of the Pinochet case.

The second House of Lords judgment restricted the scope and number of the alleged crimes in respect of which Senator Pinochet could be extradited for torture and conspiracy to torture committed in Chile after the UK'S ratification of the torture convention in December 1988. The charges were, of course, still extremely serious.

I issued a second authority to proceed on 14 April 1999, giving my reasons. A second judicial challenge to my decision was made by Senator Pinochet's representatives, but was again rejected by the divisional court. On 8 October 1999, Senator Pinochet was committed by the Bow Street magistrate to await my decision on whether to extradite him to Spain. Senator Pinochet's solicitors applied for habeas corpus, and a hearing date was set for 20 March this year.

On 14 October 1999, I received representations from the Chilean embassy, supported by medical reports which suggested that there had been a recent and significant deterioration in Senator Pinochet's health. I commissioned a medical examination of Senator Pinochet by a team of independent practitioners of outstanding national and international reputation in their fields. The team consisted of Professor Sir John Grimley Evans, Professor Andrew Lees and Dr. Michael Denham. On the team's advice, Dr. Maria Wyke, a consultant neuropsychologist, was also brought in.

I want to put on record my gratitude to Sir John Grimley Evans and his team for their assistance. They have performed a very significant public service. They have not been able to speak freely in explaining and, where necessary, defending their findings, despite widespread public scrutiny.

The clinicians were instructed to undertake an examination and to provide me with a fully comprehensive report on the state of Senator Pinochet's

[Mr. Jack Straw]

health. In particular, they were asked to advise whether any aspects of Senator Pinochet's health suggested that he was not then fit, or was likely to become fit, to stand trial in Spain. They were told that I was particularly interested in Senator Pinochet's ability to follow a line of questioning, to recall events—some of which took place as long ago as the 1970s—and to give coherent evidence. They were also asked to advise me on whether Senator Pinochet could be feigning any of his symptoms.

As I disclosed in my statement on 12 January, the conclusions of the medical report, applying the tests that I had outlined, indicated that Senator Pinochet was unfit to stand trial and that no significant improvements in that position could be expected. The Government's chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, confirmed the quality and thoroughness of the report. I am placing a copy in the Library of the House.

I informed the interested parties on 11 January that, in the light of the medical evidence and subject to any representations received by 18 January, I was minded to conclude that no purpose would be served by continuing the Spanish extradition request.

On 25 January, a judicial review application was made by Belgium and Amnesty International for disclosure of the medical report. In inviting Senator Pinochet to undertake the medical examination, officials had, on my behalf, given an undertaking of confidentiality. I indicated to the divisional court that although I would have preferred to disclose the medical report to the requesting states, I considered myself bound by the undertakings that I had given, subject to any overriding public interest.

Mr. Justice Maurice Kay held that the report should not be disclosed, but a full divisional court, in a judgment of 15 February, said that while the issue had been a very difficult one, the need for transparency to the requesting states in this exceptional case outweighed any duty of confidentiality. It said, however, that I should disclose the report to Spain, Belgium, France and Switzerland only in terms of strict confidence. I complied with the judgment. I regret to say that the content of that report was almost immediately leaked to the press.

Requesting states were invited to make any representation on the medical report by Tuesday 22 February. The representations included opinions from medical practitioners questioning the conclusions of the report. I asked Professor Sir John Grimley Evans and his team to review those medical opinions, and received their advice on 27 February. The team's advice was also reviewed on 28 February by the Government's chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson. He commented:

> I was very impressed with the care with which Sir John (and his team) has responded to each of the points of criticism of their report. This is not a crude rebuttal—it is a sound and logical reply supported by clinical evidence. I believe it is a further reflection of the skill, integrity and independence with which this task has been carried out by the clinicians.

I considered the matter afresh in the light of all the material. Having done so, I was satisfied that the conclusion of the original report was correct. I intend to place the medical representations and the team's response in the Library once I have secured the agreement of the requesting states.

The principle that an accused person should be mentally capable of following the proceedings, instructing lawyers and giving coherent evidence is fundamental to the idea of a fair trial. The trial of an accused in the condition diagnosed in Senator Pinochet, on the charges that have been made against him in this case, could not be fair in any country, and would violate article 6 of the European convention on human rights in those countries that are party to it.

A number of the representations that I received argued that even if there were questions about Senator Pinochet's fitness for trial, those should be determined in Spain and not here. I looked at that matter with great care. However, I was advised, and I concluded, that on the basis of English law I was bound to form a view of my own on Senator Pinochet's fitness to stand trial and that I could not refrain from reaching such a view on the basis that the question could be determined in Spain.

In any event, I established, with the assistance of the Spanish authorities, that Spain's principles for determining the fitness of an accused to stand trial are similar to ours. I therefore concluded that given the advice that no improvement in Senator Pinochet's condition could be expected, no judicial purpose would be served by the continuation of extradition proceedings for the objective of a trial in Spain which could not result in any verdict on the charges against him.

Of the 70,000 letters and e-mails from the public which I have received from all over the world, and many letters from Members of Parliament and organisations, almost all have urged me to allow the extradition proceedings to take their course, so that the allegations made against Senator Pinochet could be tried. I attach great importance to the principle that universal jurisdiction against persons charged with international crimes should be effective.

I am all too well aware that the practical consequence of refusing to extradite Senator Pinochet to Spain is that he will probably not be tried anywhere. I am very conscious of the sense of injury that is bound to be felt by those who suffered from breaches of human rights in Chile in the past, as well as their relatives.

All of these are matters of great concern, and I had them very much in mind when considering the evidence about Senator Pinochet's state of health. They have been among the reasons why I required the evidence of Senator Pinochet's medical condition to satisfy a high standard of expertise, thoroughness, objectivity and cogency before I was prepared to act on it. Ultimately, however, I was driven to the conclusion that a trial of the charges against Senator Pinochet, however desirable, was simply no longer possible.

The case has taken 17 months, much of that in court proceedings. While the House of Lords hearings on state immunity were indeed an exceptional feature, that period is not an unusual one in a complex, contested extradition matter. The Extradition Act 1989 is now more than a decade old and I believe that the time has come to review it. Work on that was in fact already under way before the Pinochet case began, and I intend to publish a consultation paper in due course on the options for streamlining our extradition procedures.

As I have already made clear, this case is unprecedented. Throughout the process, I have sought to exercise my responsibilities in a fair and rational way in accordance with the law. The case has understandably

aroused great debate and feeling. Its impact has been felt worldwide. It has established, beyond question, the principle that those who commit human rights abuses in one country cannot assume that they are safe elsewhere. That will be the lasting legacy of this case.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his customary courtesy in giving me early sight of it.

I am sure that I speak for many when I welcome the fact that we have a final decision in the case, which has mainly been characterised by muddle, contradiction and delay. I also welcome the fact that there will be a review of the law of extradition, as it is clear that the case has pointed up several unsatisfactory aspects. I look forward to the consultation paper being issued in due course.

Will the right hon. Gentleman please publish an estimate of the full costs from the beginning to the end of the case? Will he also please publish an estimate of the police manpower involved in the case?

Will the Home Secretary explain the delays, particularly the two delays that occurred between October and March? The right hon. Gentleman was informed in October that there was a medical question mark over Senator Pinochet's fitness to stand trial, yet the procedures were dragged out until March before we finally had a decision. I ask the same question in respect of the application for habeas corpus, which was made in October and had not been determined by the time that everything else was resolved.

Does the Secretary of State accept that there are serious lessons to be learned from the case? It remains the fact that Senator Pinochet came to this country for medical treatment and, at the behest of our ethical Foreign Office, was greeted and feted at Heathrow—yet hardly any time later, he was arrested while still recovering from the operation for which he had come to this country.

The senator and those arguing on the other side of the case were subjected to a highly protracted legal process in which the Secretary of State appears to have been unable swiftly to determine the various matters that were his responsibility, rather than the responsibility of the court. He had the power to refuse the extradition application, but above all he had the power to act much more quickly when he knew that there was a question mark over the senator's health. It is that delay, rather than the original delay, which concerns me most.

The Secretary of State glossed over the leak of the medical report; he mentioned it, but he glossed over what was behind it. It remains a feature of the case that the Home Secretary gave an undertaking of medical confidentiality on the basis of which, presumably, permission to make the medical examination was granted. That confidentiality was then breached. What investigation has he made of that? What representations has he made to Spain, if that is where the breach occurred? How seriously does he take the matter? He is shaking his head, but I am not asking him to provide an explanation by magic; I am asking him what attempts he has made to find one. That is a reasonable question.

Senator Pinochet has been returned to Chile, and many of us will welcome that because we believe that Chile should have determined whether the case came to trial, and held that trial if it so determined. The outcome is satisfactory, but the case was deeply unsatisfactory. At the end of the procedures, I cannot believe that Spain, Chile, the senator or the relatives and victims of his alleged crimes are happy. I cannot believe that anyone has gained satisfaction from the handling of the case. When reviewing the workings of our extradition law, will the Home Secretary also review the points on which he had absolute discretion, but took a long time to exercise it?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady asked me specific questions, which I shall try to answer, and made some general observations with which I shall also deal. Our current provisional estimate of the Government's legal costs is just under £1.4 million, although they are likely to be greater. I cannot provide an estimate of the cost of the police protection. I may be able to do so with one important proviso: that I am satisfied that that will not compromise such security operations in future. That has been the policy of successive Governments. Subject to that, I will provide the information to the House and the right hon. Lady.

The right hon. Lady asked about the delay. No unreasonable delay occurred from the point in early October when I was informed by the Chilean Government—not Senator Pinochet's representatives—of anxieties about his medical condition. It is very unusual in an extradition case for medical representations to be submitted by a third party, in this case the Chilean Government. We had to ensure that my actions were in accordance with the law. At that stage, the matter was before the courts, not before me. In normal circumstances, it would have been appropriate for the habeas corpus proceedings to be completed before further representations were considered by the Home Secretary.

In the light of the serious condition which was disclosed prima facie by the medical report from the Chilean embassy, I was satisfied that it was right and proper of me to seek further independent medical opinions about Senator Pinochet's condition. However, first, I had to assemble a team whose expertise and independence was beyond question. That was put in hand with the greatest possible speed, but it took the chief medical officer, the Home Office and me some time to assemble such a team. We had to check that its members had the relevant expertise, no connections with Spain or Chile, and no political affiliations that would later bring their integrity into question.

The right hon. Lady asked an eccentric question about the delay in the habeas corpus application. She should know that as we have separation of powers in this country, the timing of cases is a matter for the courts, not the Home Secretary. I reject her suggestion that I have acted without speed at any stage in the process. Whenever a decision has been ready for me to make, I have acted with speed.

The right hon. Lady asked about the leak of the medical reports. I greatly regret that leak. I offered medical confidentiality partly because I was concerned that if it was not provided—the information was given only to the senator's representatives, the Crown Prosecution Service and to me—there would be a danger that it would not simply be confined to those who had an interest in it, but broadcast worldwide.

I fully accepted that, in terms of seeking publicly to justify the conclusions I reached, it was easier for me to have that medical report on the record. I made it clear to the divisional court that I felt myself bound by the

[Mr. Straw]

undertakings of medical confidentiality, which I had given in good faith, but of course if the court ordered otherwise I would have to follow the decision of the court. That is what I did—*[Interruption.]* That is precisely what I did. We do not know exactly where it was leaked, but there is every suggestion that it was leaked outside this jurisdiction. Inquiries are being made. I understand from the Spanish ambassador that Spain regrets the leak, but has been unable to conclude that it was the fault of the Spanish authorities.

I want to make two final points. I have dealt with the allegation that the right hon. Lady made about delay. She then suggested that there has been muddle and contradiction in this case. Looking at the Opposition's response, only they have shown the most extraordinary muddle and contradiction in the pursuit of this matter. This morning on the radio she said, commendably, that she had never suggested for one moment that anything I had done was improper. She also suggested that once the matter had been before me it was appropriate for me to make decisions. That is a rather different comment from past ones that I have had to accept without the possibility of responding.

The right hon. Lady told the Conservative party conference—I suspect more for its entertainment than as a recitation of the truth—that I had welcomed General Pinochet to the United Kingdom, when I had done absolutely nothing of the kind, and that I had arrested him, which I had also not done. There is also the comment of the Leader of the Opposition on 10 December 1998, who described my decision to issue the first authority to proceed as "cowardly". I do not happen to believe that accepting and acknowledging our international obligations and the rule of law is a matter of cowardice. Given the position that she is now taking, I hope that she will invite her right hon. Friend to withdraw such an unsubstantiated remark.

My final point is that I am sorry that the right hon. Lady did not see fit to acknowledge the very serious nature of the crimes alleged against Senator Pinochet. He was accused of torture and of conspiracy to torture of a very extreme kind. Those were and remain crimes that should have been the subject of international judicial process, but for the fact that this man was unfit to stand trial.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Does the Home Secretary accept that many people in this country and around the world feel a sense of shame at the news that Pinochet has now left British airspace and is therefore free from any likelihood of prosecution in any court anywhere in the world? Does he also accept that in addition to the 31 cases of torture on which Pinochet stands indicted in British courts, he stands accused of the death or disappearance of more than 7,000 people in Chile? This man has not faced justice; he has avoided it. He has lived in luxury and gone through the courts here. None of his victims ever had the chance to go through courts or be represented anywhere. They were merely shot and murdered during his disgraceful regime.

Can the Home Secretary explain why, on 5 November 1999, he wrote to Pinochet's lawyers offering medical confidentiality in return for Pinochet undertaking a medical examination? Subsequent to the divisional court's decision to overturn the January decision of a court, Belgium, France and Spain all requested further medical examinations of Pinochet. Pinochet refused to be examined again and subsequently the Home Secretary has allowed him to leave this country.

Many people and many eminent doctors believe that Pinochet is capable of comprehending a case against him and is therefore capable of standing trial. Can the Home Secretary therefore explain why this situation has been allowed to develop? Would he be prepared to meet the families of the victims of torture and of people who have disappeared to explain to them personally why he thinks that that is the correct decision to take, when none of their relatives had any opportunity for any justice whatever during the reign of terror in Chile?

Mr. Straw: On my hon. Friend's last point, of course I would be happy to arrange a meeting with the families whom he speaks about to explain the decision that I came to, but I have to say that I reject a great deal of the rest of what he said. In the light of the medical evidence that I had before me, there was no case whatever for a further medical examination.

The situation was this. First, the Chilean embassy had arranged a medical examination of Senator Pinochet by people who were eminently qualified in their own field. Notwithstanding that, because the examination was by someone effectively appointed on the side of Senator Pinochet, I was not remotely willing to accept that advice as conclusive, even though it indicated that there had been a very significant deterioration in his health in the autumn of last year—so the panel was then appointed. Clear tests were set for the panel, but the decision about Senator Pinochet's unfitness to stand trial was mine, not its.

I asked the panel to offer advice on the basis of tests that I had set, but I then sought the further advice of the Government's most senior medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, on those reports. On 7 January, he wrote to me to say:

> This authoritative medical report leaves me no reason to doubt the specialists' judgement that the Senator is not fit to stand trial and that his present condition is not one which would be expected to improve. The report also makes clear that the Senator's condition could not be feigned.

He repeated that conclusion when he commented on the further reports that I received very recently.

I have already explained why I offered medical confidentiality in this case. I believe that I was right to do so, notwithstanding the fact that I was always aware that it would be more difficult publicly to justify my conclusions on the basis of my simply reporting them, than if the report were made public in a worldwide sense.

My hon. Friend asked, would not the decision be greeted with shame? I do not believe that it will be greeted—or should be greeted—with shame. I hope that it is greeted with a recognition that, throughout the case, I have sought to follow the rule of law. That rule of law requires that those accused of very serious crimes, wherever those crimes are alleged to have happened, should be brought to justice. It also requires that there are some basic conditions relating to the medical and physical fitness of any accused before they can stand trial.

I have sought not only to be consistent within the case, but to be consistent between the case and other extradition cases with which I have dealt. I remind my hon. Friend that in the case of Roisin McAliskey—which was not the

same, but where similar issues of her medical condition arose—I decided, again on the basis of independent medical evidence, not to order her extradition. I do not recall that he accused me of shameful conduct in that case; rather, what I remember is that he thanked me for the decision. We have to judge these issues on matters of principle, not according to the person concerned.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): While I share the disappointment of millions, probably, that Senator Pinochet has gone back to Chile, where he will probably never be prosecuted, I also share the Home's Secretary view that it is quite wrong to say that he or others have acted wrongly to delay the proceedings in this country. Anyone who knows anything about extradition law knows that there are legal proceedings and political proceedings and that they are bound to take a length of time if they are to be properly handled. I have been critical of some of the decisions along the way, but delay and confusion is not an allegation that comes properly from the Conservative Benches or elsewhere when discussing how the Home Secretary has dealt with the matter.

I want to ask the Home Secretary about two things, as well as welcoming his response to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), in which he said that he would meet victims and relatives of victims. Many of us have constituents who would appreciate the ability to discuss the implications of the decision today.

First, given that the two controversial matters were the medical evidence and the fitness to plead, and given that the Home Secretary is to review extradition law, will he take the assessment of who is a medical expert, how a judgment is reached on medical evidence and how a conclusion is drawn about unfitness to plead away from politicians and establish a process that is agreed between parties in advance and covers a variety of cases and, ideally, is agreed internationally?

Secondly, given that I share the Home Secretary's hope that the case is remembered for the fact that it established that dictators and political leaders cannot hide from the consequences of actions taken against their citizens, can he reassure me that it will be not just a theory, but a practice, that the international convention will not allow many countries to escape and that everyone will sign up to it? The sooner we get the International Criminal Court in place and in action so that such matters can be decided by international judges, the sooner we will be seen to have a fair international judicial system for dealing with terrible tyrants, as Senator Pinochet apparently was.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I understand the disappointment felt by relatives of the victims of what happened in Chile and also by the victims that are still alive. Had it not been for the senator's patent unfitness to stand trial, subject to any conclusions of habeas corpus and court proceedings, he would have stood to be extradited to Spain. That was the clear implication of decisions that I took earlier in the case to issue authorities to proceed.

The hon. Gentleman asked two questions about our review of extradition law. First, he asked whether it was possible to establish a protocol for the assessment of the medical conditions of those who are accused. We shall certainly think about that. Ultimately, decisions on such matters will have to be made by a court or by the Secretary of State. There is a nice issue as to where the balance lies. I do not believe that such decisions can be entirely handed over to the courts, but judgments as to how the issue should be streamlined need to be considered carefully.

Secondly, we are strongly committed to ensuring that we, as a country, uphold international law. We have sought to prove that in practice even more recently than the issue of the arrest warrant for Senator Pinochet. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we shall introduce legislation as soon as possible to bring the International Court of Justice into our law.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I accept my right hon. Friend's decision—I do not think that "welcome" is the appropriate verb—but does he agree that Pinochet has already been judged at the bar of world opinion and that his crimes of torture and murder will ring through history? Are there not three conclusions to be drawn from this issue? First, dictators and tyrants do not escape justice, arrest and detention. Secondly, we have seen exposed, more by the antics of those in another place—an organisation that is loosely called "Tories for Torture"—the extraordinary behaviour of Conservative Members who have sought to justify crimes committed by one of their ideological bedmates and their double standards.

Thirdly and most importantly, is it not the case that Pinochet returns to Chile a broken and humiliated man? His spell over Chile has been broken and the people of Chile have elected a socialist president—the best way of commemorating Salvador Allende's term of office. Although Pinochet may have escaped trial, his crimes will for ever be remembered as some of the most heinous and he was in this country when the world remembered the great evil that he did.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is entirely right to draw attention to the extravagant and wholly ill-judged opinions that have been expressed about the consequences of the case. Although it was not a factor that I ever took into account, it was suggested—it was in the public print—that, if the proceedings against the senator continued for any period at all, and still more if he were extradited, it could lead to a return of dictatorial government in Chile. There is no evidence to suggest that consequence, but there is overwhelming evidence that not only in Chile, but across Latin America, the extradition process within the context of the British rule of law has assisted people in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America in coming to terms with a non-democratic past. That may be one of the legacies of this case.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): In the aftermath of the Home Secretary's decision, and of Senator Pinochet leaving our jurisdiction, would the Home Secretary be prepared to revisit another ancillary issue of public order about which I have remained silent for 17 months, until the main case was determined? I am referring to the continuous and noisy demonstration outside the London Clinic, for nearly a fortnight, in October 1998.

I raise the issue on two counts. The first is that there were people dying in the hospital and that their nearest and dearest were visiting them. Secondly, there is no question but that the people staffing the hospital were

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

genuinely in fear, especially after an international television cameraman was apprehended on the very floor on which General Pinochet was situated. Does the Home Secretary think that demonstrations outside hospitals are an issue that we should revisit for the future?

Mr. Straw: I fully understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern in the matter. As he will know, similar concerns were expressed to me by Lord Biffen on behalf of the hospital. I also know that very great inconvenience was caused to patients in the London Clinic. I shall certainly take it up with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, and I shall write to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): May I just mention to my right hon. Friend that, as a Minister of State in the Foreign Office for four and a half years between 1975 and 1979, I heard testimonies repeated by family after family about the torture and disappearance of many of those who were lost? Tens of thousands of people were affected by the Pinochet regime. May I also remind my right hon. Friend and the shadow Home Secretary that that included the torture of a British citizen, Sheila Cassidy? Although I am willing to accept the decision that my right hon. Friend has had to make, I think that we should at least remind everyone that Pinochet received our judicial process in a fair way and had a fair hearing—which he denied tens of thousands of his own citizens.

Mr. Straw: I think that my hon. Friend's point is very well taken. He knows from his earlier experience of the very serious problems that affected the people of Chile in the period following the assassination of President Allende.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is it not worth reminding the House that in December 1997, when the Labour Government were in power, the senator came to the United Kingdom as a VIP guest, when he was commander-in-chief of the Chilean army? The VIP reception that he received when he came in December 1998, at the behest of the Foreign Office, was essentially no different. Now, the important thing is to forget this sorry episode as soon as possible—the least said, the soonest mended.

May I also say how pleased I am that, in 10 days, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), will go to Santiago for the inauguration of the new democratic Government under President Lagos? The Minister will find that Chile is a wholly democratic country which is under the rule of law that it has had ever since Pinochet voluntarily relinquished power.

Mr. Straw: I am very glad that my hon. Friend the Minister of State will attend the presidential inauguration, which I believe takes place on Thursday. It is right to say that the elections in Chile were democratic and fully representative.

Let me just deal with the myth about Senator Pinochet being welcomed as a VIP guest. My understanding is that when he came to this country he was provided with VIP facilities at Heathrow, as is routine, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was aware of his visit. At that stage we had no knowledge that any extradition warrant was going to be issued in the Madrid court. It was not until I was on an aeroplane travelling to Avignon in France—to make a speech about the need to modernise extradition procedures, as it happens—that I was passed a copy of *The Guardian*, where I read a small item saying that Senator Pinochet was in the country and might be the subject of extradition proceedings, whereupon I suggested to my private secretary that we needed to find out something more about the matter.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I feel that a great injustice has been done today to the thousands of people who disappeared or were tortured or murdered, as well as to their families, many of whom have spent night after night and month after month outside the House of Commons protesting about General Pinochet. It is a tragedy that this country, which has signed up to all the human rights conventions and the convention on torture—the list of conventions is as long as one's arm—allowed General Pinochet to come here without prosecuting him ourselves. Why did we wait for Spain to ask for his extradition? Why did we not do it ourselves? We are obliged under the torture convention to prosecute those who come here and are accused of heinous tortures in their own country.

When further medical evidence was requested, a further examination should have been possible. There appeared to be doubt. Those who appeared on behalf of Amnesty International thought that it was essential that a further examination should be carried out. Why was that not done?

My right hon. Friend has not explained satisfactorily why General Pinochet was given an assurance that his medical details would remain secret. As my right hon. Friend knows, it is possible to make such details available in the public interest. It should not have required other countries to make that request to the courts.

There are clearly weaknesses in English law that need to be rectified. What proposals does my right hon. Friend have to investigate those weaknesses and ensure that if someone similar, such as Saddam Hussein or any of the Iraqi war criminals, visited this—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Lady has said enough for the Home Secretary to respond to.

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand the strong feelings involved, particularly those of victims and relatives affected in Chile. However, we cannot deal with such issues simply on the basis of emotion. If we did, there would be a great danger of falling into the trap of double standards—applying different principles to those of whom we approve from those that we apply to those of whom we disapprove. Many Conservative Members have fallen into that trap.

My hon. Friend talks about our being signed up to all the human rights conventions. It is precisely because we are signed up to human rights conventions, and we cannot pick and choose which articles of those conventions we apply, that I have had to come to my decision. The plain, unalterable and unanswerable fact is that Senator Pinochet's medical condition is such that to have

extradited him to Spain would have been a palpable breach of article 6 of the European convention on human rights, which guarantees the right to a fair trial.

The test of fitness to stand trial in Spain is in all material respects the same as the test to stand trial in the United Kingdom. Moreover, for reasons that I have explained, there is no question but that I could not have passed the responsibility for determining fitness to Spain. It was a decision that I had to make. If my hon. Friend had been in my position, faced with the same evidence and the duties imposed by all the international human rights conventions to which she refers, she would have had to come to the same conclusion as I did.

Several Hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next hon. Member to put a question, I ask for much shorter questions and, if possible, shorter answers. There is another major statement to be made and we must protect the debate on Welsh affairs.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I welcome the fact that Senator Pinochet, a true friend of the United Kingdom, has returned to his home country—which is the proper forum to hear the allegations made against him.

Does the Home Secretary accept that had he acted more decisively in October 1998, this thoroughly unsatisfactory and disgraceful fiasco might have been avoided? I have some sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman in his difficulties over judicial review. The House should hold him to account, not the judges of our country. Is it not unacceptable that the Home Secretary was obliged to extend the incarceration of Britain's only political prisoner at the behest of foreign Governments?

The Home Secretary was saying that, were it not for the fact that the senator was unfit to plead, he would have bowed to the request of a foreign Government. What implications will that have in future for visitors from China, Zimbabwe and other countries of whose practices we disapprove?

Mr. Straw: We may geographically be an island but judicially we are not. We have international obligations to other countries that go back centuries. Extradition is one of them. The procedures are over-complicated, as this case illustrated—but they are such that other states are able to request extradition of a fugitive from this country, and we are able to do likewise. International order, and order within each country, is enhanced by the availability of extradition.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): The decision will undoubtedly be a bitter blow for all the people who suffered at the hands of the Pinochet regime, but I accept—as someone who campaigned for Pinochet to face justice—that it would be wrong for the senator to be placed in the dock if his health is as claimed by doctors. We shall soon see whether there is any recovery once he is in Chile.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in a country such as ours, governed by the rule of law and justice, it is absolutely nauseating that a former Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, should act as the chief apologist of Pinochet and minimise the tortures and mass murders that occurred under his regime? She has brought only disgrace upon her name and reputation.

Mr. Straw: I never thought that Lady Thatcher's comments were consistent with support for the international rule of law, but that is for her to explain.

One of the key questions put on my behalf to the medical team was whether there was any possibility that Senator Pinochet could have feigned his symptoms. We have to rely on the best medical evidence available and the conclusion of the doctors and of the chief medical officer was:

> The senator's condition could not be feigned.

It is hugely important in such a case that there is no fabrication of symptoms. I am as satisfied as I conceivably could be that there was none in this instance.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): When the Home Secretary reviews the extradition processes, will he do his best to introduce a filter against mischievous, maverick and politically motivated interventions by other countries in our judicial process? The right hon. Gentleman indicated that that was a large part of the problem, and such a filter would be a benefit of his quite proper review. If the Home Secretary fails to do that, it is possible that this country may be visited by fewer and fewer Heads of State—past and current—because they are afraid of the same happening to them. That might not be a bad thing from some people's point of view, but if we want an increasing number of heads of state from Africa and the far east to visit, they might seek some reassurance that they will not go through the same thing as Senator Pinochet.

Mr. Straw: Sometimes I find the right hon. Gentleman's arguments difficult to follow. If he is arguing that former Heads of State against whom there are allegations about the commissioning of serious crimes should enjoy immunity wherever they travel, I do not take that view.

The right hon. Gentleman implies that Spain's extradition request was mischievous and maverick. I do not for a second take that view either. That request was proper and was found by the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords in its first decision to be proper in all material respects as to the charges. The second decision by the House of Lords in March 1999 reduced the number of extradition crimes, but the two sets remaining, of torture and conspiracy to torture, were among the most serious of which anybody could be accused—and were backed by clear evidence. It would have remained to be seen, had extradition and a trial taken place, what decision would be arrived at by an independent Spanish court. But in no sense do I criticise Spain for seeking extradition.

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): My constituents include victims of Pinochet's brutal regime, and today they and I are required to swallow a very bitter pill. Can my right hon. Friend say where my constituents can turn now for the justice they ought to receive for the violations of their human rights?

Mr. Straw: I understand of course that for anybody who was in Chile and suffered at the hands of the Chilean

[Mr. Straw]

regime when Senator Pinochet was in power, or for their relatives, my decision is a bitter pill to swallow. Throughout this case, I have sought to make decisions in accordance with the law and our international obligations.

We in Europe accord to people suspected of crimes greater rights than those accorded by many dictators to their victims—some of whom are never given the chance of a fair trial before they are convicted and punished for their alleged crimes. An essential part of our rule of law—and something to which Chile is aspiring—is that while international obligations require us to pursue persons against whom serious criminal allegations have been made, they are provided with minimal safeguards. One of those safeguards is that such persons should be fit to stand trial.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I wonder whether the Home Secretary is sensing the temperature of the House? Both sides in this issue feel embittered and frustrated by the way matters have been handled. There is not just our view that this is an abuse of the ancient rule of hospitality against a guest of this country who showed us nothing but friendship in our hour of need. There is also the view of Government Back Benchers that the Home Secretary has used doctors to get him off a hook of his own making. As this episode unfolds, does not the right hon. Gentleman feel that he should have acted more decisively in October 1998—instead of clouding the whole issue in pseudo-legalisms and achieving nothing for this country or for Anglo-Chilean relations?

Mr. Straw: In my study of British extradition law over 17 months, I have never spotted even in a footnote that one of the considerations that I have to take into account is "the ancient rule of hospitality". That was not one of our considerations. I did act decisively in October 1998—I refused to quash the extradition warrant. The hon. Gentleman should have said that I made a decision with which he disagreed—that would have been the honest position to have adopted. Throughout this case, I have acted decisively. I have made decisions, whether yes or no, on the basis of the proposition before me. I have always been aware that whatever decision I would make would please some people and displease others.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): May I thank my right hon. Friend for explaining precisely how he arrived at what was obviously a finely balanced judgment? Does he agree that although many people will find it difficult to understand why it was not possible to see justice done in this case, we should not lose sight of the fact that this country facilitated the process whereby important principles of international law were established—first, that there should be universal jurisdiction for human rights abuses, and secondly, that Heads of State cannot automatically rely upon immunity? Does my right hon. Friend agree that important principles have been established none the less?

Mr. Straw: Yes, I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that the principle of universal jurisdiction in respect of very serious crimes such as torture is now established as, too, is the principle that former heads of state are not immune from a process for such alleged crimes. If the approach of the then shadow Home Secretary had been followed, and I had simply quashed the original arrest warrant in October 1998, none of that experience would have followed.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): There is something uniquely shabby, even by the standards of this Government, in laying on a reception for Senator Pinochet when he arrived in the country and then conniving at his arrest under a defective warrant. Does the Home Secretary realise that the rest of us understand that the reason he sought medical evidence, or acceded to that request, was not his concern about Senator Pinochet's human rights, but the dawning realisation of the nightmare that would descend upon him if Senator Pinochet died in our jurisdiction? Is not one of the conclusions that he can draw from today's exchanges in the House that any lingering reputation that he had for ministerial competence has quite gone?

Mr. Straw: I leave aside the hon. Gentleman's gratuitous insult. What he says is wrong from top to bottom. There was no conniving at the arrest. He fails to understand that there is a separation of powers here. The hospitality department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is not also a police department that executes warrants. *[Interruption.]* There should not be liaison between the hospitality department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the police and prosecuting authorities in this country. If there were liaison, there would be most serious allegations of connivance—it could be alleged that we were conniving to ensure that a fugitive from justice should escape from justice again. The Conservative party claims to be the party of law, yet for 17 months Conservative Members have been inviting me to ignore the law in order in pursuit of their own political convenience.

As to the suggestion that this was a defective warrant, the warrant was not defective—it was found to be fully effective by the courts. On two occasions, not one, my decision in respect of those warrants was challenged by Senator Pinochet's lawyers, and on both occasions the court found in my favour.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): It is not only shabby but entirely predictable that the Conservative party should continue to act as apologists for murderers and torturers. Did my right hon. Friend, upon the Spanish authorities receiving the medical evidence, receive notification from them of the withdrawal of their extradition order? Has the medical evidence been furnished to the Chilean authorities, whose ambassador to this country has upon more than one occasion stated that it is the aim of that Government to bring General Pinochet to justice? Should the general, as many of my constituents who suffered at his hands believe, undergo a miraculous improvement once returned to Chile, will the Government assist the Chilean Government in making every effort to ensure that at some point he stands before a court of law?

Mr. Straw: So far as I am aware, and I have taken this only from the television, the Spanish Government have indicated that they accept the decision that I have made in this case. There was some suggestion on the television

news that the judge in the case may have taken a different view, but that is my understanding. I also understand that a similar approach has been taken by Belgium.

The medical evidence has not formally been made available to Chile, because Chile has not been party to the proceedings in this case, nor is it another requesting state. As the reports will now be made available in the Library of the House of Commons and formally made public, there is no reason why they should not also be available to the Government of Chile.

It is not for me to speculate about the prognosis of Senator Pinochet's condition, except to say that the very clear and thorough medical evidence from an independent medical team supported by the chief medical offer was that Senator Pinochet's symptoms were not feigned and that they were not likely to improve.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Home Secretary accept that, like him, I believe in the relentless pursuit of people accused of crimes against humanity? Will he also accept that, unlike him and many of his right hon. and hon. Friends, I do not believe in the application of double standards to that pursuit? Does he know that many of my family were killed by the Nazis in the 1940s? Can he explain why the Government, who were so keen to pursue General Pinochet, have consistently stonewalled my attempts to get them to make representations to the Government of Syria over the case of Aloïs Brunner, Eichmann's right-hand man, whom they are still sheltering?

Can the right hon. Gentleman explain why, when Konrad Kalejs, one of the very people who may have murdered the members of my family, was found to be in this country, he was not arrested, but bundled straight out of the country? I know that the researcher who was most qualified to advise the Home Secretary of the nature of Kalejs's crimes was not even contacted before the right hon. Gentleman kicked out this murderer, against whose crimes the crimes of Pinochet against leftists pale, if not into insignificance then into something far less horrible than what millions of victims suffered at the hands of the Nazis, whom the chattering classes evidently care so much less about.

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand the hon. Gentleman's very strong feelings when it comes to the holocaust. He knows that I, too, have personal reasons for understanding them. However, I wholly reject the argument about double standards. Indeed, my point to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) was that it was precisely to avoid double standards that I sought to act as consistently as I could with regard to this case and the case of Roisin McAliskey. Double standards would have arisen if I had acted in a completely contradictory way, which I suggest that in no sense have I done.

The hon. Gentleman referred to someone who was suspected of being a fugitive in Syria. It is the first time that the case has been made known to me. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to make representations to me, I am happy to see him and follow them up.

The hon. Gentleman's point about Mr. Kalejs makes my point about Secretaries of States and courts having to act according to the rule of law, both national and international. The simple fact, as everybody knows, was that no extradition warrant had been received in respect of Kalejs.

Dr. Lewis: Arrest him?

Mr. Straw: Although I am endowed with some powers, I do not have powers of arrest, except in very marginal circumstances relating to immigration offences when we wish people to leave the country and they refuse to do so. As Kalejs left voluntarily, there was no power whatever to detain the man. That is the truth of it. I had the matter examined with very great care. I do not know which researcher the hon. Gentleman is talking about, but we were in contact with a number of researchers, and I was in contact with representatives of the Jewish community.

Of course I understand the demand that if people are alleged to have committed serious crimes, however long ago that may have been and whatever the country, they should be brought to justice. I see it as part of my responsibility to ensure that that happens, but it has to happen within a framework of the rule of law.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The Home Secretary is a candid and reflective person. With the huge benefit of hindsight, is there anything at any stage that he would have done differently?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I have certain wishes, and have already expressed the thought that it would be in everyone's interest if the procedure for extradition were simplified both in high profile cases such as this one and in more routine cases. With the benefit of hindsight, I can say of the key decisions that I have taken—the original decision not to quash the extradition warrant, two successive authorities to proceed, the decision to ask for independent medical examination and the decision I have announced today—that I would not have taken any of them differently.

Senator Pinochet (CPS Role)

2.30 pm

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the role of the Crown Prosecution Service in respect of Senator Pinochet.

Earlier today, the CPS, as prosecuting authority for England and Wales, advised the Metropolitan police service that the material provided by the Kingdom of Spain for the purposes of extradition proceedings would not be admissible in a criminal prosecution in England and Wales and could not be put into admissible form without a full police investigation. On the material available to the CPS, therefore, there is no realistic prospect in this jurisdiction of convicting Senator Pinochet of any criminal offence.

The CPS also advised the Metropolitan police service that, in view of the independent medical report on Senator Pinochet, commissioned by the Home Secretary, and in view of representations made to the Home Secretary concerning the report, no court in England and Wales would allow a trial of Senator Pinochet to take place, whatever the evidence. Following that advice, the MPS decided that no purpose would be served in seeking to effect an arrest of Senator Pinochet.

Those decisions were necessary because of article 7 of the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The convention provides that if a state does not extradite, it must consider whether to prosecute the person itself. Accordingly, following the Home Secretary's decision not to extradite Senator Pinochet to Spain, the Spanish extradition papers were submitted formally to the CPS as the independent prosecuting authority for England and Wales. The CPS in turn formally referred the papers to the MPS, which is responsible for investigating offences and deciding whether to arrest or charge people.

In fact, the papers had previously been supplied to the CPS and the police and had been carefully studied by them, so both the CPS and the police were in a position to announce their decisions today. However, before I say more about that, I should set out the involvement of the CPS in the case. The CPS had a role as agent for the Kingdom of Spain, which arose after Senator Pinochet's arrest on 16 October 1998, pursuant to a warrant issued by the fifth central magistrates court in Madrid. On 18 October 1998, the CPS commenced acting as agent on behalf of the Kingdom of Spain in the extradition proceedings, and it has continued to act for the Kingdom of Spain throughout the extradition process.

In its role as agent for the Kingdom of Spain, the CPS acted in accordance with the instructions of the requesting state, which is in accordance with long-standing reciprocal arrangements between this jurisdiction and other countries. In doing so, it has been quite independent of the Government. In performing its role as agent for the Kingdom of Spain, the CPS has given confidential legal advice on the extradition proceedings and received instructions.

Let me turn to the separate and distinct function of the CPS in this matter, which is the main focus of this statement. That function is its role as the independent prosecuting authority for England and Wales, and its involvement in that regard arose in two ways. First, in October 1998 two firms of solicitors, acting for a number of individuals, applied to the then Attorney-General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Aberavon (Sir J. Morris), for consent to prosecute Senator Pinochet in this jurisdiction for offences of torture, contrary to section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, and for offences of hostage taking, contrary to the Taking of Hostages Act 1982.

The papers in one of these applications were also copied by the solicitors to the MPS, which in turn sought the advice of the CPS as prosecuting authority. In those circumstances, my right hon. and learned Friend deemed it appropriate to liaise with the CPS before reaching a final conclusion on the applications for Law Officer consent to prosecute. The Attorney-General also received advice from senior Treasury counsel. Subsequently, he advised the solicitors that decisions on whether or not to grant Law Officer consent to prosecute are made by applying the tests set out in the code for Crown prosecutors, and that the legislation criminalising torture and hostage taking is not retrospective—a point later confirmed by a decision of the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords. He also advised that the material submitted in support of the applications contained insufficient admissible evidence against Senator Pinochet to justify the granting of Law Officer consent to prosecute for either offence. Consent to prosecute was, accordingly, refused.

I should add that a third firm of solicitors, acting for a number of Chileans, applied last week for my consent to prosecute Senator Pinochet for offences of torture. That application has been carefully considered and the advice of counsel was obtained. Again, the code of Crown prosecutors was applied to the decision-making process. The first requirement of the code is that there should be sufficient admissible evidence for a realistic prospect of conviction before a prosecution may follow. The application contained no evidence of a kind admissible in this jurisdiction, and I accordingly declined to grant my consent.

The second function of the CPS as prosecuting authority has been to consider the case for prosecution of Senator Pinochet in this jurisdiction under article 7 of the UN convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The CPS and police recognised that article 7 might come into operation in respect of the Spanish extradition papers. To prepare for that contingency, the CPS obtained copies of all the relevant Spanish extradition papers in March and April 1999 in its capacity as the prosecuting authority for England and Wales. The MPS, as investigating authority, was also supplied with a copy of those papers. All that was done with the agreement of the Kingdom of Spain and the Home Office.

The Spanish extradition papers were allocated to lawyers in the CPS separate from those acting for the Kingdom of Spain. The provisional conclusion of the CPS was that the material provided by the Kingdom of Spain for the purposes of the extradition proceedings would not be admissible in a criminal prosecution in England and Wales, and that the material could not be made admissible without a full police investigation. The CPS advised the police along those lines. Whether or not the MPS institutes a full investigation in this or any other case is a matter for it to decide.

It may help the House to understand the provisional CPS conclusion if I explain that in European extradition proceedings it is not necessary to bring evidence before a court to show that a person has committed the offences of which he or she is accused. All that is necessary is that the court here must be satisfied that the allegations amount to an extradition crime and that the formal request complies with the requirements of the Extradition Act 1989 and the European convention on extradition of 1959. That explains why the CPS reached its provisional conclusion that, in the absence of a full investigation by the police, there was no admissible evidence for the purpose of a prosecution here.

In addition to those evidential considerations, the CPS—again in its role as independent prosecuting authority—received, in January, and with the consent of Senator Pinochet, a copy of the medical report prepared by the independent experts commissioned by the Home Secretary. The CPS has also seen representations made to the Home Secretary concerning that report.

The report and subsequent advice make it clear that Senator Pinochet's ill health is such that he would not be able to defend himself properly in any criminal prosecution brought in this country. The provisional CPS conclusion in the light of the material was that no court in England and Wales would allow a trial of Senator Pinochet to take place because of his ill health, whatever the evidence. Again, the CPS advised the police of that.

In reaching its provisional conclusions, the CPS consulted me and I agreed with them, after taking the best independent legal advice available. My right hon., noble and learned Friend the Attorney-General has not involved himself as a Law Officer in this case. He and I agreed that his previous patronage of Redress, from which he resigned on taking ministerial office in May 1997, meant that it would be more appropriate if I handled the case. The solicitors acting for Senator Pinochet were advised of that in September last year.

Following today's formal submission of the Spanish extradition papers to the CPS under article 7, the CPS has confirmed its provisional conclusions. First, the material in the possession of the CPS would not be admissible in any criminal prosecution in England and Wales, and could not provide a realistic prospect of conviction. Secondly, an investigation for which the police are responsible would be required to gather evidence admissible in this jurisdiction. Thirdly, whatever the evidence that might be available, no court in England and Wales would allow a trial of Senator Pinochet to take place in view of his ill health. I agree with those conclusions.

Accordingly, the CPS did not apply for my consent, in respect of the Spanish extradition material, to prosecute Senator Pinochet for torture. The Metropolitan police service and Senator Pinochet's lawyers were advised of the CPS's conclusions. The MPS, which has taken its own legal advice, decided not to arrest Senator Pinochet earlier today.

The House will also be aware that on 11 and 13 November and on 15 December 1998 my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary received requests for the extradition of Senator Pinochet from Switzerland, France and Belgium. Further requests were received from France on 4 February last year and from the Kingdom of Belgium on 12 October last year.

On 9 December 1998, my right hon. Friend decided not to issue an authority to proceed with regard to the requests from France and Switzerland. On 27 January 1999, he decided not to issue an authority to proceed with regard to the request from Belgium. On 22 February 1999 and 19 November 1999 respectively, he decided not to issue an authority to proceed in respect of the second French and second Belgian requests.

Following my right hon. Friend's decisions, the extradition papers were submitted to the CPS as the prosecuting authority under article 7. The CPS, in turn, referred the papers to the MPS to enable the investigating authorities to consider them. The CPS also advised the police that the allegations contained in the Swiss, both French and both Belgian requests did not disclose offences that could be tried here, as the conduct alleged in each of the requests occurred before the relevant legislation came into force. Accordingly, the CPS did not apply for Law Officer consent to prosecute Senator Pinochet for torture in respect of the Swiss, French and Belgian extradition material.

In performing its role under article 7 of the convention in respect of the Swiss, French and Belgian material, the CPS also took into account the medical report commissioned by my right hon. Friend and the representations made to the him about Senator Pinochet's medical condition. As I said, the CPS concluded that no court in England and Wales would permit a trial of Senator Pinochet to take place in those circumstances, whatever the evidence.

The CPS consulted me about those matters and I agree with its conclusions.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I begin by thanking the Solicitor-General for early sight of his statement and also for the assistance of his officials this morning.

The Solicitor-General told us that the evidence provided by Spain would not be admissible in criminal proceedings in this country. When did that become apparent to the CPS? Was it made clear in any of the several hearings in the courts during the past 15 months? When were the Spanish authorities told?

If there is no prospect of conviction in this country, does it follow that there has been, and remains, no prospect of conviction in Spain, France, Belgium or Switzerland?

Does it follow from what the Solicitor-General has said about Senator Pinochet's state of health that those four European democracies would also not allow a trial to take place in their jurisdictions—and if not, why not? Certainly, that is what the Home Secretary appeared to suggest a few moments ago. I presume that the Solicitor-General has made inquiries about that matter.

When did the Solicitor-General decide to refuse leave to prosecute General Pinochet under the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and the Taking of Hostages Act 1982? When did he tell the four European states that I mentioned of that decision?

The hon. and learned Gentleman referred to an application, last week, by a third firm of solicitors for consent to prosecute Senator Pinochet in this country. Has he reached a conclusion as to whether their evidence is admissible in any of the other four European states?

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

The hon. and learned Gentleman explained the law and procedure relating to European extradition proceedings. Irrespective of that, does the Home Secretary retain a discretion not to order extradition in any given case?

There remain in existence—if only formally—habeas corpus proceedings begun on 22 October 1999. What will happen to that case?

Finally, how will the hon. and learned Gentleman persuade the House and the public that this whole affair has been worth while and not just a lawyers' bonanza?

The Solicitor-General: The material rolled in during the past year; it was continually assessed. At no point was it possible to say that the evidence was sufficient for a prosecution in this jurisdiction. As I explained to the House, under the extradition provisions the requesting state simply provides evidence of allegations; it does not have to provide detailed evidence.

I had no need to tell Spain, because the responsibility of the CPS was twofold. On extradition, it was acting as agent of Spain, but as an independent prosecuting authority, it was simply acting in accordance with the law of this jurisdiction.

There was no refusal on my part to prosecute. As I said in my statement, I was never asked to give consent. The CPS decided that there was no case to prosecute in relation to the code. Consequently, I did not have to make a decision.

The material received from the solicitors last week was such that it could not be used to prosecute in this jurisdiction. It contained a series of allegations—obviously serious ones—but there was no admissible evidence that could be used in court.

On habeas corpus, the point is entirely moot because the particular person has now left the jurisdiction.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Will my hon. and learned Friend take it from me that I know nothing at all about the law and practice of extradition? Is it not true that, in criminal cases, the court usually decides whether the accused is fit to plead? Would an alternative course have been to allow General Pinochet to go to Spain and for a Spanish criminal court to decide whether he was fit to plead?

The Solicitor-General: That was not my decision. Inasmuch as I had responsibility for the CPS, my decision was to ensure that it acted in accordance with the current code for Crown prosecutors. In other words: was there evidence for a prosecution in this jurisdiction?

My right hon. Friend asked whether it might have been possible to decide in court on Senator Pinochet's fitness to plead. When it is quite clear—and it became quite clear after the medical reports—that no prosecution can occur, there is no way that a judge in this jurisdiction would allow a trial to begin.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I am grateful to the Solicitor-General for providing me with advance notice of his statement.

The case has been a long one. We welcome the review of the law of extradition announced by the Home Secretary. Will the Solicitor-General tell us whether there will be widespread consultations in respect of the review, and what the role of his Department will be?

We endorse the principle that those who commit abuses of human rights in one country should never assume safety elsewhere. I should be grateful if the hon. and learned Gentleman elaborated on the following words from his statement:

> Whether or not the MPS institutes a full investigation in this or any other case is a matter for it to decide.

Did the CPS instruct, or endeavour to instruct, the Metropolitan police to instigate such an investigation?

The length and complexity of the case emphasise the need for an International Criminal Court to try human rights cases at a supranational level. The United Kingdom Government signed a statute of the International Court in Rome in July 1998, but they have failed to ratify the ICC treaty. Will the Solicitor-General provide us with a timetable for the publication of the draft legislation to ratify the ICC treaty? When will the Government ratify that treaty?

The Solicitor-General: The Law Officers' Department has only a limited role in extradition, and that applies in respect of Irish extradition. We may be consulted on some of the detailed legal aspects. However, there are always lessons to be learned from such cases. One issue that I flagged up to the House last month was the role of the CPS as agent of a foreign state. In our jurisdiction, there is a clear division between the police's duty to investigate and our duty to prosecute. The CPS does not tell the police what to do.

We are committed to the International Criminal Court. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs is very keen for legislation to get on the statute book in that regard. However, I can give no timetable for it.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): As Chairman of the all-party Latin America group, may I ask whether Law Officers—doubtless together with Foreign and Commonwealth Office lawyers and Home Office lawyers—are considering the delicate balance of whether the operation of the law does not sometimes conflict with reconciliation? The truth is that this case has opened a Pandora's box in Chile, which was increasingly becoming a stable society. Questions should be asked as to whether legal actions on one continent will create grief in other continents. The answer is another matter, but is the question at least being reflected on?

The Solicitor-General: Inasmuch as I can reply to my hon. Friend's questions, I simply say as a lawyer that law does not always lead to justice, nor does it always lead to reconciliation.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): May I reinforce the point just made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)? Is not a general principle involved? When a democratic state decides, as part of a political accommodation, to put its past behind it, it is not for other countries to intervene with criminal proceedings. Is that not what was done in Spain with regard to the

Franco regime? Is that not what we ourselves are doing in Northern Ireland, where hundreds of convicted terrorists have been let out of prison and Ministers negotiate with people who are apologists for murder? At the end, we say that that is part of a process of reconciliation. We would be very angry if, for example, the Government of Holland tried to extradite Mr. Gerry Adams or Mr. McGuinness. Surely there has to be discretion and we have to recognise the right of democratic states to put their pasts behind them without other Governments intervening.

The Solicitor-General: In this case, we acted purely in accordance with our international obligations and with our obligations under the law on the statute book in this country. That may have had certain repercussions, but I cannot comment on that. We simply acted in accordance with the law. I certainly take the point that reconciliation can often be very valuable.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Why have successive Attorneys-General in Britain refused to allow private or public prosecution on behalf of Pinochet's murdered British victims, William Beausire and Father Michael Woodward?

The Solicitor-General: As I explained earlier, the fact is that the evidence was not there. There must be evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction under the code of the Crown prosecutors. However, I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who said that human rights abuses occurred in Chile and that those who suffered and their relatives feel a sense of injury.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the Solicitor-General confirm that, as a matter of law, if the President of China, the President of Zimbabwe or any other left-wing dictator with blood on his hands should come to this country and a warrant for extradition were received from another state, Her Majesty's Government would deal with that warrant in precisely the same way as the one for Senator Pinochet was dealt with?

The Solicitor-General: As I said earlier, we will act in accordance with our legal obligations. As a result of the review that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has initiated, those obligations may change. However, we will act in accordance with the rule of law.

Points of Order

2.55 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You, Madam Speaker and the other occupants of the Chair are the guardians of the rights of Back-Bench and, where appropriate, Opposition Members. You will know that business questions is one of the most valuable occasions available to Back-Bench Members during the parliamentary week. Today, Madam Speaker saw fit—I in no way challenge her decision—to truncate business questions when, in my perception, Government Members had all had an opportunity to ask their questions, but a number of Opposition Members were still waiting to be called.

Will you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and Madam Speaker consider whether an informal rule exists? When you have called all the Government Members does that automatically eliminate the remaining Opposition Members from being called? If that were the case—I hope that it is not—it would have serious implications. Like me, you will recall that business questions used to run until all Members had been accommodated. I hope that the matter will be considered seriously—I am sure that it will be—because I worry about the implications if Opposition Members were to be denied the opportunity to ask a business question because too few Government Members had bothered to be here.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am a regular attender at business questions. It is one of the rare opportunities in the week when a humble Back Bencher such as myself can bring important matters to the Government's attention.

I would have brought up the case of the dairy industry because I went to an emergency meeting of farmers in North Shropshire last week. Following the lamentable ignorance shown by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he answered my question, I should have liked to have brought the issue to the attention of the Leader of the House and asked for a debate on it. Would it be possible to ask Madam Speaker always to allow all Back Benchers to be called in business questions?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Madam Speaker always deals as fairly as possible with such matters. I shall see that the points that have been raised are brought to her attention.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Before I become totally paranoid, may I ask for your support and protection? For the second time today, the press in what I hope is a demonstration of frustration and not malice have taken to bombarding me from above with notebooks and pens. Will you encourage them to desist?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the press will have noted the hon. Lady's comments. I am sure that she does not need my protection to deal with such matters. I will see that her point is brought to the attention of those responsible.

Welsh Affairs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

2.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): At ten past 12 on 17 October 1944, when war was still raging, the first Welsh day debate, as we have come to call it, was held. It was opened by Lady Megan Lloyd George—then the Liberal Member for Anglesey but who later became the Labour Member for Carmarthen—and contributions were also made by the Member for Ebbw Vale, Aneurin Bevan, and my first predecessor as Secretary of State, Jim Griffiths. They argued that the debate was inadequate in the sense that devolution was necessary to address Welsh problems.

Indeed, that was just like 100 years ago—the Labour party is celebrating its centenary—when Keir Hardie told the people of Merthyr and Aberdare that we should have some form of home rule. Now we have it, and yesterday was the first St. David's day—and this is the first Welsh day debate—since devolution.

Nine months have passed since my predecessor's functions were handed to the National Assembly for Wales. There have been some painful moments, but it is a new, young, democratic institution, which the people of Wales voted for in their referendum.

There is undoubtedly a need, over the three or so years before the next elections are held for the National Assembly, for some stability to be recognisable in the Assembly. None of us would want to see a repeat performance of what occurred some weeks ago.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the report from the National Audit Office and the Select Committee highlighting how Gwent tertiary college was just about destroyed by the previous principal and senior management. He will also be aware that a dispute is going on in the college because staff seeking a wage rise, not having received one for three years, went on strike yesterday afternoon. Would my right hon. Friend care to comment on a letter sent by the present chief executive, of which I have a copy passed to me today by the *Gwent Gazette*, the local newspaper, in which the chief executive encourages young kids to cross the picket line to break the strike? That has serious cost implications, and we now have a situation in which the chief executive—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not continue his intervention, which is already very long. We have only just started the debate, in which many hon. Members want to catch my eye. It will set a very bad precedent for the debate if there are interventions of this length. Therefore, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will come very briefly to his point.

Mr. Smith: Will my right hon. Friend dissociate himself from the sentiments in the letter, in which the chief executive is pitting students against staff to try to break a strike?

Mr. Murphy: I am intrigued as to how that intervention came on the issue of the need for stability in the National Assembly. I can understand that there is also a need for stability in Gwent tertiary college. As a Gwent Member, I am very aware of what my hon. Friend is referring to. I hope that the principal and the trade unions will get together as speedily as possible. I certainly do not think that the letter to which my hon. Friend referred has helped matters at all.

I return to the National Assembly. I believe that, in the few months since it has been up and running, it has achieved many things for Wales. At this stage it is right for me to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), who unquestionably set the Assembly going on the right lines. He established it in its first months, and we should all wish him well, as indeed we should wish the new First Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), well, too.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I do not wish to dissent from wishing the hon. Gentleman well, but does not the Secretary of State agree that it has not set a good precedent that after the last two incumbents as Secretary of State for Wales went to the Assembly they proceeded never to vote, in one case, or on only one occasion, in the fulfilment of their parliamentary responsibilities in this House? Does he also agree that this sort of dual mandate is proving deeply unsatisfactory?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that when there is a general election for this House there will no longer be such mandates, so far as my party is concerned. It is clear that the holder of the responsible job of First Secretary has an extremely difficult and onerous position in establishing the National Assembly.

In the months of its existence the Assembly has done many good things. It has, for example, established special relations with business in Wales, with the voluntary sector and with local government, in a way that has never been tried or tested elsewhere in this country. It has set in train a radical reform of post-16 education and training in Wales; it has launched "A Better Wales", which sets out a radical transformation of the quality of life of Welsh people over the next decade; it has brought a new approach to dealing with social exclusion; and for the first time ever the £8,000 million Welsh budget is being decided in Wales by those elected in Wales to deal with the priorities. In such a short time it has achieved much.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): Is my right hon. Friend suggesting that the disbursal of moneys in Wales before the establishment of the Welsh Assembly was not done by elected Members?

Mr. Murphy: Of course not. It was done by my predecessors and the two Under-Secretaries who accompanied them. As I can be today, previous Secretaries of State could be questioned by Members of this House, by the Select Committee, the Grand Committee and so on. What I am saying is that there is now a much stronger, more transparent way of looking at the budget, because there are now 60 elected Assembly Members in Wales, and they are in a position to examine that budget. We are, too, of course, in the sense of looking at the overall budget. Not long ago I appeared before my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) and his colleagues on the Select Committee on Welsh

Affairs for five and a half hours. That appearance was all about money, too, so the opportunities for examination by elected representatives of the people of Wales are now doubled. It can happen here in this House and it happens in the National Assembly.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Secretary of State has referred to the way in which money is distributed. A central question is the total money available. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the report from Brussels—the response to the single programming document on objective 1 status for Wales—which said:

> The Commission needs to be satisfied that future financial resources will be available to provide public spending for the whole programme and cannot be satisfied that this will simply be reviewed in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. A commitment to this effect needs to be included in the final SPD.

That is something we need to do this month. Is the right hon. Gentleman in a position, in conjunction with his Treasury colleagues, to give an assurance now so that we can give that commitment from the National Assembly in response to the SPD?

Mr. Murphy: The document was incorrect in its references to the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. We are in the middle of it; it started at the beginning of the year and concludes in July.

As a Member of the National Assembly as well as of this House, the right hon. Gentleman knows that the document—the plan—is an agreement between the European Union and the National Assembly. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West indicated to the Assembly this week that in no way did that comment mean that the Commission would block the plan when it came up for further consideration at the end of March. I cannot give an assurance of the type that the right hon. Gentleman seeks, because we are still in the process of that spending review. We have gone over these matters many times. Obviously, it is a hugely significant issue for Wales. I am given to understand that the progress of the plan will not be hindered by the comments to which the right hon. Gentleman has just referred.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I should like to quote to my right hon. Friend the following words of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan):

> The Commission has confirmed that it does not intend to block the single programming document until the spending review is completed later in the summer.

Therefore, the Commission is quite willing to wait until July.

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend reinforces the point that I have just made.

I return to our roles as Members of Parliament and Ministers here. I am the thirteenth Secretary of State for Wales. The job has changed. It is to protect the settlement; to symbolise the place of Wales in the United Kingdom; and to represent Wales in the Cabinet and the Cabinet in Wales. It is also, with Members of this House and the other place, to steer through primary legislation for Wales. There are at least half a dozen Bills going through the House—the Local Government Bill, the Learning and Skills Bill and others—in which there are very large Welsh sections. Some 35 per cent. of the Learning and Skills Bill relates to matters specifically affecting Wales.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): As my right hon. Friend knows, I represent a London seat, but it contains some 2,500 people of Welsh descent, a delightful Welsh chapel and the very active Harrow Welsh society. It is also close to the Welsh school in Willesden, which, as my right hon. Friend will also know, is experiencing financial problems.

As my right hon. Friend stalks the corridors of Whitehall and Westminster, will he be able to ensure that the educational needs of Welsh people living outside Wales will be given some consideration?

Mr. Murphy: It is difficult enough to represent Wales in the House of Commons; representing the Welsh diaspora as well is even more difficult. I accept, however, that the Welsh school plays a significant part in the lives of Welsh men and women—and, obviously, children—in London, and I will make appropriate representations to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Our roles as Members of Parliament have changed. I mentioned the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, which must now find a new role and, in my view, is dealing with that very well. The Welsh Grand Committee still meets, and provides a forum for those who represent Welsh constituencies. Welsh Question Time has changed as well. I should, however, mention something else, because it has been mentioned to me by Members on both sides of the House. Those of us who represent Welsh constituencies are not London Members; we are Welsh Members who happen to be in the United Kingdom Parliament, which happens to be in London. That should be put on record because, as we enter a new constitutional age, nomenclature is important.

As for our constituency work, I have no evidence—I am sure that the same applies to my colleagues—that our postbags have diminished. Moreover, our role here as representatives of the people of Wales has not diminished either. Nevertheless, I feel that we should, along with our colleagues in the Assembly, develop a new role enabling us to work together for the benefit of our communities.

The settlement—the contract with the Welsh people that devolution constitutes—is concerned with, above all, the place of the Assembly in the United Kingdom as well as its place in Wales. The relationship between the Assembly and the House of Commons is hugely significant. We are all in this game—this business of governance—to improve the quality of life of Welsh men, women and children, and we can do that together.

I think that the ultimate test of any politician, wherever that politician is a Member, is whether at the end of the term of office—here, or in the Assembly—the people he or she represents enjoy a better quality of life than when that term of office began. I also think that Members of Parliament and Members of the Assembly can bring that about together.

During that first Welsh day debate in 1944, Aneurin Bevan spoke of the problems confronting the people of Wales. We would do well to heed his advice today as we

[Mr. Murphy]

take stock of the progress that we have made in the past nine months towards democratic devolution—towards what I call "partnership with a difference". Bevan said:

> What is the problem that I, and my colleagues, were up against between the two wars? We had in Wales, in the Welsh valleys in particular, a problem arising out of unemployment in the basic industries. I spent most of my adult life in the shadow of unemployment, because the basic industries happened to be situated largely in South Wales. Our problem was to try to get enough political leverage to secure attention for our difficulties.—[*Official Report*, 17 October 1944; Vol. 403, c. 2313.]

The words

> enough political leverage to secure attention

are another way of saying that Wales's problems, then and now, need that "partnership with a difference" between our Assembly and our Parliament and Government.

As ever, Bevan started from where his people were—from their lives, concerns and aspirations. He put it all in a universal context, recognising that the task of the politician is to be the tribune and the advocate of the people in terms of their hopes and aspirations for a better life. That, in my view, is what politics is all about. If we fail the people, the democratic institutions that we cherish, and have only just established, will fail as well.

There are a number of contexts in which we can tackle together the problems that afflict the people of Wales. That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer set up three task forces representing the United Kingdom Government and the Governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, to deal with the knowledge economy that is so vital to the future of Wales, with child poverty and with pensioner poverty. The other important reason that the Assembly is joining this Parliament in considering stability in the years ahead is the importance of delivering the services that it is charged to provide, just as we are in the United Kingdom Government.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): My right hon. Friend mentioned pensioner poverty. As he knows, one of the Government's main promises and priorities was to help the poorest pensioners. Is he aware that no action has been taken to discover the identity of the 700,000 poorest pensioners in the United Kingdom—many of them in Wales—whose income is below the minimum income guarantee level? Action was promised in April 1999 and again last month, but, as I say, none has been taken. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to ensure that a scheme to alert the poorest pensioners to the availability of benefits will be initiated in the near future?

Mr. Murphy: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is obviously important to identify as many people as possible who can qualify for the benefits that the Government have given.

The Government have been tackling social exclusion, poverty and worklessness, step by step. Since the last St. David's day debate, more than 100,000 low-paid workers in Wales have benefited from the first ever national minimum wage. More than 80,000 Welsh families have benefited from the working families tax credit. Families have received the biggest ever increase in child benefit. Unemployment in Wales has fallen by 9,000, to a 20-year low. Youth unemployment has been cut by 75 per cent. since 1997. Pensioners' winter fuel allowance has been guaranteed, and more than half a million pensioners in Wales benefit from that. Moreover, the new deal, which has already helped more than 10,000 young people in Wales to find jobs, will be extended to all unemployed people. Pensioners over 75, of whom a quarter of a million live in Wales, will be given free television licences.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Notwithstanding the list of the Government's contributions that the right hon. Gentleman has given, does he agree that there seems to be a different cycle of economic development in different parts of Wales? Some parts, especially rural areas, are in recession. Is not one of our roles to do what we can to deal with the poverty trap in desperately poor rural areas?

Mr. Murphy: Of course I agree that poverty is not limited to urban and industrial areas. Over the past few months, we have engaged in many a debate on such issues. However, all the measures that I have outlined apply as much to rural as to urban areas, and I think they are all hugely significant in reducing the poverty of our people in Wales.

The whole business of reducing poverty and improving lives can happen only when there is a stable economy that can help to produce schools and hospitals, and there is no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has produced just that. We have a good, strong, stable economy, and that is the basis on which we can work in Wales to secure a better life for our people. We are making work pay, and giving everyone who wants to work an opportunity to do so. We are fighting for the families of Wales by keeping inflation under control, and keeping interest rates down. The most effective support for social inclusion is work, and the Government have made getting Wales off benefit and into work their priority. We have been able to make progress because we have got the economic fundamentals right. We did not go for the soft options proposed by the Conservative party, and as a result, unemployment has continued to fall.

I shall be interested to find out, when the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) rises, what he will tell the House about the new deal and the working families tax credit, and whether he agrees with the shadow Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who told the House that no future Conservative Government would want to make use of European structural funds.

I deal briefly with economic developments in Wales. The Government's key themes of modernisation, enterprise, fairness and partnership are having a major impact on the Welsh economy. In the past few months, I have been privileged to go around Wales, visiting universities and colleges in Bangor, Swansea and elsewhere and launching information and communication technology centres in Ogmore vale and Merthyr. People are recognising that we transform our economies by constantly raising the skills levels of all our people.

The projects that have been launched in Wales in the past two years are legion. I shall not list them, but I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends will be able to point to examples of first-class economic development in their constituencies, where highly skilled jobs have resulted from the Government's economic policy.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): My right hon. Friend kindly mentioned his visit to

Merthyr, which was deeply appreciated, to see how we are trying to deal with IT skills. Is he conscious of the fact that training providers all over Wales are worried that with all the reorganisation that is going on, their work in financing and developing skills programmes might be disrupted? Will he therefore ensure that whatever else happens as a result of the Learning and Skills Bill, work will not be interrupted by the reorganisation proposals?

Mr. Murphy: The post-16 Bill's purpose is certainly to ensure that there is co-ordination between all training providers in Wales, and that Wales has a national policy for training. I am sure that the last thing that anybody wants is disruption of training opportunities. The Bill will give people greater opportunities. The details of the measure have yet to be discussed in the National Assembly because we are still passing the primary legislation. I know that my hon. Friend will be taking an active interest in those matters as the Bill progresses through the House.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) referred to the rural economy, and we could not have this debate without referring to the problems that have occurred in the countryside in Wales, as well as in England, over the past months. As I have said at Question Time, there is hardly a Welsh Member of Parliament who does not represent a farming community. Our constituencies are mixed. We are all deeply aware of the difficulties.

I am also aware that the rural development plan, which is being developed by the Assembly, our countryside Bill, which will soon be introduced, and our serious look at red tape will all have a good effect on the countryside. Farming is still a major employer, and Members of the House and of the Assembly need to work out the long-term future of farming in Wales.

In all the years that I have been in the House I have never had to perform so grave a duty as when I presented Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report on child abuse in north Wales. The report was a catalogue of the most appalling and unforgivable acts of random abuse and violence directed against some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

I made it clear then that the Government would not waste time in considering the report and taking any and all appropriate action. I am therefore able to tell the House today that the Government will bring forward an amendment to the Care Standards Bill to establish in Wales an independent children's commissioner on a statutory basis.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I am delighted by the right hon. Gentleman's announcement. He will remember that I spoke to an amendment of that nature in proceedings on the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 and, as I recall, he supported that amendment.

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because I know that the establishment of a children's commissioner has support from all parties in the House and the National Assembly.

The House will know that the appointment of such a commissioner is the first recommendation of Sir Ronald's report. Within the scope of the Care Standards Bill the role of such a commissioner would be confined to covering children in care. At the moment the Assembly is considering its proposals on a children's commissioner, and I am conscious of the fact that it is likely to seek to establish a commissioner with wider powers than could be accommodated in the Care Standards Bill. The Government will want to consider any Assembly proposals urgently and sympathetically when they are eventually published. Undoubtedly, we will want to discuss such proposals with the Assembly and seek speedy agreement on how they can be taken forward.

We have, in the Care Standards Bill, an opportunity to act now to protect children in care and we intend to take it. The commissioner will have statutory powers of monitoring and oversight of complaints, whistleblowing and advocacy arrangements for children in care. In addition to publishing reports, the commissioner will be able to examine the handling of individual cases of children in care.

All of us in public service have a duty to protect those in the care of the state. Sir Ronald's report showed that trust has been betrayed. By acting to establish a children's commissioner the House will be making its contribution to making such abuses and betrayals as few and far between as is humanly possible. None of us can guarantee that such abuse will never recur, any more than we can legislate to abolish evil, but we can use what powers we have to offer the maximum degree of protection from evil, and that is what the proposed amendment will do.

I repeat that I am conscious of the fact that the Assembly is still considering other roles for a children's commissioner, which was my party's manifesto commitment, and I know that other parties in the Assembly will agree to that measure. We will be in a position to meet the Assembly as soon as its Committee has considered the matter, and then we will have to consider the appropriate legislative vehicle.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Assembly's Health and Social Services Committee has already given detailed consideration to the proposals for a children's commissioner. Will he ensure that he takes on board some of the forthright views expressed in the Committee and that the matter will be dealt with expeditiously?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, of course. I understand that the Committee has not yet concluded its deliberations, but when it has done so, we will discuss these matters with the appropriate Members of the Assembly. We will then have to consider how best to proceed. We do not know when the Committee will complete its deliberations, and we are well into the Session, so we will have to see how we can accommodate the proposals later. In the meantime, it is important that Wales has a children's commissioner who, by statute, will be able to deal with children in care. That will be a tremendous step forward.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): I, too, strongly welcome the idea of a children's commissioner for Wales. It will be a great step forward and is, as my right hon. Friend said, one of the many good recommendations of the Waterhouse report. However, there are question marks

[Mr. Martyn Jones]

over the report, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will confirm that there is to be a debate on it in the House, so that we can discuss it at length.

Mr. Murphy: I am aware of my hon. Friend's interest in these matters, and I assure him that there will be an opportunity in the not-too-distant future for a full debate on them, and I am sure that he will take part.

Our vision is of a Wales at the heart of British, European and international life, where all, regardless of creed, colour, ethnicity or language, can feel themselves part of a great world community and yet also be distinctively Welsh and British. The Wales that we seek is not one where people have to choose between their Welshness and their Britishness, any more than they have to decide between social injustice and economic efficiency. We can be proud to be both British and Welsh. We want a society where business can prosper, but where everyone who wants a job can get one that pays a decent wage and where families can realistically hope for public services to be of the highest quality. That is our vision for our new Wales as we enter the 21st century.

3.29 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am being schooled in the odd phrase in Welsh, so I shall say, "Gwyl Ddewi hapus i chi." Lord Roberts of Conwy taught me that, and one could not have a better tutor in Welsh. I hope that the next lesson will allow me to say, "Happy St. David's day for yesterday," which would be more appropriate than what I have just said.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that foreign languages are allowed in the Chamber, but an immediate translation must be added.

Mr. Evans: I said "A happy St. David's day to you", but it would have been more appropriate for yesterday than today. I hope that lesson 2 by Lord Roberts will take me that stage further.

Mr. Flynn: May I have a ruling from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Welsh language is a foreign language in this Chamber? This is the only real Parliament that Wales has. Are you saying that, in this Parliament, the status of the language is the same as that of Slovenian or Ethiopian or any other language?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It was not my intention to give such a formal ruling. I was simply saying that, if words are used in the Chamber that some hon. Members do not understand, it is helpful if, immediately afterwards, the English equivalent is given, for the benefit of those such as me, who enjoy the Welsh language very much but do not understand it.

Mr. Evans: I give you an assurance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the rest of my speech will be in English, as the only other Welsh phrase that I know is the one meaning "Merry Christmas and a happy new year", which is not appropriate.

The Secretary of State began by speaking about the centenary of the Labour party. I overheard a Minister say the other day that he did not understand all the talk about a 100-year celebration, as the party has been going for only six years. However, we congratulate Labour on its centenary. It is a great shame that more was not done by previous Labour Governments for the people of Wales.

It is also a shame that we debate Welsh affairs only once a year, and we did not have a debate at all two years ago. Two and a half hours has been spent on other matters today, and as I know that others wish to contribute, I shall be as brief as I can.

It is important that we have the St. David's day debate. The people of Wales and Members representing Welsh constituencies should not be sidelined. It is bad enough that we are constrained by the sort of questions that we can ask the Secretary of State and the Minister during Welsh questions when that rare opportunity arises, so it is important that the Select Committee and the Welsh Grand Committee continue to investigate Welsh affairs on behalf of the people of Wales.

The people of Wales can rightly be proud. I was proud of the way in which they conducted the rugby world cup last year in a world-class stadium in Cardiff. I will be at Twickenham on Saturday. I fail the Norman Tebbit cricket test time and again. Although I represent an English constituency, I shall be supporting Wales on Saturday, and I wish the team well.

The Prime Minister fails to recognise that there is a north-south divide. In Wales, as my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik)—that will ruin his career—suggested a moment ago, there is a north-south-east-west divide. Certain parts of Wales are booming, and investment continues in places such as Cardiff. We cannot fail to see the cranes operating there, constructing new buildings, and the new investment that is being attracted. Further west, in parts such as Swansea, where I was born and lived for 33 years, it is much more difficult to attract investment.

The gateway to south Wales is the relatively new second Severn crossing, which has been open for four years. It is a great pity that it still does not have a proper name. Perhaps the Secretary of State and other Ministers with responsibility for the bridge would consider holding an open competition so that people in Wales and possibly other areas could suggest a name for the bridge, perhaps reflecting the links between England and Wales and the importance of the second Severn crossing.

I have not failed to notice the campaign organised by the *Western Mail* to make St. David's day a national holiday for Wales. There is great merit in that. There is no reason why the people of Wales should not celebrate St. David's day. I was with some London Welsh people last night at their club, Daniels, where they were celebrating St. David's day.

There are still too many people in Wales who cannot find jobs and who therefore have 365 days of the year off. We must ensure that Wales remains competitive in the United Kingdom and Europe and globally. We have a global economy in Wales, so an additional bank holiday must be at the expense of an existing bank holiday. To make Wales less competitive would be a retrograde step for employment.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that other European countries are fully competitive and have more bank holidays than Wales or England?

Mr. Evans: I am not sure whether other European countries are more competitive. The changes that were

made and the legislation that was introduced during the 18 years of Conservative rule have helped to make Britain far more competitive than some other European countries. To impose more burdens on business in Wales at this time would not be useful.

The Secretary of State presented a review of devolution and said that the Welsh Assembly had already achieved a great deal. According to the findings of the latest ICM poll, he is one of the 4 per cent. of the British public who believe that devolution has achieved a lot; 88 per cent. believe that it has achieved a little or nothing.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Let us be fair. Does my hon. Friend agree that one thing that has been achieved is that there is much less work for officials of the Welsh Office to do in London, which probably explains why the Box is packed with them today? Evidently, their duties weigh lightly on their hands.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman will not make reference to anyone outside the Chamber.

Mr. Evans: I thank my hon. Friend. I know that there is great interest in the debate, and particularly in my speech. I expect that that is why there are so many people listening.

Part of the problem with confidence in the Welsh Assembly was the overselling of the institution in the first place, and the way in which it started, with the rigged leadership election which finally backfired. No one now trusts the Labour Government on the holding of referendums or internal elections.

That is one of the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is in Wales today. He is not afraid to go to the people. He is in Monmouth with his truck, selling in Wales the message of saving the pound, which is extremely popular with people in Wales and throughout the rest of the country.

We know that the jury is still out on devolution. As we were reminded earlier, three quarters of the Welsh people did not vote for it, but it is still in its first year. The nine Conservative Members of the Welsh Assembly are working hard to ensure that it works well for all the people of Wales.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No, I will not give way, as I know the point that the hon. Gentleman will make.

One of the priorities of the Welsh Assembly has been a new home for itself. We recall the farce about the siting of the Assembly—whether it should be in Cardiff or in other parts of Wales. The Secretary of State suddenly discovered that Cardiff was the capital of Wales and decided that the Assembly should be there. Then there was the farce about whether it should sit in the city hall or some other building, and now there is a farce about a new building. The Conservatives in the Welsh Assembly tried unsuccessfully to block the erection of a new building.

Page 30 of the White Paper on which the Welsh people voted, because there was no Act at that stage, stated that the Government estimate for acquiring and equipping a building for the Assembly would be between £12 million and £17 million. When we questioned that, we were told that £17 million was at the top end of the estimate. Less than 12 months later, the cost of that building has been estimated at £23 million, with a contingency of a further £3 million. Few people believe that it will cost less than £30 million.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the hon. Gentleman comment on the difference between £230 million for Portcullis House and the odd £20 million for a new democratic Chamber for Wales?

Mr. Evans: I shall refer Portcullis House to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee because I am unhappy about any waste of taxpayers' money. The cost of the Scottish Parliament building ran out of control. It was said that it would cost £40 million, but it will cost more than £200 million. The people of Wales had faith in the White Paper on which they voted at the referendum, when the margin of victory was narrow. The White Paper stated that the cost was between £12 million and £17 million. It is now estimated at £23 million and £26 million. Something is wrong and someone should be brought to book because of it.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Portcullis house was initiated by the Conservative Government. Why has no Conservative spokesperson criticised the expenditure on that building? Is it because the money is being spent in London and therefore cannot be criticised, while the expenditure that the hon. Gentleman criticises is happening in Wales?

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman should listen more carefully. I said that I had criticised the runaway expenditure on Portcullis House. I criticise such runaway expenditure on any public buildings on which taxpayers' money is spent.

Mr. Ruane: Did the hon. Gentleman vote for or against the expenditure on Portcullis House?

Mr. Evans: That happened several years ago. If a vote was held, it probably took place late at night. However, we are discussing the problems of buildings that are costed, but for which the cost then spins out of control. The hon. Gentleman must bear some responsibility. The Labour Government have been in power for the past three years. What have they done to ensure that they have a tight grip on expenditure on public buildings?

The people of Wales do not want expenditure on a new Assembly building. Those who have visited the building know that it is perfectly adequate; many people would describe it as luxurious when compared to some of the rooms at Westminster. The priorities for expenditure should be the health service, education and the police rather than plush accommodation for Assembly Members.

I referred to the farce of the leadership. The Prime Minister did not understand his devolution settlement. In a rigged voting system, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) defeated the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) by getting fewer popular votes. The contest was a shambles; control freakery at its worst. I was interviewed by John Humphrys on Radio 4 on the day after the contest. He said that the

[Mr. Evans]

result marked the worst day for devolution. The antics that preceded it were a disgrace, and the Prime Minister's dismissal of democracy in Cardiff as "fun and games" was arrogant. The removal of the Prime Minister's placeman and the choice of a new leader was a good day for devolution in Wales because at least the people of Wales had chosen him through their representatives.

Another problem surrounded the removal of the ban on beef on the bone. When the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament changed their minds and decided to consider the issue more deeply, it led to a paralysis of the Government. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food changed his mind. He said that it was safe to remove the ban but that he would not do that without the agreement of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. That paralysis damaged the farming industry greatly.

Dual mandates have already been mentioned. As the Secretary of State said, when a Member of Parliament is also First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly, it is impossible for him to be here, and doing a proper job is extremely difficult. The voting figures illustrate the problem. All dual mandate hon. Members should consider which job they want to do. I suspect that they would resign their Westminster seats, as happened in Ceredigion.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Did my hon. Friend notice that, when I raised the matter in an intervention, the Secretary of State did not answer my point about the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies), who does not lead his party in the Assembly and by January had not participated in a single Division in the House? Is that not an appalling abnegation of the duties of a Member of Parliament?

Mr. Evans: I agree. The right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies) is not alone. The record is 0 per cent. for several other dual mandate Members of Parliament. Their constituents would like a representative who worked full-time at Westminster to promote their interests.

Council tax bills will soon drop through the letter boxes of people in Wales. It will be an eye opener for many people to discover the following predictions. In Anglesey, the increase will be 16.5 per cent.; in Conwy, it will be 11.3 per cent.; in Powys, it will be 13.8 per cent.; in Swansea, it will be 14.1 per cent. and it will be a staggering 18.2 per cent. in Monmouthshire. Yet inflation is running at a little more than 2 per cent. There are four overspending local authorities in Wales. The other 18 unitary authorities have had to dip into their purses to subsidise them. However, the council tax increases, which average more than 10 per cent. in Wales, will seem pretty rich to people who were told during the general election campaign that there would be no tax increases. What is the council tax if it is not a tax? Pensioners have received a 75p a week increase, farmers' incomes have plummeted—they will find such increases unacceptable.

Mr. Llew Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that council tax increases, especially in the poorest local authorities, have nothing to do with overspending or inefficiency, but everything to do with poverty? If he bothered to read research that was published this week, he would get a better understanding of how that poverty affects communities such as mine, which desperately need a lot of money to build up public services and rectify the injustices that they experience. The hon. Gentleman should never forget that the increases are due to poverty, not overspending or inefficiency.

Mr. Evans: I do not discount poverty, but it is the responsibility of Labour-run local authorities, the Labour-dominated Welsh Assembly and the Labour Government. People in poor authorities, perhaps those who have incomes that are just above benefit levels and face such increases, will be the new poor in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. They will have to scratch around for the extra money. Poverty will not affect Russell Goodway, the leader of Cardiff, whose salary has increased to £58,000. The bill will be picked up by poor people in Wales. That is a scandal.

Let us consider business rates. Today's *Western Mail* includes an article headed "Tourism staggers under body blow of huge rates rises". The new rate rise for businesses may be 40 per cent. Many small businesses in Wales are involved in tourism and operate at the margins. That is another problem.

The countryside has been mentioned. Rural poverty is great in Wales. The debates that we have held on post offices and the threat to rural post offices has been mentioned by the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, which believes that half the rural post offices in Wales could face closure if the changes to automated credit transfer goes through. Some of those post offices do 40 per cent. of their business through ATC and the assurance that automated teller or hole-in-the-wall machines will be installed in rural post offices is not much comfort when consumers will face a £2.50 charge every time they use them. That is a scandal.

There are problems in the national health service in Wales. We were told time and again that it was safe in the Government's hands, but the number of patients waiting for an operation has soared by 13.9 per cent. since they came to power. The number waiting more than 12 months has gone up 60 per cent., the number waiting more than 18 months has rocketed by 167 per cent. and the number waiting to get on the waiting list has soared by more than 50 per cent., but the statistics hide the fact that we are discussing human beings who are waiting for treatment on the NHS. Last year, I raised the issue of the Newport man who was given a waiting time that was longer than he would live if he did not have his life-saving operation. We cannot have those problems in the NHS in Wales. A report says that another 42 intensive care beds are needed in the Swansea and Bridgend region and I ask the Secretary of State to consider the problems that the people of Wales face there and to talk with the First Secretary about how better to alleviate them.

Farming is in a deep crisis—the worst for 60 years. In the Ceredigion by-election campaign, I visited a farm with my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), the chairman of the Conservative party, at which a calf was destroyed because the farmer simply could not afford to take it any further. He would have been lucky to get 50p for it at market. It is appalling that farmers have seen their incomes drop by 75 per cent. in three years. The farmgate milk price has completely collapsed and some farmers have to have two or three jobs to make ends meet. That is the crisis that farmers face in Wales.

The Government still fail to understand that, in the most rural parts of Wales, the car is not a luxury, but a necessity. Extra taxes have been heaped on the motorist and it costs £165 a year more to fill up a car in Wales directly because of Government tax policy. I hope that the Secretary of State is having talks with the Chancellor to ensure that motorists in Wales are not clobbered again in the next Budget.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): My hon. Friend understates his case. According to the Automobile Association, if all the increases in fuel duty, value added tax and road tax are added up the average motorist pays almost £900 a year more to run a car. As he rightly says, a car is the last asset that a poor family in rural Wales can afford to lose, because with it will go the job.

Mr. Evans: The Government fail to understand that public transport is non-existent in parts of Wales and depending on it would be ridiculous. My hon. Friend is right to remind us of all the other extra taxes—stealth taxes—that have been put on the motorist in Wales.

On education, the Government said that class sizes would fall, but after an initial fall they have started to increase. That is a particular problem. The National Union of Teachers is concerned that in six local education authorities—Conwy, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Wrexham, Ceredigion and the Vale of Glamorgan—the number of junior school classes with more than 30 pupils on the register has already increased. The people were promised that things would get better, but we are starting to see them get worse.

There is also a fear over rural schools and parents at Bwlchygroes primary school in Llanfyrnach are appealing to the National Assembly against Pembrokeshire county council's closure plans. The school is one of five that the council plans to close to save money and we have to have assurances from the Government about their commitment to rural schools. The Learning and Skills Bill, which is going through Parliament, is seen as a threat to sixth forms because of the way in which funding is being changed. Education is our investment in our future and it should not be spun out of all recognition.

Objective 1 status has been mentioned and we can see from the 21 January report from the Confederation of British Industry in Wales headlined "Major manufacturing gloom in Wales" that there is a real problem. Certain parts of Wales look to objective 1 status to ensure that they can attract extra investment, but on 17 February I received a press release from CyberCall, a west Wales company that is looking to expand with more than 400 extra jobs. It is dependent on objective 1 funding and match funding coming through and it looks to the Government to stop playing politics with the issue.

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: Time is catching up on us, other Members want to speak and I am coming to the end of my contribution.

The Government should take cognisance of the Select Committee report, which was scathing about their treatment of that issue:

> The current CSR negotiations are a test of the Government's commitment to Wales, and indeed of the Devolution settlement.

The Committee want the Government to get on with it, but the objective 1 report that they submitted to the European Union came back because the EU did not think it adequate. On page x, the Select Committee report says:

> The Prime Minister has said that the Government will not let Wales down. Welcome though these assurances are, the Government's "trust us" approach is not enough.

That report was made by a Labour-dominated Select Committee.

Mr. Wigley: It is important to draw the House's attention to that valuable report, but is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Secretary of State responded by saying,

> it is my view that the report is incorrect in its conclusion,

despite the fact that the First Secretary in Cardiff has said that it is a useful contribution to the debate on objective 1?

Mr. Evans: As far as the judgment on the report is concerned, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman whom I would believe. It is extremely important and influential and I hope that people will not close their eyes to what it says. Many in Wales are depending on objective 1 funding and they cannot wait until the end of the review.

The Government were elected under the banner "Things can only get better" and the Secretary of State said that he would be judged by what they did over their period in office, but can he say that things have got better for students in Wales, pensioners, motorists, farmers, those who are waiting for treatment on the NHS, taxpayers in Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom who will see stealth taxes go up by more than £40 billion in a Parliament, those in schools in Wales who look to a better service and those who are waiting for objective 1 match funding? There is only one conclusion: "It's worse than under the Tories" in Wales. [Hon. Members: "That is what you say."] I am sorry—the words are not mine, but those of John Hopkins, Labour's Blaenau Gwent leader. In the *Gwent Gazette* on 10 February he said, "It's worse than under the Tories."

Mr. Llew Smith: That piece of literature was written in the English language. If the hon. Gentleman reads it again he will find that those are the words not of Councillor John Hopkins, but of the local newspaper. Councillor Hopkins did not make that statement.

Mr. Evans: I am sorry—the *Gwent Gazette* says that there was an "astonishing attack" on the Prime Minister and that the

> people of our area were better off under the Tories than they are with Labour, he says.

That is a quote from Mr. Hopkins. I am sure that the spin doctors from Millbank have been on the phone—it will have been red hot because we all know how Millbank operates against discordant voices in Wales. A number of Labour MPs sitting here must feel that they were right and the Government wrong and we all know that the phones of one or two of them were red hot. I believe what John Hopkins says—it is worse than under the Tories and Wales is fed up with the Government's spin doctors. Wales is fed up with the political shenanigans and internal squabbles. Wales deserves a brighter, better future, and that is what the Conservatives will provide after the next general election.

3.59 pm

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans)—at least I will look good. I congratulate him on his profundity: he referred to the naming of bridges, public holidays, London parties and trucker Hague going through Wales. However, I must confess that towards the end of his speech he did apply himself to some real issues.

If the hon. Gentleman wants a campaign, will he join me on mine? I would much rather see the Welsh flag on the Cenotaph than have a public holiday on 1 March. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales will join me in the campaign to pay tribute to all those Welsh people who died in wars in this century fighting to preserve our democracies and freedoms. Let us all join in the campaign to have the Welsh dragon on the Cenotaph. I will gladly trade it for a public holiday on 1 March.

I take the hon. Gentleman to task for castigating local authorities that have overspent. With his Government's reorganisation of local government in Wales, communities in the valleys could not afford to provide public services, except by stretching funds and sometimes overspending. The merger, for example, of Rhondda, Taff Ely and Cynon Valley councils—two of the poorest areas in Great Britain, by any socio-economic indicator—was bound to fail. It was done by his colleagues in government.

Some of my Labour colleagues are a little reluctant to give money to the poorest areas. Inclusive politics, which is the buzz phrase in Wales, goes out of the window when some of the richer parts of Wales are asked to give something to poorer parts—then we see the inclusiveness and brothers in arms. As always, the Welsh are happy to stab each other in the back on occasions and not to support themselves by running under the same flag, except perhaps on days when we play rugby against the English.

The Secretary of State is right to draw attention to Labour's achievements in Wales, but I was much amused to read the document that came around a little earlier that listed securing a yes vote in the devolution referendum as one of Labour's achievements. Many of us, and certainly the vast majority of the people of Wales, would not regard that as an achievement by any standard.

A peculiar view has developed: more government means good government. The more tiers of government there are, the better people are represented and the more democracy there is. In one sense, democracy is a finite thing; it is not extended by creating all sorts of organisations. Democracy can be destroyed, and democratic deficits or gaps can arise as a result of creating too many institutions. It will certainly eat up many already poor resources, which should be spent on education, schools, hospitals and other health facilities.

During the debate on the Welsh Assembly, all sorts of statements were made. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) said that investors and industries abroad were queueing up, waiting for the Assembly to be set up; they saw that Wales was going to become a democratic country and they were prepared to invest. That was one of the arguments of the vote yes campaign: everyone was waiting for Wales to become democratic, as though it were not before.

I am extremely proud to be Welsh, but I am also proud to live in a British community which, from my experience—I have worked as a geologist in many countries—is probably one of the best to live in and enjoys a measure of democracy that most people in the world do not achieve. I do not think that setting up the Assembly extended democracy—it extended bureaucracy. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), the leader of the Welsh nationalist party, scoffs at that. Is he daring to suggest that bureaucracy in Wales has not increased as a result of the setting-up of the Assembly?

Let us consider a point that the Secretary of State made: 60 Members are now making decisions that were previously made by three Ministers. Secretaries are coming out of our ears in Cardiff, all being paid very handsome salaries; it is all very expensive. Is that an extension of democracy and not simply an extension of bureaucracy? I cannot see how my constituents in the Rhondda, one of the poorest areas in Wales, have benefited from any democratic increment that was supposed to come with the National Assembly.

Like some Labour Members, Welsh nationalists talked about inclusiveness. Wales was going to enter into a great period of inclusive politics—brothers in arms, Welshmen marching forward into the new millennium. Wow. Look at what has happened over the past few months. What sheer hypocrisy was spouted during that referendum campaign.

What has happened since the Assembly was set up? Frankly, one great achievement is that we have created a class of political eunuchs in Wales—not just in Cardiff, but in Westminster, too. In Cardiff, 60 people are being paid to do a job that was previously done by three people. There is a hugely expensive superstructure, a point that was raised by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley in relation to the new building. There are now more civil servants in Wales, so there has been a huge extension of bureaucracy. We were not exactly writhing under the yolk of British rule before last summer.

I understand that the eunuchs of the Ottoman empire spent time extolling the Sultan's characteristics—I am not sure who in Wales could be classified as the Sultan in the harem. The eunuchs invented increasingly elaborate titles for themselves in the harem. I am not suggesting that that is paralleled in the Welsh Assembly, but there seems to be a preoccupation with status and titles—and it is not confined to the Members. The statue of Oliver Cromwell stands outside, and visions of that age are evoked in me when I recall that the principal officer serving the Welsh Assembly is called the Counsel-General, one of the most wonderful titles that I have come across. I am not sure who picked that term out of the mire. I wonder what he is all about.

I also wonder what some of the Cabinet Secretaries actually do for their salary of nearly £70,000 a year, with expenses on top. There is bound to be a limit to the number of cattle markets, newly opened roads or potholes that can be visited. Not many schools or hospitals seem to be in the pipeline. With all due respect—all of them are my colleagues and in the same party—it is not as though they make profound decisions.

The Secretaries do not really have to make decisions. The Assembly is rather like a glorified county council. Many right hon. and hon. Members have served on local

authorities. I had the privilege of serving on the old Glamorgan county council, which covered almost half of Wales. It took bigger decisions than many of those being taken by the Welsh Assembly.

I do not envy the role of the First Secretary, as I think that he has a very difficult job. However, one thing that he could do is reduce the number of Cabinet Secretaries. The great virtue is that it would free money to be spent where it should be spent, not on Welsh schools in London—I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) has left the Chamber—but on schools such as the Rhondda special school for handicapped children. Water is coming through the roof and the yard is unsuitable as a playground for these very badly handicapped children. It is a shame to have spent £25 million on a new building for the Welsh Assembly when other buildings were available and there is not enough money to put three 1918 schools into a decent condition for our valley communities.

There is another virtue in getting rid of some of the Cabinet Secretaries. I understand why the former First Secretary appointed so many of them—he wanted a praetorian guard; people who would be loyal and back him through thick and thin. He wanted to ensure that, as a result of his patronage, whenever he was in trouble he could rely on their loyalty and backing all the way. Well, the events of the past few months demonstrate that one certainly cannot buy loyalty in Wales. I was disgusted by the great haste with which they all fled the field and left my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) on his own. He was further emasculated by the Welsh nationalists who preside over the Welsh Assembly. If ever a dirty deed was done in Welsh politics, it was when Plaid Cymru combined with the Tories and the Liberals to stab him in the back.

Of course, we are no better off. I criticise my colleagues in Cardiff as being eunuchs, but we are also castrated as Members of Parliament. As the Secretary of State said, we still have a role to play. We still have our postbags because people look to us when they desperately need help. In one sense we are the last resort for many of our constituents who have problems. However, we face difficulties in tabling questions to the Executive and we no longer have the ability to question directly in respect of certain areas of government.

That brings me back to my initial point, which relates to a profound democratic issue. Some 200 years ago, America sought independence on the basis of no taxation without representation. The argument was that if taxes were raised and paid, the people's representatives should have the right to know how the money was spent. Now, Members of Parliament are in the ridiculous position of raising taxes, deciding the level of taxation and saying how much should be allocated to Wales, but not having the right to monitor how it is spent in certain areas. We cannot chase the penny, and that is fundamentally wrong.

I am not proposing that decisions should be taken away from the Welsh Assembly—which exists, warts and all. However, there should be a mechanism to enable us to participate and to put direct questions to the First Secretary. Instead of more democracy, we have a democratic deficit.

The Welsh Assembly is an experiment and I know that I am being overly critical of it, but my criticisms are justified because the people of Wales were misled last year. One has only to look at some of the statements that were made at the time to see quite how grossly they were misled on inclusiveness, for example. We have to give it a chance to win, but it is not for the Assembly to create a situation in which it can operate on its own. As I said year after year during the campaign, at the next election every Member of the Welsh Assembly will say of every proposal, "We would love to have done it, but we were prevented from doing so by Westminster. We do not have the chance to raise money or make laws."

There are already voices among the Welsh nationalists—quite rightly; at least they are not hypocritical about it—and elsewhere requesting more powers for the Welsh Assembly. The next election will be fought by every political party in the Welsh Assembly on the basis of more powers being transferred from Westminster. However, the Welsh people were not asked that question. Although, fractionally, there was a yes vote, had there been honesty, forthrightness and less hypocrisy surrounding the yes campaign in Wales, the Welsh people would have thrown it out.

4.16 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): This St. David's day is at the dawn of a new century. I believe that it is a good time for Wales and a good time to be Welsh. Wales has a higher and more respected profile in spite of the down side in the press and the media. However, that does not apply to London taxi drivers. Yesterday, when I was discussing St. David's day with a taxi driver, I told him that I had seen daffodils in Gwent yesterday morning. He did not believe me and said, "No. You have to put your daffodil in a pot and keep it in a warm place to get it to flower on 1 March." I replied, "I am very sorry, but I saw them two hours ago." He still did not believe me. There is obviously a big gap in perception between London and Wales.

There are great problems in urban and rural Wales. The question is what we can do about them here in Westminster and whether we have the right legislature in the Assembly to conquer urban and rural deprivation in Wales. Although I did not agree with much of what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) said, he pinpointed many current difficulties.

The rural-urban divide is a big problem in Wales. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members will have read in today's *Western Mail* an article by Rhodri Clark about rural Wales being left in the cold. I believe that it should be compulsory reading for Ministers.

The rural areas need to be reconnected with the rest of Wales. As they have fewer parliamentary seats because of their sparse population, urban representatives dominate in the Welsh Assembly and here in Westminster.

Since the 1960s, under Governments of both colours, the county of Powys has lost most of its transport infrastructure, including a huge amount of its railway infrastructure, its health authority, its ambulance service, three county councils, its police service base, its fire service and the Development Board for Rural Wales; and it is about to lose its probation service. That has resulted in a huge loss of decision making within our communities and a huge watering down of services. I would not advise anyone to travel at night in Powys, as, should they be unfortunate enough to have an accident on the road, an ambulance could not be guaranteed to arrive within the

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

statutory response times in the hours between 12 midnight and 8 am. Five years ago, it was guaranteed that one would be picked up by emergency services within that time. There has been a serious decline in those services.

As hon. Members have said, there is a catastrophic crisis in farming. In the previous financial year, many farmers in my constituency earned 39p an hour. Currently, some of them are making no money whatsoever. Although I realise that that is a consequence of global markets and the pound's strength, something has to be done about it.

We have, thankfully, been successful in saving our community hospitals, owing largely to a massive campaign and a sympathetic decision—for which we are very grateful—by the previous Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael).

In my constituency alone, in the past 30 years, 30 rural schools have been closed. We have also had to run campaigns to prevent bank branches and post offices from closing. From all that, hon. Members will perhaps appreciate why we have had to fight a type of guerrilla warfare—against the big battalions of Government, bureaucracy and multinational companies. We now face the threat of at least half our rural post offices being closed because pensions and benefits will be paid directly into bank accounts. However, many poor rural people do not have bank accounts.

Mr. Wigley: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a crying need for greater resources for the health service and rural schools? Does not that need—with a Budget in two weeks—underline the need to ensure that we maintain current taxation levels, so that resources are available rather than given away in tax bribes?

Mr. Livsey: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The Liberal Democrats' policy is certainly not to cut tax by 1p, as will happen in the next Budget, but to spend that money on the national health service.

An announcement was made only yesterday on additional charges for using bank cash dispensers. However, in many parts of my constituency, there is only one bank's cash dispenser within a 20-mile radius. The decision to increase the charge might seem rational to someone at the bank's headquarters, in Cardiff or Birmingham, but it will spell disaster for local rural communities.

Our farming community, and what little manufacturing industry we have remaining, is threatened by global economics. Massive job losses are occurring in both sectors. We pay up to 5p a litre more for petrol and diesel. Although we have received a little money from central Government for rural bus services, those services range from few and far between to non-existent. New technology could provide some of the solutions, but some of the new technology infrastructure is inadequate and not up to modern standards.

A consequence of the massive decline in farming is that many of our young people have had to emigrate to find decent jobs. Those young people are replaced by others who come to our area to retire. Although it is not the retirees' fault that a consequence of the prices that they pay for houses is to put the local housing market out of reach of our younger people, or that they put additional strains on social services and the NHS—I do not criticise them personally; I welcome them—that is still the consequence.

There is much that we can and will do to reverse the downward trend, but it cannot be tackled properly unless the whole of Wales is properly unified, with a far greater sense of purpose and leadership than has to date been displayed. The main vehicle for regeneration will undoubtedly come from the National Assembly for Wales and from more enlightened legislation from Westminster, combined with the vital input initiated by the European Union.

The decline of the south Wales valleys has been devastating. I am privileged to represent communities in a part of the upper Swansea valley—an old industrial area containing some of the finest people whom one could ever wish to meet. They have an immense community spirit. Recently, however, global economics has overtaken them.

Lucas SEI, for example, closed because of the uncompetitive pound and rock-bottom wage rates in Poland. The whole operation was spirited away by the multinational company to eastern Europe. We have been left to pick up the pieces, and we are fighting back. The Amman and Tawe Valley Partnership, the Welsh Development Agency and other agencies, with the local elected hon. Members, are doing their best, and we have managed to get a new employer into the Lucas factory. Currently, however, it is employing only one tenth of the previous number of employees.

Every valley, especially in the coalfield areas, has declined. One has only to visit those areas to see the devastation that has been created largely by 18 years of Tory rule, but which is not being helped by the Labour Government's adherence to a far too strong pound and their current refusal to enter the euro zone. Now, the problem for Wales is that the type of decline that the valleys has experienced is rapidly being mirrored in rural Wales, especially in the decline in farming.

The plight of farmers is really terrible. Previously, Wales's Labour party leaders spent much time addressing the issue of the unity of urban and rural Wales. It is time that we again addressed that issue. The interests of Wales, whether urban or rural, should be considered as one entity. However, if we are to address many of those issues, we shall have to make the National Assembly more effective.

It was not surprising to learn that, yesterday—even on St. David's day—the National Assembly was impotent to take decisions on even relatively small adjustments to secondary legislation. The matter began initially with—I think correct—statements that Wales should be a GM-free area. However, because of legal advice, the Assembly could not proceed as directly in achieving that objective as it should have liked to do.

We also learned yesterday that amendments to proposals for performance-related pay and conditions for teachers may not be within the Assembly's province, and that the Assembly's decision on the matter may be pre-empted, at Westminster, by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. I do not know whether that is true, but it is what is alleged.

I well remember speaking on Third Reading of the Government of Wales Act 1998, and saying that although establishment of the Assembly was an excellent achievement, the nature of the Act would greatly test the

new Assembly Members. I said then that the Assembly would be known for what it could not do rather than for what it could do for Wales, and that that would be a very frustrating experience for all those who were involved. It gives me no pleasure now to acknowledge that my prediction has been proved true sooner than I had expected.

The fundamental flaw that has to be addressed, whether we like it or not, is that the Assembly is unable to exercise primary legislative functions—*[Interruption.]* Ministers may say "Well!", and the hon. Member for Rhondda may say that that was not in the referendum, but throughout the 20th century, the Liberal Democrats' policy was that a Welsh parliament should be created and have primary legislative powers. As that model has not been adopted, the various chickens that I have been describing have been coming home to roost.

I am sure that that legislative need will be recognised, and that, in the not to distant future, the Assembly will be given the powers necessary to match actions with expectations in Wales.

Mr. Evans: Is the Liberal Democrats' policy to push to give primary legislative powers to the Welsh Assembly without a referendum, and to give it tax-raising powers without a referendum?

Mr. Livsey: I was talking about legislation, not taxation. Nor will I abandon my party's adherence to a very important 100-year-old policy of granting primary legislative powers to a Welsh Parliament.

Mr. Rogers: That was a good Liberal Democrat answer.

Mr. Livsey: Yes, it was. I am obliged to the hon. Gentleman.

This week's announcement that the Presiding Officer will, for example, have his own independent legal officer demonstrates another weakness in the 1998 Act. We failed to include in the Act amendments tabled by Liberal Democrats Members that would have enabled the Assembly to have three classes of civil servant. I remind the House that we advocated providing for Executive departmental civil servants; independent civil servants, who would have been designated to work with Members and political parties; and officers of the Assembly, similar to those at the House of Commons, who could independently proffer advice to Assembly Members.

I believe that three classes of civil servant would solve many of the Assembly's problems. I am also quite certain that such reform, in the medium to long term, will make the National Assembly a far more effective democratically accountable body.

The vexed question of match funding for objective 1 and objective 2 initiatives, which was the cause of such a hiatus in the Assembly a few weeks ago, would have been eased to some extent had the Assembly had tax-varying powers. That is probably the most contentious of the proposals that we put forward during the passage of the Government of Wales Bill, but it would have epitomised democratic power with responsibility, which the hon. Member for Rhondda mentioned just now.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify what he has just said about tax-varying powers? Is it his party's policy that the Welsh Assembly should be given tax-raising powers without reference to a referendum of the Welsh people?

Mr. Livsey: I did not necessarily say that, because that is an important matter. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Conservative peer, Lord Roberts of Conwy, who has advocated giving the Assembly tax-varying powers and said that it could lower taxes and Wales could become a tax haven.

Mr. Evans: We need clarification on this simple point. Is it Liberal Democrat policy to give the Welsh Assembly tax-varying powers without a referendum? Yes or no?

Mr. Livsey: Yes, of course it is. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman can read our manifesto, which has said that in the past. I do not know why he is trying to persuade me to abandon a policy that, as the hon. Member for Rhondda has said, is entirely logical.

Mr. Ruane: Does the hon. Gentleman think that a proposal to give the National Assembly for Wales tax-raising or tax-varying powers would receive the backing of the people of Wales, with or without a referendum?

Mr. Livsey: We would seek to persuade the people of Wales. The Scottish Parliament has tax-varying powers with a 3p limit. There are various ways of achieving tax-varying powers without going the whole hog, as some have suggested that we would like to do.

I regret that such a hard-working and honest Member of Parliament and of the Assembly as the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth should have had such a rough ride in the Assembly, but—[HON. MEMBERS: "Look behind you."] I am sure that you agree that people should not interrupt half way through a sentence, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is an element of truth in the description that he was Whitehall's representative in Wales rather than Wales' representative in Whitehall. That perception, together with the vexed question of objective 1 match funding and the Treasury's inability to come up with the necessary transparent evidence of such funding, unfortunately left the Liberal Democrats with no alternative but to vote in the way that they did on the confidence motion in Cardiff.

To paraphrase George Orwell, all votes are equal, but some votes are more equal than others. I welcome the arrival of the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) as the new First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. In the end, democracy has won in Wales. Like the Liberal Democrats, the new leader adheres to the concept of one member, one vote—or OMOV, as he fondly describes it. There is something satisfying in the fact that in Wales—a country of fair-minded people with strong democratic principles—people of all political perspectives were able to see justice finally done. The hon. Member for Cardiff, West has clearly said that other systems of election not based on one member, one vote will not be exercised again in Wales. I welcome that. It is real progress and the Liberal Democrats wish the new First Secretary well in his endeavours to obtain for Wales a fair settlement of United Kingdom resources with which to tackle the many problems that I have described in my speech.

[Mr. Livsey]

I believe that the Secretary of State is of a similar mind to the First Secretary in wanting to achieve success for Wales. Now is the time for real leadership and unity for the whole of Wales. That is very much in the interests of its people. I am optimistic for Wales in the 21st century. It is up to us and the Members of the Assembly to give a lead. Wales and its people together are far bigger than all of us and they deserve greater success in the future.

4.34 pm

Sir Raymond Powell (Ogmore): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). However, I challenge him on what sort of democracy has won in Wales in the past few weeks. What happened was not democratic. He referred to a resolution that was tabled in the National Assembly for Wales. There is no doubt that the resolution was provoked by the Welsh nationalists for the purpose of disquieting most of the Members of the Assembly.

If we analyse the vote, we find that the result was determined by the unelected Members of the Assembly. Nineteen of those 20 unelected Assembly Members belong to the Opposition parties. They all participated in the debate and voted. I found the attitude of the Opposition parties in the debate disgusting.

Mr. Livsey *rose—*

Sir Raymond Powell: Let me finish this point first. Unless the facts go on the record, I doubt that the House will ever know what really happened. The Secretary of State handed in his resignation—

Mr. Paul Murphy: No, I did not.

Sir Raymond Powell: I am sorry; it was the First Secretary. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has only recently taken up the post—no wonder I forgot. We shall have a long time to remember him afterwards.

The First Secretary gave what I am given to understand was a brilliant speech and handed his resignation to the Presiding Officer. I am sure that Madam Speaker or her Deputy Speakers would not allow a vote to take place on a person who had already handed in their resignation. It was disgusting and humiliating for the person involved and those who participated. The vote should never have been called. The fact that it was called was clear evidence of the political persuasion of the Presiding Officer. Anyone who watches a re-run of the proceedings will know that what I am saying is true. Such procedures would not be tolerated in the House, but we would never have allowed the situation to arise. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State should negotiate with Madam Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly so that they can at least ensure that it never happens again. They should also look at the procedure for appointing and dismissing a Presiding Officer.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) took about 15 minutes of my time. If we have a debate on Welsh affairs in future, we may as well have it in Westminster Hall because sufficient time is not available in this Chamber. Perhaps arrangements could be made for a full day's debate on Welsh affairs before the end of this millennium.

I ask my right hon. Friend to consider the suggestion—not necessarily made by the *Western Mail*, because it always gets things wrong—for a public holiday on St. David's day. I do not want the Welsh nationalists to be able to say, "That was our campaign—we initiated it" because I made that suggestion on the Floor of the House in 1983 and I do not know whether some of them were here at that time.

Listening to my right hon. Friend's speech, I reflected on the two years and nine months that the Government have been in office and realised that he could have said a lot more. He might have done if he had taken twice the time used by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley. He could have recited chapter and verse in respect of all that the Government have delivered since 1 May 1997, especially for Wales. I am not looking for a position on the Front Bench but just stating facts.

Perhaps my right hon. Friend will prepare a detailed statement for right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House. Such a statement was published by the Department of Social Security, dated December 1999. It contains key messages on welfare reform running to 15 paragraphs; fairness through reform of the Child Support Agency, 15 paragraphs; fairness through reform of pensions, 20 paragraphs; and fairness through reform of rights and responsibilities. We could publish another three or four pamphlets on the new deal. I have great praise for the efforts made by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) to introduce the new deal system for us.

Another major reform was devolution for Scotland and Wales. In the 1970s, Labour party members and MPs wanted devolution and spent hours, days, weeks, months and years bringing that proposal before our annual conference at Llandudno in 1987. I was proud to be the chairman of the Labour party in Wales at that time and to witness devolution being adopted as party policy. It took many more years before Labour was elected and had the opportunity to introduce devolution.

Many constituents, party members and some Labour Members are critical of devolved power and the Welsh Assembly in general. Of course there is a lot wrong with it. There would not have been much wrong but for the system of proportional representation that was introduced, which created 20 unelected Members and 40 elected Members.

Mr. Livsey: Surely it is incorrect to claim that Members were unelected, given that the election was held as a consequence of primary legislation passed in this House. Those 20 individuals were legally elected under the PR system devised for the Welsh Assembly.

Sir Raymond Powell: One should examine in detail who was elected, how they were elected and to whom they are individually answerable. What rights do they have to hold surgeries? I found one in the surgery that I use at my town hall some months ago, sitting where I usually sit in an office that I normally use. He was a Welsh Assembly Member but not even from the Ogmore constituency. I do not know whether he was taking complaints on my behalf or on behalf of my daughter, who is a Member of the Assembly.

When the votes were counted, there were 27 elected Labour Members out of 40. Without the candidates on the list, the position today would be very different. We are having a meeting in Blaenau Gwent at the weekend on the subject of PR. Eight Tories got elected. Only one of them was elected by the people of Wales. Nine Welsh nationalists were elected but eight went on the list. The leader of the Welsh national party boasted in the Chamber about his membership but he has nine elected Members and nine appointees.

What have the Liberal Democrats to boast about? Have they got as many Members as the Welsh nationalists? No way—but still they had three unelected Members appointed to the Assembly. We were saved only by having the First Secretary elected under the system, and I was very glad about that.

My only consolation from all the voting was that my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) was elected. I want to say a few words about how much work my right hon. Friend put in to the Welsh Assembly. The Welsh nationalists may not appreciate that—half their Members were not elected anyway—but what my right hon. Friend accomplished was appreciated by many people in the Assembly. It is all right for anyone coming after him to take up the cudgels, but it is a different matter to start it from raw and create the situation that we have today.

I warn the Welsh nationalists, who keep warning the Labour party, against trying again the trick that they tried only a couple of weeks ago—the farcical idea of tabling a motion on a problem that they knew the First Secretary could not solve. They knew that the Treasury had no licence to give money to Wales and that the First Secretary could not obtain match funding for objective 1. We have learned a lot about objective 1; we can study it again. Next time, the Liberal Democrats might not get cold feet—they might come into the Chamber and turn the nationalists down. I warn my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that we must have a solution to ensure that the people whom we elect in Wales are protected from someone who uses his office as Presiding Officer in the interests of his nationalist party.

Not only do I send my congratulations and condolences to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth, but I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on taking on this position. I am confident from the work that he has already accomplished for us in the Government, particularly in Northern Ireland, that he will fulfil his duties, as we expect of him, in a most dignified way. I wish him the best of luck and great support for the future.

The Opposition talked earlier today about the difficulties and problems of the Labour party. We are not hiding behind desks—we know that we have had problems. We had problems regarding our election for the leadership, and we have had problems since then that were no fault of ours. One of our Members happened to walk over Clapham common one Sunday night, causing uproar and disgust to a number of his colleagues in the House. That lost us votes, seats, support, Assembly Members and control of councils. It was undoubtedly one of the worst accidents that could have happened not only to the person concerned but to the party. The problems that we had were similar in size and upset to the problems of sleaze that the Tories had before the last election.

We have got over that problem, and I am confident that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) will take up the reins as the First Secretary of the Assembly. He will have my support and that of all his colleagues in the House. I hope that we will also see the friendliness, objectivity and comradeship that people talk about wanting for the Assembly, but which the Welsh nationalists, in particular, have not shown so far.

4.53 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I am sure that my contribution will sound moderate and, dare I say, contemporary compared to that of the hon. Member for Ogmore (Sir R. Powell). During the last Welsh Grand Committee debate, I was accused of whingeing and scaremongering. Some—not all—Labour Members said that there was no problem in rural Wales. One of them is in the Chamber now. Unfortunately, we have seen a deepening crisis in rural Wales, and I am afraid that I am not scaremongering.

I said in response to the Secretary of State's reference to the commissioner that I wholeheartedly accepted the Waterhouse report. It is a wonderful piece of work, and I respect him for doing it. I am glad that it will be implemented as soon as possible. The Government are doing many things that I can fully accept. I am not one of those professional whingers who finds against everybody on every count. That does nothing for anyone's credibility.

Our Assembly colleagues tried to sort out the agricultural crisis by introducing a calf-processing scheme and attempting to assist farmers but, every time that they have tried to help, they have been hampered by people in this place. The problems of tir gofal, organic aid, beef on the bone and others have all been made worse by the reluctance of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to support the Assembly's proposals.

Mr. Flynn: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that 80 per cent. of farm subsidy goes to the 20 per cent. of farmers who are the richest, very few of whom are in Wales? Does he further agree that the NFU in Wales should campaign for modulation to ensure that the poorest farmers—those in real need—receive the subsidies being overpaid to the richest farmers, who are mainly in England?

Mr. Llwyd: I agree entirely and have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman is right. I hope that the NFU will conduct that campaign. However, the hon. Gentleman's party campaigned before the election for modulation, but it has changed its mind. That is one of life's funny quirks, but I hope that the NFU will pick up the ball and run with it after reading today's debate.

Mr. Öpik: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that modulation has been discussed by the Select Committee on Agriculture, and there is strong support for it among some members of the Committee, as well as further afield?

Mr. Llwyd: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support; there is clearly—in the words that the hon. Member for Ogmore could not find—a consensual approach. There is a feeling that MAFF has been less than

[Mr. Llwyd]

helpful to the Assembly. If the Assembly decides—excuse the pun—to plough a particular furrow, I hope that MAFF will allow it to do so rather behaving as it has in the past.

There is a general rural crisis. The single programming document submitted on the Assembly's behalf does not include enough about the problems of rural Wales, although its amended form says more. The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) rightly said that 80 per cent. of support goes to the richest farmers. In my area, most farmers are hill farmers whose incomes have dropped by 62 per cent. over the past two years—and they were hardly raking it in before that. Heaven knows how they exist at all.

The crisis is hitting not just one industry, but the whole rural economy. Shops and businesses are going down too. Every sector of agriculture has fallen. The width of the crisis distinguishes it from previous crises such as that of the 1930s. The situation in rural Wales is absolutely disastrous, but the historical relationship between sterling and farm incomes suggests that 2000 will see yet further falls as sterling continues to appreciate.

To be fair, I must say that the recession in agriculture is not affecting other industries, many of which appear to be doing well. However, incomes in the dairy sector fell by 21 per cent. between 1998-99 and this year. In less favoured areas, cattle and sheep incomes have fallen by 28 per cent. There are few farmers now in the pigmeat industry, in which the crisis has come to a head. We all know of the deepening crisis in the dairy industry.

This is the fifth year of recession for the agricultural industry. How long can it go on? The UK economy grew in 1998 by 2.2 per cent. In 1999, it grew by 3 per cent., and it will grow by probably a little more than 3 per cent. this year. However, there are no signs whatever of a recovery in the agriculture industry.

I am not whingeing without making suggestions as to what can be done, although the suggestions are not mine, but those of the NFU. Several matters can be tackled. Sterling remains over-valued; that makes exports less competitive and renders domestic markets vulnerable to cheap imports. As sterling has appreciated, prices have collapsed. It is obvious what the answer is on that matter.

The BSE crisis left the industry with greatly increased costs throughout the supply chain and with little or no export market for British beef. The collapse in world commodity markets brought on by the Asian and Russian financial crises had impacts on wool prices and so on.

European legislation allows for about £450 million compensation for UK agriculture during 2000—£47 million of that is immediately available to Wales. So far, the Government have promised to pay only 20 per cent. of that to the UK—less than 12 per cent. has been committed to Wales. The agrimonetary compensation package is vital. When the Secretary of State speaks with his colleagues, I urge him to request clarification of that matter.

We understand that there will be a contribution through the Fontainebleau agreement, but the industry is in crisis. Surely if his colleague, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, can stump up tens of millions of pounds for Longbridge—good luck to the people of Longbridge—we can have some support for Welsh farmers.

NFU Cymru—Wales—points out that net farm incomes in Wales average only £4,500. One of the Government's catch phrases is social exclusion—rightly. The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs—members of which are in the Chamber—is examining that subject. Considerable work has already been done and evidence has been taken. I hope that useful reports will be prepared in due course, and that the Government will respond accordingly.

However, the Government are not doing anything for social exclusion in rural Wales. I shall not do my credibility any good by agreeing with the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), but his comments on transport and fuel prices in rural areas were right—cars are a necessity, not a luxury.

Will the Minister lend his considerable support to a campaign to persuade Barclays to reconsider the mass closure of its banks in Wales? Two such closures are proposed in my constituency. One is in Blaenau Ffestiniog—an area that was hard hit economically. Now it is recovering and much work is being done, but Barclays has announced that the branch will be closed.

The other proposed closure is in Harlech. I have written to the chief executive and the chairman of the bank to ask for a meeting. I hope that some good will come of that. However, if the Government are serious about tackling social exclusion, I urge the Secretary of State to play his part in that matter—I know that he is a serious gentleman. Other hon. Members in the Chamber face similar threats to rural and urban branches and the matter needs to be addressed. Government intervention would bring about a change. I urge him to consider the matter.

I shall deal briefly with the subject of post offices, because they have been discussed on several occasions. However, the subject is important in rural Wales. The post office is a crucial element in the provision of support to people on low incomes in rural areas. Together with the church, the chapel and possibly the pub, it gives a village a heart. The post office and the small shop are vital.

I live in a village near Bala, where there is one shop. The proprietor told me, "If I lose the post, I'm closing. That's it." Fortunately, I have a car. Many people—some of them retired and on benefits—will not be able travel to the next town just to do some basic shopping without paying £5 or £6 for a return trip. That is how important post offices are to me. I am acutely aware of the problems—as, I am sure, are many Members. We need to consider the fact that the Government seem hell bent on introducing automated credit transfer. It will create havoc in rural areas—I cannot put it any higher than that. It has realistically been estimated that up to 60 per cent. of existing post offices will be under threat if the ACT system is introduced.

For I all know, the Minister for Competitiveness may be sincere in what he says; he has worked in the postal industry. However, I am worried about the way in which the Department of Social Security will approach the matter. Only a few years ago, it tried to get the elderly to receive their money directly in a bank account. In fact, it made it difficult for them to do otherwise. Such an approach would harm post offices in rural Wales. We know that 63 per cent. of the existing post offices in Wales receive 40 per cent. of their turnover from carrying out such transactions. The issue is extremely important.

I am not scaremongering. I am deeply worried about the issue. I live in a community in which people are desperately concerned, and I am rightly raising that concern at this stage. I hope that the Minister will take the issue on board, because there is no doubt that it will impact on rural Wales far more than on the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Will the hon. Gentleman accept that the Government have said that those members of the public who want to can continue to receive their payments in cash both before and after 2003?

Mr. Llwyd: Yes, I accept what the Minister says on the face of it. However, I do not know what the Department of Social Security is planning to do. Only a short time ago, under the previous Government, DSS mandarins decided that they would close a third of the benefit offices in Wales and they did not even bother to tell the relevant Minister about that. He was alarmed, and I do not know what the hidden agenda is any more than—

Mr. Alan W. Williams: The hon. Gentleman is scaremongering.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman also said that in the Welsh Grand Committee. The only word that he seems able to use is "scaremongering". Perhaps his constituency is different and is immune from the problems that affect the rest of Wales. I hope for his sake that it is; he might even save his seat.

Mr. Williams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way having drawn me into intervening. Will he engage in some joined-up thinking? Earlier he referred to bank closures in Blaenau Ffestiniog and Harlech, and, of course, we regret that when it happens. However, does he not realise that the Post Office will have a great opportunity to develop banking services? The Government are working hard, through the computerisation of all rural post offices, to diversify the services that post offices will be able to provide. In particular, they will be able to offer banking services.

Mr. Llwyd: That argument has a flaw. It is said that automatic cash dispensers will be placed in post offices, and that is fine. However, I tell the hon. Gentleman that they are extremely costly to install and, in many areas, banks were not able to afford them. Even if they are installed, the best reckoning is that it will cost £2.50 a transaction. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but he is no expert on the subject. The accepted truth is that it will cost £2.50 a transaction.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Is my hon. Friend aware that many sub-postmasters in my constituency complain that they do not have the turnover to get a national lottery terminal in their sub-post offices, let alone one that would allow a bank to put in an automated teller machine?

Mr. Llwyd: My hon. Friend is right, because we are talking about rural areas. What exactly will a village shop diversify into? For heaven's sake, what can it diversify into? There is nothing much that it can do. It might be able to add a few lines to what it sells, but it is pie in the sky to suggest that every post office will be able to trade itself out of a deeply worrying position.

Mr. Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us where he gets the figure of £2.50 for each transaction from?

Mr. Llwyd: The figure of £2.50 a transaction has been extensively referred to in the press recently. If it proves to be wrong, I shall gladly apologise.

Mr. Livsey: I support what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Under legislation, the regulator has no power to impose a 30p rate, and the banks have said that they are going ahead with a £2.50 charge.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: Not true.

Mr. Llwyd: I think that I have made the point sufficiently. There is real concern about this issue. I shall not dwell on it now, because it will be for another day. I have received numerous petitions on the subject, and I have sent them on to the Government. I hope that we shall be able to get them to reconsider this very damaging proposal. It might work in some urban areas, but it is certainly no good for any rural area. It will be extremely damaging for rural Wales.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): What would be the hon. Gentleman's party's answer for a small village in my constituency, where the postmaster is giving up? The Post Office has written to say that it has advertised extensively to try to find somebody in the village to take over the business. That has nothing to do with the changes in 2003. If an answer is not found by the end of this month, that post office will close. There is another example in my constituency.

Mr. Llwyd: There are several answers. The first is that such businesses are now blighted, because the change is hanging over their heads. I have examples of post offices that have closed. Corners of village halls are being adapted for a few hours a week. It is possible to do that. There is no point in the hon. Lady's shaking her head. She asked for a response and I have given her a reasonable response. We all have the same problems.

Let us see what happens in the coming months. Some people from the hon. Lady's own party are campaigning on the matter. Her neighbour, the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas), is campaigning on it now, a bit late in the day. He is getting on the bandwagon. *[Interruption.]* Not a Hague wagon, but a bandwagon.

I shall leave the subject there. I have flogged it enough, and I do not want to bore the House. However, it is part of the question of social exclusion. In rural areas, public transport is, alas, very poor, and this will mean people having to travel distances for basic provisions. That is the problem facing some of our rural communities.

I ask the Secretary of State whether it is possible to shift the Government's emphasis to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises to take on labour. The truth is that 90 per cent. of the businesses of Wales are small and medium-sized, and many are in rural areas. That is something that surely could be done. There is the question of objective 1 money being used for it, in conjunction

[Mr. Llwyd]

with Government policy. I hope that we could look at this in order to assist the growth and revitalisation of rural areas.

Mr. Wigley: My hon. Friend has emphasised the crisis hitting the rural areas, where the post offices are under threat. If they are under threat now, they will be that much more under threat if the changes are made. That does not apply only to rural areas. Sub-post offices in suburbs and some of the mining villages in the valleys will equally be under threat. People in those communities will also be deprived of the services on which they depend.

Mr. Llwyd: Certainly.

I have made my point about the rural areas. There is a genuine crisis. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) was right to speak as he did about our problems.

On the positive side, I welcome the new deal, despite the cost of implementing it. It is a step in the right direction, and I am pleased that it is happening. It is having some effect. As the Secretary of State said, it is having an effect in rural Wales as well. It is disproportionately less, because of the sparsity of population. Nevertheless, it is a step forward.

In conclusion, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to look at the problems of rural Wales and do what he can, in conjunction with the First Secretary. We owe it to our constituents to ensure that we have a revitalised rural economy. If we do not, we shall fail our young people, who have to leave to look for jobs, and we shall imperil our culture, language and everything that we all hold dear. Large swathes of inhabited Wales will disappear from the map.

The right hon. Gentleman is a serious politician, and I hope that he will take this message on board.

5.14 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Given that, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, this is the first Welsh day debate since the Assembly has been up and running, I am tempted to engage in a brief discussion of the relationship between Westminster and Cardiff bay, but, because of the few minutes available to me, I shall not do that. Instead, I shall speak of what is understandably the hottest subject in Wales: objective 1 status. When my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer secured objective 1 status, they also secured about £1.2 billion from the European Commission.

Mr. Caton: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, and I have heard the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and, indeed, the Secretary of State make the same claim. Moreover, I have heard members of Plaid Cymru claim that their party secured objective 1 status. But should we not give credit where it is due? The Tories secured objective 1 status for us by running down the economy during their 18-year tenure.

Mr. Davies: I shall resist the temptation offered by my hon. Friend, and concentrate on the good work done by my right hon. Friends in Brussels. I do not know the extent to which they realised that, although that £1.2 billion is very welcome, something approaching another £1.2 billion from the Treasury was needed to match it. If the Chancellor did not know that at the time, it must have come as a bit of a shock to him on his return. Perhaps the moral is that it is dangerous to be at the heart of Europe, because we do not know what we will get from Europe at the end of the day.

It may not be necessary to draw on all those guaranteed funds if and when they arrive, because funding for projects may come from other sources. Some may come from local government; some may come from other public bodies; some may come from voluntary organisations. Hopefully, much of it will come from the private sector. Indeed, if projects are not financed by the private sector, they are probably not very good in any event, and are certainly not the wealth-producing projects that we want. However, there must be a lender, or provider, of last resort. The Treasury must be the provider of last resort if the £1.2 billion is not matched elsewhere, and the Exchequer must give a guarantee to that effect.

We in Wales may think that this is our peculiar problem, but I understand that it is also a problem for areas in England that have secured objective 1 status. The problems in Yorkshire are probably as great as those in the valleys of south Wales—and I believe that Yorkshire has obtained close to £1.2 billion. We all know of the problems in Liverpool, and those in Cornwall. This is not just a problem for Wales; it is a problem for the British Exchequer, for the British taxpayer and, ultimately, for the House, because the Exchequer is accountable to the House.

Mr. Wigley: I accept that it is vital for Cornwall, South Yorkshire and Merseyside to gain the full advantage of their potential from the funds, but is there not a difference between those areas and Wales? Public expenditure in Wales is defined according to the Barnett block, which was drawn up for the coming financial year—2000-01—before we knew that we would receive money from the European Union. As a result, any money that we must advance as match funding from the Barnett block will inevitably be granted at the expense of health, education or other services that it would otherwise have financed.

Mr. Davies: I understand the point, and I will deal with it, but what I am saying has nothing to do with the Barnett block. I was making the simple point that the problem is not peculiarly Welsh, but relates to Yorkshire and Liverpool as well. The funds that go to those areas must also be matched. We can discuss where the matching funds come from, and I shall do so in relation to Wales, but this is a British problem. British Exchequer money will have to be found as a last resort, and as the British Exchequer is responsible to the House, the House must be involved.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) is right in respect of Wales. In theory, the money could be provided as a first charge on the Welsh block grant. As he rightly said, if the money was drawn upon under objective 1 match funding, it would to some extent be denied to health, education and local government. I do not see how it is possible to operate the Welsh block budget against the background of a first charge of £1.2 billion. Quite apart from the consequences, I do not see how,

technically, we could spend money on hospitals knowing all along that there was a charge on that money for the payment of objective 1 match funding.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that although in theory that is possible, it is not realistic to expect the match funding to come out of the budget for education, health or local government. We all know of the pressures in our constituencies on the health budget and of the debts of health authorities and hospital trusts. There is pressure on local government, which in my constituency is having to close old people's homes.

The match funding can come only from Her Majesty's Treasury, as an ultimate guarantee which may not have to be drawn upon. I would understand if Treasury Ministers and civil servants were concerned about giving a blanket guarantee over six years for projects that had not been dreamt up. No one knows what those projects will be, and they may not produce wealth for Wales. How do we get out of that dilemma? It would be reasonable and sensible for that Treasury guarantee to be given with the condition that when projects concerned with match funding were conceived, they had to be approved by the Treasury and the Welsh Office. That would not be an open-ended commitment.

There is no such open-ended commitment now with the £1.2 billion from Brussels. The European Commission has to give its imprimatur to schemes. Brussels does not, therefore, simply write a cheque for £1.2 billion. If we are, through the House, calling on the Exchequer and the British taxpayer also to provide up to £1.2 billion—it is realistic to ask for that amount—it is right and proper in constitutional terms that the Treasury and the Welsh Office should approve each particular project, as the Commission does and as the Assembly has for the Cardiff bay project.

That would be fair because the match funding is not devolution money. By definition, it is additional to that. The devolution settlement is the block grant, and it comes to about £8 billion a year. That is to be spent by the Welsh Assembly. The match funding will come from the Treasury, which is accountable to the House, and the Welsh Office must also be involved.

There is another reason why there should be approval from central Government Departments such as the Wales Office and Treasury. In Wales, sadly, the amount of money raised in taxation does not come anywhere near the total amount of public expenditure that comes into Wales. About £7.5 billion to £8 billion of public expenditure goes through the National Assembly. Almost an equivalent amount comes to Wales outside the devolution settlement. Total Government public expenditure in Wales is £15 billion to £16 billion. However, the amount raised in Wales in taxation is about £10 billion, so there is about £5 billion leeway. The extra £1.2 billion, if it must all come from the Treasury, does not come from Wales. It does not come from Scotland. It comes from the more prosperous areas of England, whose taxpayers are asked to make that contribution.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon made a speech some years ago—I hate to remind him of it, as he knows what I am about to say—in which he castigated the gin-swilling colonels in Surrey and Sussex. What he did not appreciate was the fact that the more gin they drink, the more money there is to pay the salaries of those who sit in Cardiff bay. That is the reality. We may like it or dislike it; we may condemn the situation and blame people for it; but if there is, as I believe there should be, a guarantee of £1.2 billion, and if the money does not come from other sources, that money will have to come from the taxpayers—I will not call them gin-swilling colonels—in those areas of England that are far more prosperous than Wales, the north of England or parts of Scotland.

Mr. Wigley: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I will not go after the gin for the moment, although the argument advanced by the First Secretary in Cardiff is persuasive. He suggested that the Treasury has an interest in getting the economy in Wales buoyed up, because it will then have more take from taxation in Wales.

Before the right hon. Gentleman concludes his speech, will he address himself not just to the £1.2 billion of match funding, but to the £1.2 billion coming from Europe? That comes through to the Treasury, and in the coming financial year we will not get a single penny extra out of that money. It comes through to the Treasury, it is then passed to Wales, and it is netted off from our Barnett block. Those are the mechanics. That is why we are constrained in the difficult way that we are. The right hon. Gentleman needs to address himself to the £2.4 billion, not just to the £1.2 billion.

Mr. Davies: I am very fond of the right hon. Gentleman, but he is not at his best today. Sometimes he does all right, but today he has not been listening, or perhaps he does not want to hear. I stated clearly that £1.2 billion comes from Europe. That cheque will eventually end up in the Welsh Assembly. *[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Gentleman denies that £1.2 billion will come under objective 1, I do not know where we are.

Let us assume that I am correct. I know that it upsets the nationalists, but the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer manage to get funds for Wales, and also for South Yorkshire, Liverpool and Cornwall. We know that that is because the economies of those areas are in a bad way, and we are not happy about that. We know that that £1.2 billion will come. I conceded the point made by the right hon. Gentleman, on which we all agree, that under the crazy European system—I do not know who devised it—the £1.2 billion must be match-funded by almost a further £1.2 billion.

Mr. Wigley: I have the Select Committee report, and there are five members of that Committee in the Chamber. The report recognises that we need additional public expenditure survey cover in order to be able to use that money. Unless we get that additional cover, we are constrained to spending within the Barnett block. Unless the money comes in, in the form of additional PES cover, we will lose out on the European component, not to mention the match funding. The Select Committee recognised that, as I hope the right hon. Gentleman will.

Mr. Davies: The right hon. Gentleman is losing the plot. Let us start again. He should put his book down and think. The European Union will write a cheque for £1.2 billion for Wales. We need another £1.2 billion from the British Exchequer. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer should guarantee from the Dispatch Box the £1.2 billion for Wales to match the

[Mr. Davies]

£1.2 billion from the European Union. However, the Welsh Office and the Treasury should vet the schemes. The right hon. Member for Caernarfon is nodding. I gather, therefore, that he accepts my generous condition of scrutiny by the Welsh Office and the Treasury.

Mr. Wigley: That can be argued in terms of financial control; I accept that each project has to be justified. However, I implore the right hon. Gentleman to accept that we need not only match funding cover, but PES cover.

Mr. Davies: How much more money does the right hon. Gentleman want? Wales receives £15 billion. We raise £10 billion through taxation, which leaves £5 billion. Wales is to receive £1.2 billion from the European Union, and I have said that the Chancellor should give us £1.2 billion—yet the right hon. Gentleman wants more money. After the debate, perhaps he can explain how much more money he wants on top of the £15 billion, the European £1.2 billion and the other £1.2 billion. I make the simple point that there should be match funding. However, that money cannot come from Wales.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on his victory. I watched the television when he made his victory speech. He said that he wanted to work himself out of a job and that although he was going to Westminster, he did not want to be there. I can understand that. Even the post-modern Welsh nationalist party believes in some form of separation and Welsh membership of the European Union. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) nods. I am not sure, but I believe that he also wants to work himself out of a job eventually. To paraphrase a famous saying, "Make me chaste my lord, but not yet."

Mr. Llwyd: Yes, I am trying to work myself out of a job. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I could fall back on another.

Mr. Davies: Perhaps. I am trying to make a serious point. If the Welsh nationalist party wants to leave this place, so that there are no seats here for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, Ceredigion or Caernarfon, where will the £1.2 billion for Wales come from? It will not come from the crazy policy of variation of taxes that the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnor (Mr. Livsey) proposed. If Wales is one of the poorest areas in Britain, how will we get more money by taxing Wales? That policy is foolhardy. Not even the Welsh nationalist party in its current state would argue that.

Mr. Paterson: Does the right hon. Gentleman know that for every pound we receive from the European Union, the British taxpayer contributes £2.12, according to the Government pink book? Would not it be preferable if all the schemes were repatriated and determined by national Governments so that twice the money could go towards the projects and decisions could be made swiftly?

Mr. Davies: If I pursued that, I would be called a Euro-sceptic or a little Englander. I shall not go down that road. The Treasury should provide match funding and I am glad that even the Welsh nationalists agree that a condition should be attached to that, and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the House should play a part in vetting projects that use Treasury money.

Mr. Öpik: If the right hon. Gentleman was given the choice between a penny off income tax or £2 billion towards health, what would he vote for?

Mr. Davies: I shall not be drawn down that path.

Mr. Öpik: Tell us.

Mr. Davies: I am trying to give a short answer.

I agree that generally one should not cut taxes any further—we need the public expenditure. One can argue for or against these propositions, but as I understand it, when the married couple's tax allowance is taken away, as it will be from 5 April, and as mortgage interest relief is taken away, many people will pay more tax unless there is some reduction in what used to be called the standard or basic rate of income tax. We shall hear about that in the Budget, but I suspect that there will be a cut in the basic rate to compensate for one or the other, although I do not know whether that will work out perfectly.

I return to the 26 March Budget. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announces that the Treasury will be the provider of last resort or guarantor for the £1.2 billion that may be required. It is perfectly possible to do so and I do not think that we need more, although the nationalists apparently do. I know that my right hon. Friend is a very tidy Scotsman and he wants to make sure that everything works perfectly. He wants to act—if he is to do so—in the comprehensive spending review, as it is now called. However, there was a time when public expenditure and the Budget were one and the same.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend will know the public expenditure totals when he stands up to announce them. If he does not, I do not know how he will be able to introduce his Budget. I hope that he makes the announcement on 26 March, he puts us all out of our misery and stops all the argument in Wales so that we can get on with rebuilding the Welsh economy.

5.36 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): As a new, inclusive politician from Wales, I begin by congratulating the Minister on the centenary of the Labour party. I do so as a son of Aberdare—I see the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) in her place—who is proud to have been brought up there. The first Labour Member of Parliament was Keir Hardie, who represented Merthyr Tydfil. I am proud to call myself a Welsh socialist.

Mr. Hanson: Come over to us.

Mr. Thomas: A Welsh socialist, I said. I hope that the Minister will join Plaid Cymru in celebrating our 75th anniversary later this year.

As a new Member, I have been fortunate: shortly after making my maiden speech I have been given this opportunity to round out some of my general descriptions of the constituency by discussing in more detail its economy and rural economy and the effect of Government policy in the rural economy. As the representative of a constituency that is part of the objective 1 area, I make a

small plea for essential changes to be made to the Government's approach to the economy in general. That status is a sign that our gross domestic product has fallen below 75 per cent. of the European average.

I acknowledge the Government's hard work in gaining objective 1 status for the area that I represent, but as many Members have said, we need it because the current state of our economy is nothing to be proud of. It is a sad testament to many years of under-investment in rural and urban Wales, although I acknowledge that the present Government are not responsible for a lot of that. Nevertheless, let us be clear that their hard work on objective 1 will come to nothing, as the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) made clear, if the questions on match funding and additionality are not answered urgently. They are addressed in the Select Committee report and have been discussed across the Chamber today.

I want to concentrate on the wider economic trends that the Government are following. I hope that the Minister will think seriously about how the Welsh economy is performing and not paper over the problems with general comments about the United Kingdom economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) made clear, parts of the UK economy are doing extremely well, but we have a problem in the rural economy and a general problem in the Welsh economy.

Let us remind ourselves that the area ranks as one of the most underdeveloped, underpaid and underskilled in Europe. Nothing is more crucial to my constituents and, I know, to many constituents of Labour Members, than for the Government to address the problems of regeneration—urban and rural—and to invest in a rural infrastructure that can deliver sustainable development. That is the true test: not whether we have objective 1 status, but what we do with the opportunity.

Let us look at the economic context. Unemployment is falling in my constituency and in many Members' constituencies, but the bald statistics mask a real crisis. The unemployment statistics are skewed by the amount of young people who are leaving my area and rural areas in general, and by the inward migration of older, retired people. The economy is low wage, with many tourism and agricultural jobs, which are seasonal and depend highly on general economic circumstances. People might have a job this week, but not the next. It is like that in many rural areas that I represent.

In particular, the strong pound is hitting both tourism and agriculture. The milk industry in Ceredigion—we need to put it on the record—is on its knees under the strength of the pound. The difference between sterling's current rate and that which would apply under convergence is worth 2p on a litre of milk. On an average Welsh quota for an average Welsh dairy farmer, that is about £15,000 a year. It is the difference between profit and loss, happiness and misery.

An additional factor in the make-up of Ceredigion is the high rate of self-employment. That again reflects the tourism and agriculture sectors, where small businesses dominate. It bodes well for a local "menter", or entrepreneurial approach to objective 1, but it does not bode well for attracting private sector match funding to rural areas as they do not have the large firms. There are no headquarters or large corporations there. On the split and share of objective 1 funding, it should not cluster around the Sony corporations and M4 corridor, where it would be easy to get match funding. It has to be spread throughout the area, particularly rural Wales.

All that may suggest that Wales is the poor man of the UK and goes cap in hand to the Treasury for resources. I do not accept that. There are many hidden subsidies within the tax system. It is not a simple case of saying that the tax take from Wales is X, the amount of Government spending in total on Wales is Y, so Wales is poor and gets money from other areas of the UK. We have to have a much more sophisticated analysis, including in particular things such as the defence industry in south-east England and the hidden subsidies for investment and infrastructure building in the UK.

Mr. Denzil Davies: We are back on the defence industry. Dr. Phil Williams has been writing article after article about the lack of a defence industry in Wales. Does the hon. Gentleman not realise that that has nothing to do with it? The amount of public expenditure that comes in is £15 billion. The amount of taxation raised is £10 billion. On the Maastricht criteria, there is a gap of 15 per cent. of GDP—higher than in any other country in Europe, except Slovakia.

Mr. Thomas: I make three comments on that. First, where are the multinational headquarters of those companies? Where do they pay tax?

Mr. Denzil Davies: In Wales.

Mr. Thomas: I do not think so. Secondly, investment in infrastructure follows that sort of industry, which we do not have in Wales and rural Wales. Thirdly—I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is another Welsh socialist—there is nothing wrong with redistribution of income anyway, if that is the point that he wants.

We will have another debate at another time, but I argue that Wales is getting quite a raw deal from the Government. That is worsening under the Barnett formula. Consequential as it is, it makes things worse for Wales year after year. It started 20 years ago. We need a new, renegotiated formula. *[Interruption.]* There are nods and disagreements, but many Welsh electors are seeing it for themselves.

The evidence is there. Plaid Cymru won over 30 per cent. of the vote in the Assembly and European elections. We have heard a cogent argument from the hon. Member for Ogmore (Sir R. Powell) against any form of proportional representation and for entrenching the Labour party, even when it fails to win a majority in Wales.

Mr. Llew Smith: How does the Barnett formula make things worse for people in Wales? What statistics does the hon. Gentleman have to prove that point?

Mr. Thomas: I shall send the hon. Gentleman a copy of our detailed proposals.

Mr. Smith: I should like an answer now.

Mr. Thomas: I shall give the hon. Gentleman an answer. The Barnett formula is consequential on spending in English Departments and does not take into account the additionality of European money under objective 5b and

[Mr. Thomas]

objective 2. We have not received the money that we should have had, as Barnett has blocked it. That is why the Barnett formula has failed Wales.

The right hon. Member for Llanelli referred to Merseyside having been allocated £1.2 million under objective 1. Wales deserves 38 per cent. of the objective 1 package for the United Kingdom, but if we apply Barnett we get only 6 per cent. The right hon. Gentleman should put those arguments to the Chancellor, as we are putting them to the people of Wales and receiving their support.

Mr. Llwyd: My hon. Friend should know that the Secretary of State recognises that and has agreed to take it up with his Cabinet colleagues.

Mr. Thomas: I shall press on and turn to the picture in Wales now. Notwithstanding the comments that I made about the Labour party's honourable history and tradition in Wales, that hegemony has now been broken and we have to work within a different pattern of Welsh politics. It has been shattered, and no party now has a majority in Wales. Hon. Members have criticised the work of the Welsh Assembly, but they must recognise that the new century has ushered in a new type of politics.

The first two years under this Government have proved something of a revelation for many people in Wales. The Welsh electorate did not expect new Labour to follow Conservative spending plans for the first two years. After attacking such spending plans when in opposition, the Government now have a lot of explaining to do to the people of Wales.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Leaving aside the merits or otherwise of following the Conservatives' budget plans for the first two years, does the hon. Gentleman accept that what he has just said is completely wrong, because when Labour fought the last election, we promised to do precisely that in order to overcome the huge debt that we inherited from the Tories? We told the electorate what we planned to do. Whether the hon. Gentleman agrees with it is another matter, but we told the electorate and they elected us.

Mr. Thomas: I said that the electorate did not expect new Labour to do that. It may have been promised, but the election was fought on the basis of change, and change did not come.

It is time to reveal the real reason for those policies and the comprehensive adoption by new Labour of the right-wing orthodoxy that says internal markets bring efficiency savings and deliver services better than the public sector. A lack of faith in the public sector and the idea that the free market can be a tool for combating social exclusion and delivering economic development in deprived areas is Thatcherism by another name.

We need a reality check here. It cannot be denied that what is being delivered in Wales now is a widening gap between the rich and the poor. It is there in the statistics and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) knows it well. There is continuing under-investment in our schools and our health services and a total disregard for the current farming crisis.

New Labour's attitude to public expenditure betrays a shift to the right. For Labour pioneers, spending on public services was seen as an essential tool for achieving social justice. It could pay for comprehensive education, council housing and the national health service. Now, however, new Labour regards public expenditure with great suspicion. We do not share that view. New expenditure has been ruled out and existing expenditure has to yield greater value. Nurses spend less time with patients in the name of efficiency, and teachers spend more time on administration. They do not have the opportunity to provide care. Council tax rises burden the local electorate because of the squeeze on national public expenditure. There is a new orthodoxy—I should like the Minister to deny it—that public expenditure should not rise above 40 per cent. of gross domestic product. The Government have stuck absolutely to that orthodoxy. There is no rhyme or reason for it: it is an article of faith. Public expenditure as a percentage of GDP—*[Interruption.]* Other European countries have a higher ratio of public expenditure to GDP.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I tell the House that continued sedentary comment is extending speeches to the point that many, many hon. Members will be disappointed?

Mr. Thomas: Public expenditure as a percentage of GDP has fallen since new Labour took office, and the new Labour plan is to continue the trend until the next general election.

Let us consider some of the figures from the Conservative Government's last year in office. Although it pains me to say it, in that year, general Government expenditure was 40.4 per cent. of GDP. In the first year of the current Government, the figure fell below 40 per cent., to 39.4 per cent., and it is predicted to remain below 40 per cent. for the next two years. In 14 of the Tories' 18 years in office, public expenditure was about 40 per cent. of GDP. New Labour has promised and delivered a consistently lower level of public spending.

A particularly apposite question is where those figures leave the Prime Minister's promise to raise health spending as a proportion of GDP. Unless the overall threshold of public expenditure is raised above 40 per cent., his promise can be met only by taking away from other items in GDP. I hope that the Secretary of State and the Minister will work hard in government to break that closed circle, which does nothing to help the socially excluded or the poor and particularly disadvantages vulnerable children and pensioners.

In that context, and in the context of the problems that I see in my constituency, we have to remember that about half public expenditure is spent on individuals—on pensions, and on social security payments. Is it therefore any wonder that, as a new Member of Parliament, I am already deluged by complaints about disability living allowance being taken from people because of cash limits, not because of changes in their disability? Is it any wonder that the 75p pension increase is thought to be risible when, because of rural bank closures and cuts in rural services, people have to spend that much just to take a bus to a bank or a post office?

The amount of public expenditure devoted to those services demonstrates the extent to which a Government are prepared to redistribute wealth. Redistribution of

wealth is what it is about. It is perverse for any Government who talk about social equity to set themselves the target of reducing that part of public expenditure as a matter of principle, rather than as a consequence of economic development and the growth of opportunity.

Over the years, the overall 1 per cent. cut in public expenditure has amounted to about £9 billion per year—which is equal to the Welsh block grant. Any voter would be able to tell the Government how to spend that money: on the health service, education and the rural economy. In Wales, the consequence of the cut is that health, education, public transport and the rural economic infrastructure are still starved of the resources that they need. Is that really what people thought they were voting for in 1997?

Interest rate cuts are increasing the effect of the public expenditure cut. The Government, rather than increasing investment in public services, are allowing interest rates to rise. New Labour has bought all the Tory economic arguments. Consequently, the Welsh economy is being run on the guiding principles of low public expenditure, low income tax and low inflation. Interest rates are the only weapon being used to keep the economy on track and to combat economic overheating. The way the economy is being run is disadvantageous to many areas in Wales.

Wales is getting a raw deal from the Government. When the south-east of England sneezes, Wales catches the cold. Wales has a very bad cold at the moment.

5.53 pm

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): I should like to take the opportunity—it is the first that I have had—to congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on his impressive victory in Ceredigion. I was fascinated by his observations. We saw in him a Jekyll and Hyde conflict—the socialist trying to reconcile himself with the nationalist. I tell him that they are not reconcilable, and his speech reflected that fact. When the socialist came out, he showed some conviction, but, when the nationalist came out, we saw that the two do not go together. He is also probably the only socialist on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Öpik: I am.

Mr. Rowlands: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is a socialist.

I hope that during this Parliament the hon. Member for Ceredigion reconciles the Jekyll and Hyde in him. I hope that we shall be able to convince him that the socialist path is the best, not the nationalist one.

The hon. Gentleman gave his first speech in a debate on Welsh affairs. This could be my last. I shall offer some advice to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on his post-devolution role. I understand and appreciate the role that he has had to play in recent months, acting as a go-between, trying to reconcile some of the problems that have broken out in Cardiff. I hope that that will not become the most significant part of his role. It is important to have a first-class, co-operative working relationship between Westminster and the National Assembly for Wales, but I hope that he will not see that as his central role.

One of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's favourite phrases is that we must not forget the big picture. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will look at the big picture in Wales and play his role in Whitehall and Westminster to ensure that the needs and wishes of the people whom we represent are met.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion was right to point to the importance of public expenditure as an instrument of redistribution. It is one of the few left in the hands of the Government. However, I am astonished that his party intends to try to reconcile a policy of spending a greater proportion of GDP on public expenditure with a commitment to join economic and monetary union, accepting all the criteria and the straitjacket and imprisonment on public expenditure that go with that. I shall be interested to see how his party does that. I am baffled by the view that it would be a blow for freedom for the Welsh people to escape from some imperial British control only to become a prisoner of imperial European control. I believe that we should be governed as a part of Britain, but retain our distinctive policies and attitudes.

The first aspect of the big picture is public expenditure. My right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) pointed out that the £8 billion block grant represents only just over half of the total public expenditure in Wales. The other £7 billion that comes into Wales is outside the competence of the Assembly. More than £5 billion of that is accounted for by the social security budget. Marginal changes in overall totals of social security expenditure can have a disproportionate effect on our communities. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State should spend some time ensuring that social security expenditure is shaped to meet the needs of our communities as well as those of the United Kingdom as a whole.

The other major area of public expenditure outside the control of the Assembly is £780 million of law and order and public protection spending. Those huge sums paid into Wales are spent on matters of considerable concern. I am glad that the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has decided to deal with social exclusion. It will take evidence from Social Security Ministers because we recognise that they play an important role.

In last year's public expenditure budget, £116 million was spent on industry, employment and energy. Again, that was outside the budget of the National Assembly for Wales. Is that money achieving its purpose in Wales? Is there a role that my right hon. Friend can play in ensuring that that expenditure is geared to the needs of our nation?

The most important part of the big picture is employment and jobs. If one examines the instruments and expenditure available to Ministers to promote training and jobs in our communities, a large proportion of budgets and programmes are outside the competence of the Assembly. The work of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which my right hon. Friend has passionately supported, on family tax credit, employment zones, and the new deal and its extension to the over-25s—all underpinned by the national minimum wage—is playing a major part in breaking through the fatalism and resignation to a life not on the dole but on benefit that has grown up in our communities over the past 18 to 20 years. That was not a society that we wanted to create but it is one that we have to tackle. The speech of the hon.

[Mr. Rowlands]

Member for Ceredigion was hopelessly over the top. The Government have done an enormous amount to address fatalism and resignation.

While I agree with the emphasis placed on developing entrepreneurial spirit and indigenous employment, in my area the majority of new job opportunities come from inward investment. Anyone who turns their back on inward investment is foolish. Fortunately, there are two projects in the pipeline in my constituency. One involves the St. Mary Meat Company from Cornwall; the other is One2One. Both will create an important number of jobs. Inward investment alongside the Chancellor's welfare-to-work programmes is vital to our needs and our future—United Kingdom policies working in and for Wales in every sense.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will say a cautionary word to the Chancellor about the curious, superficial Treasury view that has emerged in the last few days of the mismatch between 1 million or more job vacancies and unemployment. We must not become bedazzled, as though just tapping those vacancies will solve unemployment. Because there has been so much interest in that claimed level of job vacancies, I checked on job vacancies in Merthyr yesterday and the day before. I hasten to add that I am not looking for a job myself but wanted to check what was available.

Sadly, I found that most of the 115 vacancies available in the past 24 hours were for cooks, cleaners, bar staff, bouncers and security officers. There were also vacancies for a butcher and bailiff, a few mechanics, a hairdresser and sales staff. All those jobs are useful and will supplement incomes in some cases, but many are part-time and some are temporary. Together, they do not add up to the stuff of a major new initiative in the communities I represent.

More interesting was what my analysis of the job vacancies available at the Merthyr jobcentre revealed about the nature of our economy and the valley economy catch-22 situation. The range of jobs available at our jobcentre, apart from those with the major inward investors, do not create or offer the skills and training opportunities that conventional wisdom says is a basis for the modern economy. Those job vacancies will not create the skilled training opportunities that we think are crucial to a 21st century economy. The catch-22 is that as we do not have the job vacancies to create the NVQ 3s and 4s that we are so short of, we do not have the training opportunities. Training means work-based training, so the employment must create the NVQ 3s and 4s that I am told are essential to a 21st century economy.

How are we to address this crucial requirement in communities such as mine? If I accept the conventional wisdom that we have to train and reskill people to higher levels to meet the needs of a 21st century economy and attract new inward investors looking for higher levels of skills and training, how will we do so in this catch-22 situation? That is where objective 1 should come in; it is what objective 1 should be focusing on. As has been said, we spend so much time arguing about match funding that we have not talked much about what we will do with the money. What can we do with it to turn our economy around? If skills and training are vital, let us have a national training programme. I am not talking about a partnership here or a group there, but a programme that goes right across the board—a nationwide Welsh training programme. It should not be buried in competing projects within a partnership in this or that area of Wales; it should be a national programme with a national view.

I have not read in great detail how the Irish transformed their economy with objective 1 money, but what I have read shows that it was not a bottom-up process. It was very much a top-down process—the Irish Government decided that their population's fundamental failing was that it was not well educated, well trained or efficient enough to meet the country's needs.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Will the hon. Gentleman accept from me that the outline of the jobs available in the jobcentre in his area also applies to rural areas of Wales? Will he also accept that Ireland spent more than 38 per cent. of objective 1 money not on infrastructure but on skills training?

Mr. Rowlands: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has confirmed my impression. In that case, how do we ensure that we do the same in Wales?

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rowlands: No, I want to deal with this point, and many other hon. Members want to speak.

We cannot afford to let the objective 1 money be dissipated and chopped up into little pieces to filter into the economy. We have to have a national programme. The Employment Service provides a national instrument for delivering that service. The Employment Service in Wales has been transformed since 1997 by the Government's new deal proposals. It has been transformed in spirit, character and personnel. It is extremely proactive—it may not be in Ceredigion, but it is in my area. It has changed from the old dole and benefit mentality to a proactive, exciting service. We should build on that experience and use objective 1 money for the Employment Service.

I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) is not here, because I can even tell him where we can get the match funding from. It does not involve the comprehensive spending review, help from the Treasury or raising taxes. The money already exists in the windfall tax fund, a curious and separate fund which we occasionally ignore. The fund, which falls outside the comprehensive spending review, contains more than £1 billion, £570 million of which is unallocated. If the Employment Service and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, backed by the National Assembly, produced a first-class national training and skills programme, match funding could be found from the windfall tax fund. We need not raise the money, merely allocate it.

I have watched with fascination as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has raided the fund for interesting uses. I would like to raid it for Wales, and I want the Secretary of State to propose that we do so. The European Union could not possibly deny that that would be matched funding, and neither could it deny our objective because training lies at the heart of most EU programmes.

Why are we arguing when the money is available? We share an objective, and we should go out and achieve it instead of spending our time in debate. I hope that

during his stewardship my right hon. Friend will raise his sights and his horizons to help to ensure that under objective 1 we can over the next five years transform the Welsh economy into a modern, efficient 21st century economy capable of and willing to meet the needs of all our people.

6.11 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Having had the honour over the past year to serve on the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs and on the Welsh Grand Committee, it is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate. I pay tribute to my neighbour, the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), who chairs the Welsh Affairs Committee fairly, although he may find my views on devolution poisonous. I pay tribute, too, to the Secretary of State, who kindly allowed me to visit him with the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) to discuss the anomalous problem of the A483, a Welsh trunk road that passes through my constituency. I should be grateful if the Secretary of State would pay that problem some attention during the coming months, because it has not gone away, and careful liaison is required with his other British colleagues in the Cabinet when he discusses it with them as the representative of Wales.

It is a great shame that we did not hear from the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) on the relationship between the Welsh Assembly and Westminster.

Mr. Öpik: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for interrupting his speech so early. Does he agree that, unless the serious trunk road problem is addressed, Wales will remain without a proper north-south road connection?

Mr. Paterson: The hon. Gentleman—my neighbour—is absolutely right.

I should like to make one point about the speech of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands). I went last year to Ireland with the Welsh Affairs Committee. It is most important that hon. Members—particularly those from Plaid Cymru—should understand that the head of the Irish Development Agency said emphatically that the key to reviving Ireland's economy was not grants. Grants were welcome, he said, and they represented 5 per cent. of Irish gross domestic product.

Mr. Llwyd: Corporation tax made the difference. The hon. Gentleman need not tell me that; I know it already.

Mr. Paterson: Exactly so. Corporation tax was at 10 per cent., and it has been fixed at 12 per cent. until 2026. The idea that Ireland was turned round by grants is a fundamental misunderstanding. The improvement came from highly favourable corporation tax.

As a devo-sceptic—one who did not want devolution—I know that the part of Wales that I know best, the north-east, did not support devolution during the campaign. It is worth remembering that devolution went through on a majority of 168 votes per constituency. Real scepticism remains about it. It is not good enough to say that we have had the result and should forget about it. Whenever I speak to people who come from Wales to Oswestry market or wherever, I hear real doubt about the merits of the exercise.

The ICM poll has confirmed that. Some 40 per cent. said that the Assembly had achieved only a little, and 48 per cent. that it had achieved nothing at all. The Government tempt hubris in both Cardiff and London by discussing the spending of large sums of public money on new buildings. The project is not proven yet. We were told, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said, that the new building would cost £17 million. As recently as 19 January, the then First Secretary—the right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael)—told us that it would cost £22.8 million. We are now told that the cost could creep up to between £26 million and £30 million. It is tempting hubris to spend such an amount, when money is needed for public services.

The Welsh Office has spent £5.2 million since May 1997 on publicity alone. The Government must be careful about spending such large amounts when in health—a public service that is much in the public eye—9,422 more people are on waiting lists than in 1997; the number of patients waiting more than 12 months for treatment has increased by 3,776; and 3,743 people have been waiting more than 18 months. That is where the majority of the Welsh population would like that money to be spent.

Several Members have mentioned post offices. I shall not go into detail, but post offices are critical in rural areas. There are 1,500 post offices in Wales but the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters predicts that, if the ACT reforms go through, the number could drop to 750. That would have a dramatic impact in rural areas.

Another element of Government activity has caused real damage. We hear much talk of competitiveness, but in the teeth of that there is an extraordinary increase in transport costs. We have the most expensive diesel and petrol in western Europe; 85 per cent. of the cost of fuel goes to the Government in tax. We are heading well north of a £3.50 gallon to a £4 gallon. That was never predicted when the Government came to power.

In rural areas of Wales, 98 to 99 per cent. of goods are carried by diesel-powered lorry. Between 70 and 80 per cent. of people in rural areas drive to work. As was pointed out, the car is the last thing that a working family can afford to lose. Those people are faced with substantial increases. The AA reckons that the cost of running an average car is £900 a year. That does not make rural Wales more competitive; it damages businesses.

Mr. Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman remind the House who introduced the fuel escalator?

Mr. Paterson: The Pavlovs would have been delighted if their dogs had reacted so predictably. That is what Labour Members always say. The fuel escalator began at 3 per cent. The previous Conservative Government increased it to 5 per cent., but this Labour Government have increased it to more than 6 per cent. If the hon. Gentleman reads table B9 on page 154 of the "Pre-Budget Report", he will see that the fuel duty take is to increase over the next three years.

The Secretary of State must tell his colleague, the Chancellor, that increases in fuel duties do real damage to the rural economy.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I apologise for intervening so early in my hon. Friend's speech. Is not the argument that was

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

made to him rather like saying that, just because someone invented income tax, that person is to blame when other people increase it by vast amounts?

Mr. Paterson: That is right.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Paterson: Other Members want to speak, so I shall push on.

Recently, the Agriculture and Rural Development Secretary of the Welsh Assembly visited a farm not far from Oswestry, while I was visiting Oswestry market. The farm had 180 cows and 600 sheep, but the farmer was on income support. That is terrible.

The Secretary of State is a fair man, but I did not think that the cursory attention in his speech to the problems of agriculture was good enough. He touched on the matter, but he did not cover the depth of the crisis. An article in this week's *Farmers Guardian* referred to another visit by the Welsh Agriculture Secretary to a farm—a family farm that had been going for 400 years, but may close by the end of the year. It is a good mixed farm—dairy and sheep.

There is a dramatic crisis. Farm incomes have been slashed. The National Farmers Union in Wales reckons that some hill farmers are earning as little as £15 a week. Between 1997–98 and 1998–99, dairy farm incomes fell by
37.5 per cent. Incomes from cattle and sheep fell by 75 per cent. Those figures are dreadful. Unemployment is rising. About 2,000 jobs were lost in Welsh farming between 1998 and 1999.

It is not usual to mention suicides without paying due care to the circumstances. However, in 1997 there were eight recorded suicides of Welsh farmers; there were nine in 1998. The problem is growing worse. A study carried out by PhD students at Swansea university showed that a combination of social and economic factors was driving many Welsh farmers to feel suicidal. The position is desperate, but the problems are resolvable. Farming should not be seen as a problem, because many of its difficulties come from government agencies. I admit that they did not all happen at once, but this Government have placed extra costs on farming.

I was involved in the consideration of the Food Standards Act 1999, so someone from an abattoir in north Wales wrote to me. Before 1999, its total Meat Hygiene Service costs were £596.73 a week, but from April this year they will be £2,602. Another abattoir in mid-Wales wrote to me: its costs have risen from £300 to £17,000 a year in inspection charges, and are £180 a tonne compared to £1 a tonne in a large commercial plant. Small abattoirs are vital if we are to maintain the quality of Welsh meat and use its production as the basis for future prosperity. We shall not be able to market meat without working with such small businesses.

The Government have been extraordinarily slow to react to many of the recommendations in the Pooley report, which they themselves commissioned. The Secretary of State should push his colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to put reforms into action.

The Government could lift other costs that are imposed only in this country. Why are we the only country that insists on taking the spine out of sheep aged over 12 months? Why do we have a crisis in the calves scheme? It is traumatic for Welsh farmers to bring into the world male dairy calves only for them to have to shoot them on the spot and send the meat to hunt kennels. That is going on. The market in France sells calves for £150 each and it would make a large difference to dairy farming in Wales if that market could be opened up.

The dairy industry needs efficient production. Our dairy products cost twice as much as those on the continent. The break-up of Milk Marque has not helped, and I ask Ministers to consider what has happened to Eden Vale and Dairy Crest in the past week. It is not good enough to victimise Milk Marque and to put it in a difficult position where it cannot get production, and not to pay attention to what other producers do.

In summary, let me say there is a large contrast between what the Government spend on their agencies, publicity and services, which are not being delivered, and the devastating crisis in rural Wales.

6.22 pm

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): I would like to follow the comments of the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) on agriculture, but unfortunately time does not permit me to do that. We have had an interesting debate, and it is regrettable that many of my hon. Friends will not be able to contribute.

During the past few years, Wales has seen a period of great political change, if not turmoil. It is understandable that there should now be a call for a period of consolidation around the new constitutional settlement. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has today and on other occasions referred to a need for stability. Other Members have also done that in the debate. Stability would enable the Welsh Assembly to begin to use its powers and its budget for the better provision of essential services, such as health and education, for the people of Wales.

In the Assembly's work, there will be from time to time a call for new powers that will require primary legislation. In the debates on the Government of Wales Act 1998, it was always envisaged that that would be so. Indeed, an important part of Ministers' work is to enable the view of the Assembly and the people of Wales to be incorporated into legislation that comes before the House. How exactly that will work in practice, as well as in theory, we are about to discover over the next few years.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that the unique way that we shall first see that operating is through the appointment of the children's commissioner for Wales? People and voluntary bodies in Wales, as well as the Welsh Assembly, have a unique idea about how the commissioner should work and should be appointed. It is a test case, and the Secretary of State's announcement today shows that the wishes of the Assembly and the people of Wales are being followed.

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend anticipates my comments. That was one of the examples that I had intended to use.

I shall discuss another example first, not because I think it is more important, but because it is very topical. In another place yesterday Lord Roberts called for a Welsh

bank holiday on St. David's day. That is a very popular request, with which many of us, though perhaps not all, would wish to be associated. In order for us to have that bank holiday, the Welsh Assembly would need to implement it, but this House would need to sanction it.

Another example, which my hon. Friend has just given, is the desire to have a children's commissioner appointed in Wales. There is a very strong call for a similar commissioner to be appointed in England. But those commissioners might not have exactly the same sort of roles. In any case, we in this place might not want a commissioner to be appointed in England. If Wales desired the appointment of a children's commissioner, but one was not to be appointed in England, what legislative vehicle would be required to set up that post?

Those are two very recent examples. I am not sure that they are the best examples, but they are the most recent, of a trend that will grow. The Welsh Assembly will consider how it can best deliver services, and from time to time it will call upon this place to enact legislation so that it can do its work.

Mr. Rogers: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Jones: I will not, because my hon. Friend spoke at length and I do not have much time.

How will Parliament deal with those requests? Some issues may be conveniently tagged on to forthcoming Bills; others may not be dealt with so easily. If matters are uncontentious and have cross-party support, there should be little difficulty in bringing the legislation forward. But what if the issues are contentious? How often will calls for new legislation come before the House, and how can they be dealt with? As I see it, there are four options.

First, we fit the legislation in as best we can under the processes that we now use. However, the present procedures in the House mean that a Government are very reluctant to bring in further legislation or make significant amendments to existing legislation—and even where there are consensual issues, with cross-party support, we have seen only this week and in the week before the half-term recess how a few malcontents can keep the House up all night and endanger Government business.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, with the best will in the world and the utmost sympathy, a Government would be reluctant to bring forward legislation which it might regard as marginal and which might endanger the time required to proceed with their own legislation. Would a Government be prepared to risk losing valuable parliamentary time to pass a purely Welsh Bill or a purely Welsh amendment?

A second option is to reform the House so that Bills could be routinely timetabled. I am sure that there are several reasons why that would be desired by some hon. Members, including new hon. Members, for its own sake. It would be a way in which we could deal better with the demands that would be put upon the House by the Welsh Assembly.

A third option is to introduce some sort of fast-track procedure, following an agreed process with the Welsh Assembly, so that Welsh matters can be dealt with more expeditiously and not cause the difficulties that might otherwise arise. There is a fourth option: we could empower the Welsh Assembly to deal with these matters on its own.

Over the past two months, there has been considerable public disquiet about council allowances paid in Cardiff, which far exceed the levels recommended by the Assembly to local authorities. Indeed, they exceed the rate recommended by the Assembly to the Local Government Association in Wales by more than 300 per cent. They are also far higher than any allowances that have been paid to any councils in England. This appears to be a peculiarly Welsh problem; but, although the Welsh Assembly is responsible for overseeing local authorities in Wales, as far as I know it has no ability to band or otherwise set limits on council allowances. This place, which is responsible for English authorities, can always take on itself the power to deal with problems if they arise. Perhaps it is the Assembly's lack of power to match its responsibility that has led to the current unique situation in Wales.

The House of Lords recently debated the Local Government Bill. That Bill, which we could amend, might provide a convenient vehicle for the Assembly to exercise sensible limits on the allowances given to councillors in Wales. I urge my hon. Friends to ensure that a Government amendment is tabled, before the House of Commons debates the Bill, conferring such powers on the Assembly. If the present procedures prove inadequate to deal with practical issues—I have given a number of examples—we shall not see the stability that the Secretary of State rightly wishes to see.

6.33 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): We have had a good debate, although it has been squeezed by a number of statements which have prevented some hon. Members from speaking. Those who have spoken have, I think, led us to the conclusion that neither side of the House has been overwhelmed by satisfaction with Government policies in Wales, or by what has been achieved by the Labour Administration in the Assembly.

I believe, however, that Members in all parts of the House agree about matters concerning the Waterhouse report. We welcome the report, which has been discussed here on other occasions. It is a tragic tale of child abuse, and, as I have said before, I have considerable admiration for those who were involved in compiling it. I had a similar experience, although not as harrowing as the experience of the people who compiled this report, when as a member of the Select Committee on Health I dealt with people who had been victims of abuse as child migrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Conservative Members welcome the statement made by the Secretary of State today about the establishment of a children's commissioner.

Mr. Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the commissioner and his or her "civil service" must exercise such probity that children can trust the process? An awful lot of damage has been done to the very people who need to use this service, and it is the only way in which we can get to the heart of whatever paedophilia is going on in Wales and has not been discovered.

Mr. Walter: Trust is a very important part of the process, and we must have genuinely independent people who children can trust and to whom they can speak in confidence.

[Mr. Walter]

We have had a fascinating debate. We have seen that there is dissatisfaction with Labour as a Government at Westminster and as an Administration in Cardiff. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) responded very well to the Secretary of State's opening speech, and Conservative Members will continue to express our dissatisfaction with Labour's treatment of Wales at Westminster and in Cardiff.

It is no understatement to say that Labour is all mouth and no delivery in Wales. Many promises have been made by the Government in Westminster and the Labour Administration in Cardiff, but they have failed to deliver. The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the First Secretary are failing to deliver for the people of Wales. This year, council tax payers in Wales will experience massive increases in their bills. In many areas, a large percentage of the increase will go on bailing out wasteful Labour and Plaid Cymru-run councils. The Labour Executive in the Assembly are failing to deliver on the priorities of the Welsh people. All they have done is waste taxpayers' money on a completely unnecessary new Assembly building.

Mr. Flynn: Before the hon. Gentleman gets into his political rant, will he answer a serious question? Is he happy that the Labour Government have delivered on proportional representation by ensuring that in the National Assembly elections, the proportion of Conservative candidates elected was roughly equal to the number of votes that the Conservatives had in Wales, or was he happy with the 1997 general election result, when 20 per cent. of the population of Wales voted Conservative, but the party did not have a single one of the 40 Welsh Members of Parliament?

Mr. Walter: I do not want to get drawn into a debate about the merits of proportional representation. All I will say is that if one is looking for a declaration of popular support, the Conservative candidate in Ceredigion did somewhat better than the Labour candidate.

Labour has also failed to ensure that Wales receives its funding from the European Union. The Prime Minister said:

> We do not intend to let the people of Wales down.—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 439.]

Yet now Labour is refusing to give a commitment to secure the extra funding that Wales needs.

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Gentleman ought to be fair. I spent five years in the European Parliament, and the problem of additionality in member states supporting European funding existed some years ago, right through the period of the Tory Government. When local authorities in Wales submitted schemes, they always ran up against the problem that the Government would not support European funding to the extent that they desired.

Mr. Walter: Under previous Governments, the funding was provided. I shall come to the specifics of this case in a moment, but the Secretary of State and the Chancellor have made no commitment to provide that extra £1.2 billion.

Labour is failing to deliver on agriculture in Wales, and is totally insensitive to the needs of the industry. It has already been mentioned that the net income of dairy and livestock farms in Wales is forecast to fall by 25 per cent. in the current financial year to an average of £4,500 per farm.

I shall deal briefly with local government spending. Under Labour, council tax bills in Wales are set for a massive rise. They will increase by more than 18 per cent. in Monmouthshire and by 14 per cent. in Swansea. Many of the increases are due to the fact that the Labour Administration in Cardiff is using the council tax reduction scheme to subsidise profligate councils.

The previous Government introduced the scheme as a temporary measure to deal with the problems of changing from a two-tier to a unitary system of local government. The scheme is now being used to cover the wasteful spending of four Labour and Plaid Cymru councils. Council tax payers in areas such as Monmouthshire will be forced to pay for the overspending of councils in Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley mentioned some of the figures. In Anglesey, council tax bills will rise by 16.5 per cent., in Powys by 13.8 per cent. and in Monmouthshire by 18.2 per cent.—an average rise across Wales of 10.5 per cent.

The Assembly is failing to deliver. According to a recent ICM poll, 88 per cent. of Welsh people feel that devolution has achieved little or nothing. Instead of delivering on the real issues for the people of Wales, the Assembly has concentrated on seeking higher allowances for Assembly Members and securing the new building for the Assembly.

The First Secretary recently announced that the total cost of the new building would be £22.8 million, but in reality it is likely to be at least £26 million and possibly nearer £30 million. The people in Wales do not want to see so much money being spent on a new Assembly building. They would prefer their money to be spent on real priorities, such as education. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) was delightfully off-message. He referred to education spending and the expenditure necessary to repair leaking school roofs and to provide new school lavatories, and he compared that with the spending on the Assembly building.

There is utter confusion about ensuring that Wales receives the funding promised by the Prime Minister and the European Union. On objective 1 funding, the Prime Minister said:

> We do not intend to let the people of Wales down.—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 439.]

However, as was mentioned in the debate, the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has criticised the Government's approach to objective 1, stating that

> the Government's "trust us" approach is not enough. There is a real risk that the continued uncertainty is deterring people, particularly in the private sector, from investing in developing projects.

It is another case of Labour being all mouth and no delivery. The Prime Minister has promised the earth, but he will not make the commitment to give Wales the funding that it needs.

In appendix 8 to the Select Committee report, table 3.2 shows clearly that over the seven years of the programme, the total national contribution from public expenditure is

£885 million, of which £152.8 million is supposed to come in 2000 and £132 million in 2001, yet the Secretary of State has told us on numerous occasions that he has secured no extra funding to date from the Treasury in respect of that contribution.

Furthermore, in a parliamentary answer to me, the Secretary of State stated that there would be no increase in the departmental expenditure limit of the Wales Office in the current financial year or the next financial year. Even if the extra money was available, it would have to be spent within the existing departmental expenditure limit. I was intrigued by an intervention by the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), who had worked that out. He said that if there was no increase in the departmental expenditure limit, any money that the Treasury was willing to make available could be spent only at the expense of other programmes in Wales. The right hon. Gentleman did not receive the answer that he sought. I shall be interested to hear the answer in the Minister's winding-up speech.

The Labour party is also letting down the people of Wales on the health service. It is failing to deliver on its waiting list pledge in Wales, where out-patient figures continue to increase. In March 1997, 28,401 people were on a waiting list for more than three months for their first out-patient appointment. That figure almost trebled; it was 75,386 for the month ending on 31 January 2000—an increase of more than 165 per cent., which is well above the appalling 100 per cent. rise throughout the United Kingdom for the equivalent period.

In-patient waiting lists have increased in Wales from 66,609 in 1997 to 77,031 in January 2000, despite the Government's waiting list initiative. Overall, the number of people on all waiting lists has risen by more than 60,000 in Wales. The Labour party is failing the health service in Wales, as it is failing in every other area. Labour cannot be trusted in Wales. The Prime Minister's pledge not to let Wales down is empty and the House will realise that in the coming months.

6.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I welcome the first St. David's day debate since devolution and, indeed, the first of the millennium. I welcome the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) to his first St. David's day debate. He made a thoughtful contribution, and I look forward to seeing him return to his socialist roots and joining the Labour party.

The debate has emphasised the importance of set-piece Welsh debates, which examine the Government's role now and in the future. Today we had an opportunity to discuss the important issues that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State covered: delivery, partnership and stability. Hon. Members from all parties have talked about a range of issues that reflect those themes, sometimes from different perspectives. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) did not chime with party policy but we welcome different perspectives, and we shall reflect on them.

Mr. Rogers: I criticised not Labour party policies or achievements in Wales, but the structure in which the Labour party has to operate in government in Wales.

Mr. Hanson: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments because they add to the flavour of the debate and to today's valuable discussions. The comments that have been made from all parts of the House are the meat and drink of day-to-day discussions in the Wales Office, which has changed since our last debate, but has retained its significant impact on Welsh issues and the role of the House.

Hon. Members have raised issues that we tackle daily in Cabinet Committees in discussions that affect Wales and through our contacts with organisations, businesses, the voluntary sector, trade unions and others, and in Government correspondence with colleagues and Assembly Members. The anxieties that have been expressed today have reflected those discussions.

Twelve contributions were made to the debate and they covered a range of important issues. I shall try to deal with them all, but if I cannot, I shall write to hon. Members who contributed to the debate to give a flavour of our view on those matters.

All the issues are important, but I particularly want to mention rural affairs. The hon. Members for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) and for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) mentioned rural Wales. Delyn, my constituency, is rural, and Labour Members represent constituencies containing significant rural areas. We recognise that there has been a crisis over the past few years and that there are issues that need to be addressed. For example, the Government have given extra support through additional hill livestock compensatory allowance schemes in recent years and are considering a range of proposals such as rural rate relief to provide help. Measures such as the working families tax credit, the minimum wage and child benefit also have an impact on rural areas. I acknowledge that they are experiencing difficult times, but we are giving a great deal of support.

Mr. Livsey: Will the Minister use his best endeavours to get agrimonetary compensation for farmers in Wales, who are owed about £45 million as a result of prices not being achieved over the past 12 months?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have already given agrimonetary compensation to farmers in Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom. Further compensation is an issue, but the Fontainebleau agreement is in place and that will involve additional taxpayers' money for farming communities. We are concerned about rural areas and acknowledge those issues.

Objective 1 funding is another major theme. It was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and other colleagues, including Opposition Front Benchers. All Members know, because my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said so on a number of occasions, that public expenditure survey cover and match funding are being examined by the Government in the spending review. I recognise why Members raise those important issues, but I refer to remarks made yesterday by Hugh Richards, the president of the National Farmers Union in Wales:

> We have heard much about match funding for Objective 1 structural funds in the past few weeks but we must make progress.

It is important that

> the right projects are proposed and backed to create sustainability for Welsh agriculture.

[Mr. Hanson]

We should focus on that.

We have had our debate and people should recognise that the Government are not complacent—we secured objective 1 funding. Match funding and PES cover are important. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) complained about a lack of match funding commitments. However, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), the shadow Chief Secretary, does not believe in objective 1 money or structural funds in the first place, so that complaint was slightly hypocritical.

The other key issue is the devolution settlement generally and the hon. Member for North Shropshire, my hon. Friends the Members for Ogmore (Sir R. Powell) and for Rhondda, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) all made important points about the way in which it is working in Wales. It is less than nine months since the advent of devolution on 1 July 1999. It represents a major structural change in the governance of Wales and the way in which Members of the House and others relate to it. I say to my hon. Friends and other Members, let us see how it operates and consider how it is developing from all angles. Most of all, let us make it work and make it stable. We have to consolidate and work with what we have at the moment.

Delivery of services, stability, partnership and the themes discussed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State are extremely important and we want to emphasise them. However, I remind the House that we must not forget the big picture, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), and what the Government can do and have done to help to transform Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore asked for a detailed statement of what the Government have done to help to support the people of Wales. I can tell him without fear of contradiction that we have had a busy and productive time since the general election. A lot has been achieved for Wales and there is a lot more to follow. I say to my right hon. and hon. Friends that the hon. Members for North Dorset and for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and every other Conservative Member who participated in the debate have opposed every single thing done by the Government since the election.

We have talked about the economy and employment. As has been mentioned, the new deal has transformed the lives of many individuals in my constituency and others throughout Wales. In Wales, 12,000 young people, 2,000 long-term unemployed and lone parents have secured jobs through the new deal. It has transformed people's lives in Wales, which the Conservative party has opposed. At the end of last year, I attended the new deal launch for the over-50s in north Wales, the launch of the new deal for musicians in Cardiff, and the ONE launch in Cwmbran in the constituency of the Secretary of State in November, all of which are transforming people's lives. An additional 46,000 people are in work in Wales since the general election.

Mr. Paterson: Is the Minister aware that one calculation has it that each job, unsubsidised in the real market, costs £23,544?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman has voted against the new deal and does not support it, but it is transforming lives. Colleagues who represent seats in Wales know that to be a fact.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy mentioned tackling poverty and social exclusion, as have others. The working families tax credit has meant that 87,000 Welsh families have had an increase of £24 a week. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) launched the initiative in his constituency in November.

A total of 585,000 pensioners have benefited from the winter fuel allowance. In November, the first pensioner in Wales received the cheque from me on behalf of the Wales Office in Bangor. About 109,000 people have benefited from the minimum wage in Wales.

I know that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), who is now gracing the debate, is a convert to the minimum wage, but the Conservative party voted against it. The predecessor of my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, Keir Hardie, would have been proud of our party and its achievements in Wales. When we look at free television licences for pensioners, the massive increase in child benefit and our targets to tackle child poverty in Wales, as in the rest of the UK, we realise that the Government are delivering for Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney said that crime was an important issue. Police numbers are up in every police force in Wales since the general election because of the Government's assistance and help. Three police forces out of four have shown a fall in recorded crime from the highest ever levels, recorded under the Conservative Government.

The hon. Member for North Dorset criticised the Labour Government's achievements on health in Wales. He should be aware that, in partnership with the Assembly for Wales, this year the NHS in Wales will receive an additional £175 million worth of expenditure and has an additional £1 billion to spend over the next three years. In the first two years of the Labour Government, 11,000 more in-patients were treated than in the last two years of the Conservative Government.

The Labour Government has given an extra £844 million for the Assembly to spend on education over and above current plans. The money is transforming the lives of children throughout Wales, building new class rooms, putting new teachers in place and giving new skills. The Labour Government are achieving for Wales. All the points that hon. Members have made are important and valid.

We have made a difference to people in Wales. It is about delivery on those issues, making a change, transforming people's lives, and partnership with the Assembly to achieve that. The Queen's Speech included a range of legislative opportunities: the Local Government Bill, the Care Standards Bill and the Learning and Skills Bill, which all give opportunities to let the Assembly look at those things in a Welsh context. I am particularly pleased to welcome the Secretary of State's announcement about the independent children's commissioner for Wales.

The Labour Government have delivered for Wales, are working in partnership and do make a difference to people's lives. We have a vision for Wales, which includes local decision making, helping to make the Assembly work and ensuring that the Wales Office fulfils that job in central Government.

We want to create fairness, enterprise, stability and opportunity for all, and to show the importance of the UK being central in Europe. We want to ensure that we have a Wales that is for all, celebrating Labour's history in our 100th year, what we have delivered for the Labour party in Wales and for the people of Wales, and modernising for the future, with the Conservative party remaining where it is now: it has little influence, no power and no support.

It being Seven o'clock, the Motion for the Adjournment lapsed, without Question put.

Mr. Livsey: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Could you use your good influence? We have lost one and a half hours of our Welsh debate today and although 18 right hon. and hon. Members wished to speak, only 12 managed to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) wished to celebrate his birthday by speaking in the debate and was unable to do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows that from time to time Government statements have to be made on important issues. After that, it was for hon. Members to govern the length of their speeches. Had speeches been shorter, many more hon. Members would have been called and we could even have celebrated the birthday of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik).

Protected Tenants

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

7.1 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to highlight the renewed threat facing tens of thousands of protected tenants so soon after it seemed that the Government had at last provided them with some security, following a decade of steep, sometimes stratospheric, rent rises.

Two years ago, I introduced an Adjournment debate drawing attention to the plight of protected tenants. Many of them are elderly or facing retirement; some are vulnerable, the majority are on fixed incomes and almost all of them, by definition, are tenants of long standing. Their secure tenancies predated the deregulation of the private rented sector brought about by the Housing Act 1988. At the time, they were given assurances that their position would not be affected by deregulation, but that proved not to be the case.

Before the 1988 Act, rent assessment committees had to consider factors such as the age, character, location and state of repair of a dwelling. Rent officers and rent assessment committees were also obliged to assume that there was no scarcity of comparable rented accommodation in the locality, as that would have had the effect of sending the price of accommodation up. This provision traditionally meant that fair rents were held below the market price.

The 1988 Act created more tenancies at market rents in the form of assured tenancies and assured shortholds. It also allowed rent assessment committees to take the market into account when setting rents for regulated tenants. The entire framework for the setting of protected tenants' rent was drastically altered. Rent officers and rent assessment committees were increasingly being persuaded that fair rents should be set in line with market rents.

Rent rises started to run well ahead of inflation. By the mid-1990s, rents were often many thousands of pounds a year higher than they had been at the start of the decade.

In my debate in 1998, I urged on a sympathetic Government the need for swift action to prevent people from losing their homes, to redress the fear and anxiety that was shadowing so many lives and to protect the character of our inner-city communities, which is dependent on a stable and mixed residential base, but is in danger of being swept away by the pressures of the international property market.

I was therefore delighted, as were many of my constituents, when, 14 months ago, the Government introduced regulations, based on section 31 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1987, to impose a rent cap. While still allowing rent rises well in excess of the retail prices index—up to 7.5 per cent. above in the case of initial re-registrations—the cap none the less assured tenants that they did not face a doubling or trebling of their rents over the following years. It allowed them to plan their future—sometimes their last years—with confidence. The rent cap was greeted with relief and gratitude.

In January this year, however, the relief turned to anguish and dismay when the Government's use of section 31 was successfully challenged by the Spath

[Ms Karen Buck]

Holme landlords. Spath Holme argued that the section 31 powers had been introduced as counter-inflationary measures, that this was not the purpose of the order issued in February 1999, and that the Secretary of State had, therefore, acted ultra vires.

The ramifications of the judgment are extremely serious. Many protected tenants who were saved by the order find themselves yet again faced with the risk of losing their homes. Despite the spin that has been placed on the judgment by some landlords, they are not—certainly they are not exclusively—a group of affluent people who have been enjoying an unfair subsidy to shield them from the cold blast of market forces. As the Government's consultation document on the issue made clear, more than 60 per cent of private protected tenants are retired and only 20 per cent. are working, while 70 per cent. of regulated tenants in the private and registered social landlord sector have gross incomes of under £200 a week.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for initiating this debate. I should simply like to confirm what she is saying. Even in a constituency such as Kensington and Chelsea, which has its fair share of affluent people, many people are deeply dismayed by the rises that are now in prospect and face the future with great anxiety. The hon. Lady will know that I have taken an interest in the issue, particularly after the Spath Holme judgment. I hope that we can continue to work together on the issue in the spirit of cross-party endeavour. We look forward very much to hearing whether the Minister will be able to give any reassurance today to those who are now in a state of great anxiety.

Ms Buck: I entirely agree with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Gentleman and endorse his statement that we have been working together, on a cross-party basis, trying to reach a satisfactory conclusion to the matter.

In the few weeks since the Court of Appeal judgment, I—like other hon. Members—have been flooded with letters from desperately worried tenants. I should like to draw attention to some of the sentiments expressed in those letters, to confirm the anxiety and fear felt by many protected tenants. One letter stated:

> My landlords did not wait a moment to put in their latest proposed rent increase . . . another 150 per cent. increase . . . they are now asking for £21,000 per annum . . . I greatly fear the prospect of having to go to the Council "cap-in-hand" for benefits which I have never had to ask for before.

A second letter—from a couple in their late 70s who have been at their current address for 28 years—stated:

> We were faced immediately with a proposal for a 150 per cent. increase, on top of one of 150 per cent. two years ago.

Another of my constituents has advised me of an application for an 85 per cent. rent increase that has been lodged since the Court of Appeal judgment.

Another letter states:

> As a widow of 70, what am I to do if rents are raised beyond my means? . . . I have lived in this house for 48 years and, over those years, have spent some £150,000 on the upkeep of the property.

The same theme emerges time and again. A Kensington resident states:

> We do not want to leave the flat we have lived in for 45 years . . . Where would we go, anyway?

A tenant from elsewhere in London wrote of living alone on a small private pension plus a state pension. She now faces a rent increase of more than 100 per cent. With her health suffering from the stress, she asks the Government to help quickly, so that

> a lot of suffering, worry and fear might be avoided.

I have initiated this debate to urge the Government to act with due urgency to leave no option unexplored in restoring the rent cap. Tenants who entered into their agreement 20, 30 or 40 years ago, in good faith, do not deserve to be treated as badly as many of them are now being treated. If, in future, market forces are going to wipe out privately rented accommodation in central London for all but the super-rich and for those with company lets, let us at least safeguard the future of current residents.

Some landlords have stated that tenants who find their rent increases unmanageable can apply for housing benefit. Not only do I resent the implication that the public purse should subsidise excessive rent increases, but the washing of hands by landlords is misguided. Housing benefit restrictions are likely to apply to many, if not all, of those properties because of their location, leaving many tenants still in financial hardship.

I am aware, of course, that the Government are petitioning the House of Lords for leave to appeal against the court judgment. Although that is clearly an option that has to be pursued, time is of the essence. Many protected tenants fear that, in the time that that process is likely to take, and without certainty of success, help may come too late for them.

I therefore urge the Minister at least to consider other options, so that action can be taken swiftly. If primary legislation is possible—either freestanding or achieved through the vehicle of a leasehold reform Bill—we might be able to secure the position of protected tenants sooner and more conclusively. I am aware of the difficulties that attend on either of those options, but even in the next two years, while the issue is resolved thousands of tenants will either lose their homes or be in fear of losing them.

I should like to give the last word to a Westminster pensioner, who said:

> I really do implore you to speak out on behalf of us tenants who are now fearful that we may lose our homes . . . I have worked all my life for my country and now I want to live my retirement in peace.

7.9 pm

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) not only on obtaining this particular Adjournment debate, but on consistently raising in the House an issue that has a major effect on some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The situation that she is describing is certainly replicated in my own constituency. It is no exaggeration to say that many of my pensioners live in daily fear of losing their homes and such small amounts of money as are left to them.

The Government's action on the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order was welcome, but the recent judgment, to which my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for

Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) referred, has struck fear into the hearts of the most vulnerable people in society, whom it should be one of our first duties to attempt to protect.

I shall not repeat any of the points so tellingly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North. I shall simply touch on some of the experiences of my pensioner constituents. One pensioner couple have lived for 30 years in a property that they are entirely and exclusively responsible for. They have maintained, modernised and repaired it and have seen their rent rise over that period from £500 a year to £12,500. After the Spath Holme judgment, that will rise overnight by an additional £3,000.

Another pensioner couple have been tenants for 36 years. Again, they are responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the property. As their letter says, they have turned

a dirty, vermin-infested flat into the desirable one it is today.

The landlord has done nothing, yet in 1998 they faced rent increases of 68 per cent. After the recent judgment, there will be additional increases of £20 a week.

My final example of the realities of life for some of my most vulnerable constituents is a household in which the head of the household receives incapacity benefit. Their rent has risen from £77 a week in 1999 to £220 a week in 2000. That is clearly unacceptable and untenable.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Camden Federation of Private Tenants, which has been assiduous in trying to help my constituents who are so grievously concerned by the recent judgment. In a letter to the *Evening Standard*, the chairman of that federation made the point that my hon. Friend has made—that all regulated tenants have suffered massive rises in so-called fair rents in the past 10 years. He gave an example of a two-bedroom flat in my constituency for which the rent went up from £1,000 a year in 1988 to £5,400 in 1998. He agrees that the fair rent order controlled rents, but the lifting of the controls as a result of the new judgment will mean massive increases almost overnight.

Like my hon. Friend, I have concentrated on the experiences of my pensioners, but if we do not tackle the issue of fair rents, London is in grave danger of losing some of its most necessary skills and workers, particularly those who are dedicated to public service, such as nurses, teachers, firemen and policemen. They find it increasingly difficult to pay the rents asked when rises across London are spiralling out of control.

I welcome the Government's appeal to the House of Lords against this decision, but I strongly underline my hon. Friend's wish for the Government to act speedily on the issue. Given the vagaries of the courts, I trust that the Government will examine the possibility of introducing legislation so that some of the most vulnerable people in society can live out their remaining years without fear.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) for raising this important issue. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) and the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) for indicating the extent to which it affects many of their constituents. It is good that this is a cross-party issue, because that lends weight to the serious arguments.

I share the concerns expressed about the problems now facing protected tenants, particularly those who are retired and on low incomes, whose plight has been graphically outlined tonight. I am fully aware of the profound anxiety and uncertainty caused by the Court of Appeal's decision.

I start by placing the figures quoted by my hon. Friend in context. We believe that about 56,000 tenants had their rents capped under the order and are immediately affected by the judgment. All 121,000 regulated tenants with registered rents, as well as 241,000 secure housing association tenants, are potentially affected as their rents next come up for review. Regulated tenants are found throughout the country, but the main impact of the judgment falls in London and the north-west—where for historical reasons the gap between existing registered rents and market rents is greatest. For a few tenants—almost all in central London—the difference may be large. Elsewhere, it may be much smaller. Since the introduction of the order, the capped rent has on average been £5.70 per week less than the uncapped rent—though it is obvious from the speeches that that figure is misleading, so I do not seek to make too much of it.

Ultimately, it will be for the courts to determine the effect of the judgment, but I assure the House that we have acted to minimise the inevitable uncertainty. On 4 February, we issued guidance to the Rent Service Agency and rent assessment panels, which states that for new cases registered on or after the date of the judgment, the limit on increases cannot be applied. For cases that had already been capped, the fair rent determined by the rent officer before the cap was applied should be treated as the registered rent, effective from the date of the original registration. The guidance recommended that amended registrations should be issued with a covering letter to all affected tenants and landlords. Those letters are now being sent out.

On 18 February, we issued further guidance on the position on recovery of arrears. It stated our view that if the landlord issues a new notice of increase as required by the Rent Act, tenants will be liable for 28 days' arrears from the date of the notice. Some landlords may decide not to pursue the matter further where the difference is small, but in other cases the difference is big and is likely to be pursued.

The guidance states that it will be open to landlords to seek a county court order amending the original notice of increase, but the courts will have to decide whether the circumstances fall within the relevant provision of the Rent Act. If the court decides to amend the notice, it may apply terms and conditions with respect to arrears of rent as it thinks fit. In any case, recovery of arrears is limited to six months from the date of the county court order. Tenants will not be liable for arrears beyond one month, unless and until an order is made.

On 25 February, we issued guidance on the position of tenants of registered social landlords. We believe that, where the landlord is a housing association, tenants will not be liable to pay any arrears as there is no provision in the Rent Act that would allow a housing association to backdate an increase or to have a notice of increase amended by the courts.

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

The position of tenants claiming housing benefit is of particular concern. About half of all regulated tenants with registered rents and about two thirds of housing association tenants receive housing benefit. Local authorities have discretion on backdated payments, but claimants on full benefit are likely to have the full additional rent and the full cost of any arrears met by housing benefit. It is likely that tenants who make a new claim for housing benefit because of an increased rent or arrears of rent will also be covered. A circular was issued by the Department of Social Security on 21 February to all local authority housing benefit departments explaining the position.

I appreciate that that explanation may not give my hon. Friends' constituents much immediate comfort, but I assure the House that the Government remain fully committed to protecting tenants from excessive increases in fair rents. We were surprised by the Court of Appeal decision and even more surprised that it refused leave to appeal, but that is not the end of the story. A petition for leave to appeal was submitted to another place on 17 February and we expect to hear the outcome of our application within the next two weeks. If leave is granted, we will vigorously pursue the appeal. We intend also to seek an expedited hearing to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

I am aware that this process is likely to take several months, and that in the meantime some tenants will experience increases in rent and face the possibility of falling into arrears. I also acknowledge that, even for those who are not immediately affected in this way, uncertainty about existing arrears and possible large increases of rent at a future rent review will cause considerable anxiety and worry.

Mr. Portillo: I had a feeling that the Minister was coming to the end of his remarks. I am grateful for all the things that he has said. However, the combination of accumulating arrears and the length of time that the House of Lords judgment is likely to take is not very encouraging to the many people who are affected by great anxiety. Also, the very fact that he was refused leave to appeal from the Court of Appeal does not give the best indicator of the likelihood of success in the House of Lords. Therefore, does he accept that a much more expeditious route would be to initiate new legislation?

Mr. Mullin: I was going to touch on that in my closing remarks. I said as well that we expect to hear the outcome of our application for leave to appeal within the next two weeks, when the position will become much clearer. If there is to be an appeal, we have a period of several months in which to work out how to address it. If there is to be no appeal, we must take action fairly quickly.

I hope that what I have already said about existing arrears will go some way to allaying people's fears. However, in these circumstances, it is entirely understandable that my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North and the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea should raise the possibility of introducing new primary legislation.

As I have said, we share my hon. Friend's concern to provide these tenants, many of them vulnerable, with protection from excessive increases in rent, which we continue to believe is reasonable. I am sure that the House will appreciate that we cannot pre-empt the decision to be made in another place. We must await the result of our petition and if leave is refused, I assure the House that we will consider the position urgently.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-two minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 3 March 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

9.33 am

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sure that you, like all of us, will have seen on television the terrible humanitarian tragedy that is currently occurring in Mozambique. Perhaps you have seen the amazing pictures of the bravery and courage of the South African helicopter pilots, who have rescued an enormous number of people with only three helicopters. On the radio this morning, the Secretary of State for International Development suggested that there was a dispute between two Departments about the deployment of United Kingdom helicopters to that part of the world. People will have been appalled to hear that the dispatch of helicopters has been delayed as a result of such a dispute.

Given the gravity of the humanitarian crisis, have you, Madam Speaker, had any intimation from the Prime Minister to the effect that he wishes to make a statement in the House about the United Kingdom Government's response, and to explain the failure to act more swiftly?

Madam Speaker: At this juncture, I have not been informed that the Prime Minister or any Minister wants to make a statement on that matter.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Can you help the House by telling us the latest point at which a Minister—in this case, the Secretary of State for Defence or the Secretary of State for International Development—can approach you to ask to make a statement? It would help the House if we knew the deadline for Ministers to approach you.

Madam Speaker: Ministers are free to make statements in the House at prescribed times. However, on a Friday, I am usually informed at around 10 o'clock whether a statement is to be made, and it is usually made at 11 o'clock.

Orders of the Day

BILL PRESENTED

COUNTRYSIDE AND RIGHTS OF WAY

Mr. Secretary Prescott presented a Bill to make new provision for public access to the countryside; to amend the law relating to public rights of way; to enable traffic regulation orders to be made for the purpose of conserving an area's natural beauty; to make provision with respect to the driving of mechanically propelled vehicles elsewhere than on roads; to amend the law relating to nature conservation and the protection of wildlife; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday next, and to be printed [Bill 78].

Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.35 am

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is designed to amend the provisions of the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993 that apply to the ombudsman's powers to investigate complaints against doctors and other health service providers such as pharmacists, dentists and ophthalmic surgeons. The Bill is therefore not confined to one section of the medical profession.

I am grateful for the cross-party support that the Bill has attracted. I should like to thank the sponsors in particular; they also span the political divide. It is worth mentioning some of the sponsors by name because they have persistently shown a great interest in health matters. Some of them not only take an interest in health in the House but are registered medical practitioners. They include: my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who is a member of the Select Committee on Health, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), who is the Liberal Democrat spokesman on health, and also serves on the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), who chairs the Select Committee and the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), who is a former hospital manager. The sponsors include two doctors. I am grateful to them for sparing their time.

The purpose of the Bill is to close a loophole in the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993, which allows general practitioners and others involved in health matters to retire to avoid investigation by the health service ombudsman. For example, GPs who are worried about being investigated by the ombudsman can simply retire from the national health service to avoid answering for their actions. That is all the more worrying because GPs who officially retire from the national health service can avoid investigation and continue to practise as locums or in private practice even though a complaint which calls into question their professional conduct and ability remains unresolved.

If the Bill makes the statute book, it will bring GPs and other health professionals into line with hospital doctors. In his annual report for 1998-99, the health service

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

commissioner, Mr. Michael Buckley, drew attention to the need to tackle the matter that the Bill covers. I am especially grateful to the Consumers Association for bringing the ombudsman's recommendation to my attention and for its help in preparing the Bill.

Although the Bill will affect only a few individuals each year, it will tackle a basic injustice. We have recently witnessed action by the Home Office to consider sanctions against retired police officers following the Macpherson inquiry in the Stephen Lawrence case. The Bill will introduce similar provisions to protect patients.

It is important that patients are reassured that the laws governing health services professionals are primarily designed to protect them. As well as protecting patients, the Bill would support thousands of honest and reputable doctors who tirelessly serve our communities, and would ensure, too, that the minority of doctors who should not be practising do not tarnish the reputation of exemplary doctors. It is in no way a witch hunt.

The Consumers Association has campaigned for several years for a robust system of redress in health care. I was made aware of it about a year ago when I read a report in *Which?* magazine—I am a subscriber—of the case of Mr. Peter Smith, whose wife had died of leukaemia, a condition that her doctor had overlooked. Mr. Smith took his complaint to the health service ombudsman, who agreed to investigate. Unfortunately for Mr. Smith, the general practitioner in question retired and the investigation was abandoned. He will never know if his complaint would have been upheld. Neither will Yvonne Fisher.

In February 1998, Mrs. Fisher called a doctor after finding her 83-year-old mother, Mrs. Valles, ill at home. The practice said that none was available. Later that afternoon, her mother's condition deteriorated and she collapsed. Mrs. Fisher left her with neighbours, drove to the practice and asked that a doctor attend to her mother urgently. Finally, a doctor visited and examined Mrs. Valles. He said that she had suffered a slight stroke and was unconcerned by Mrs. Fisher's pleadings that her mother had not eaten or drunk anything, could not walk unaided and was very weak. The doctor merely commented that that was usual with strokes.

The doctor then told Mrs. Fisher that her mother ought to be moved to a nursing home as she would never be able to look after herself again. In the meantime, he insisted that Mrs. Valles should not be on her own and that she was fit enough to embark on the two-hour journey to her daughter's home. Mrs. Fisher reluctantly put her mother in her car and drove home. On arrival, Mrs. Valles collapsed. An ambulance was called, which took her mother to a local hospital. She died shortly after arrival.

Mrs. Fisher was so incensed at the treatment that she and her mother had received that she decided to complain. She took the complaint to the West Surrey health authority, which refused to hold an independent review. That led Mrs. Fisher to contact the health service ombudsman for England, who agreed that there was a case and started an investigation. I emphasise that the complaint went to the ombudsman for England, because his remit does not run to Scotland. If the Bill meets with the House's approval, we shall have to consider what action can be taken in respect of the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs. Fisher was relieved to discover that the ombudsman was to investigate her case, only to have her hopes of justice dashed when she was informed that the doctor had decided to retire and that the case therefore had to be dropped. She decided to go public because she cannot believe that doctors can avoid investigation in that way. She hopes that the Bill will be made law so that in future people will be able to see that an investigation has been properly conducted and completed.

The Bill is supported by many notable organisations, including the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners. Mr. Michael Buckley, the ombudsman, fully supports it and has called on the Government to take up the issue. Although this amendment to the 1993 Act would benefit only a few individuals, their plight must not be ignored. They deserve justice in the same way as any other person who put his faith in a system only for that system to fail him.

I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House agree that the Bill represents an important first step to safeguarding patients' interests. I want it to succeed, which is why I propose only a modest change in the ombudsman's powers. No doubt the Government will wish to consider other changes in his powers and those of the General Medical Council that would improve redress in health. One could be the extension of the ombudsman's remit to the private sector, and there are others, one of which was pointed out by the Consumers Association. It published the results of its investigation into the GMC's procedures for dealing with complaints, which uncovered a system that any objective person would have to conclude could be improved. The Consumers Association has also called for the proportion of lay to medical members on the GMC to be increased to reduce the existing imbalance in some of the procedures and to drive forward reform.

The Bill represents a first step—other reforms will take time and I urge the Government to introduce legislation at the earliest opportunity—but it would sit neatly in a range of reforms that they may introduce to reflect the needs of patients and the medical profession. It is important to take this step, which will not prejudice any others that the Government may consider to strengthen the confidence that people rightly should have in an investigative complaints procedure.

Although I have concentrated my remarks on doctors, the Bill would achieve improvements in respect of other practitioners. However, the doctor-patient relationship is the backbone of the health care system. Recently, the Shipman case has shown how weaknesses in the system of redress serve only to discredit or undermine the confidence and trust between doctor and patient. I hope that the House agrees that that must be resolved.

9.47 am

Angela Smith (Basildon): I am pleased to speak in the debate and to be a sponsor of the Bill. It is traditional to congratulate a Member on drawing a number high up in the ballot, but I confess that I have never understood that parliamentary convention. Drawing a high number is a matter of luck, but a Member deserves great credit for his choice of Bill and we should congratulate the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson-Smith) on introducing a measure that would benefit a number of people. This Bill is about empowering consumers and patients and giving them confidence.

If Members from all parties outlined their reasons for standing for election, they would all say that justice, fairness and giving confidence were first among them. Those three tenets are our reasons for becoming Members of Parliament. Today's debate is about accountability, and it continues our discussion on restoring or maintaining faith in public servants—a category into which we ourselves fall—in respect of a number of issues. We should consider the Bill—which is moderate and sensible—in that context.

My view is that the system contains a number of deficiencies in relation to complaints and accountability. Although the Bill cannot possibly address them all, limiting what it sets out to achieve will make it far more successful. It targets an important specific area: ensuring that a general practitioner's retirement from the national health service does not prevent the health service ombudsman from carrying out a full investigation of a complaint. Patients visiting a doctor or a dentist must have faith that they will receive the best possible treatment. If they receive the wrong treatment or are treated unacceptably—or merely think that they have been treated unacceptably—they must know that they have recourse to a fair and just complaints system. No one in any profession should be able to duck their responsibilities by retiring or transferring to the private sector.

That debate takes place in a number of public services—the police being a prime example. Today, we can take an important step forward in patient protection and patient confidence. We should be clear that the Bill is not a panacea, but it would address one specific point.

It is unfortunate that, in the past few months, we have been made aware of some horror stories involving doctors and dentists. It was interesting to note that an opinion poll published yesterday found that that had not dented public confidence in doctors and dentists—in fact, it is still as high as it has ever been. When hon. Members talk to individuals—as we do in our surgeries and in conversations in our constituencies—we find great dissatisfaction among those who think that their complaints are not being taken seriously. It is a matter not necessarily of confidence in an individual practitioner, but of being taken seriously.

Some of the issues that have come to light in the press have been as a result of dissatisfaction at the failure of internal investigations. I say with some regret that I do not believe that the relevant regulatory medical authorities have come out of recent events with much credit.

I am sure that other hon. Members have had cause to take up complaints made against doctors by constituents. They will be as dissatisfied as I am with the delays in, for example, the procedures of the General Medical Council in investigating complaints and in responding to correspondence from Members.

One of the first cases that was brought to my attention as an MP was from my constituent Mr. Burgess. He had a complaint against his mother-in-law's GP after she had died. Like many people, he contacted me not as the first port of call but in desperation and frustration at the pace at which his complaint was being dealt with. Even after he referred the case to me, promised deadlines were missed, and I have had to write several times to ascertain what is happening. When a deadline is missed, I write again and am told that it has been extended. Where the GP has not responded to inquiries from the GMC, the case has not been followed up until I have written to ask about it. There seems to be no sense of urgency about the investigation of the complaint, and scant acknowledgement that my constituent has complained out of genuine and heartfelt concern. A lesser man would have given up. I am still waiting for a response to an inquiry that I made on behalf of another constituent last November.

That does not give me much confidence in the system. What makes matters worse is that, in extreme cases, when a doctor or dentist retires or leaves the NHS for the private sector—sometimes in extremely dubious circumstances, as the right hon. Member for Wealden said—there is no way of following through a complaint unless criminal proceedings can be instigated.

It remains open to unscrupulous doctors and dentists who are facing an investigation and are worried about its outcome merely to retire. They can then carry on practising with no founded complaint against them.

The health service ombudsman has said that this issue should be addressed. The right hon. Gentleman rightly said that only a few people will be affected by the Bill, but the principle is important. There may only be a few isolated cases, but that does not lessen the pain and concern of the people involved. There is the potential for a more general, larger, national problem, and it is through the good will of doctors and dentists that we have not had greater difficulties. Our role as parliamentarians and legislators is to spot such loopholes and to attempt to close them.

It is important constantly to review the work and effectiveness of the public sector ombudsmen, and consider taking action, especially when they draw issues of concern to our attention. I await with interest the outcome of the review of the public sector ombudsmen that is currently with Cabinet Ministers, in the hope that we can use that to strengthen their role and act to increase public confidence. The Bill is about public confidence and protection.

I pay credit to the work of the Consumers Association in supporting the Bill and drawing such matters to our attention. There is also considerable local impetus, which is always important when we are dealing with such issues. I have received representations from my local Basildon and Thurrock community health council. It is an effective local body, and it wants to know that its concerns are being taken seriously. I have worked with the council on a number of occasions, and with Mark Ham and his team in Basildon, who want to be assured that complaints and concerns will be followed through to the very end, and that no doctor or dentist will be able to evade his or her responsibilities during investigations.

Like many others, the local community health council has had cases in which doctors under investigation have retired, so that the investigation has come to an end. That is of great concern to the council, and it has asked me to raise the issue in the House today, because this problem affects the support that it feels able to give patients who seek its advice.

The fact that a loophole exists affects patients' confidence in the system, and may result in their not proceeding with complaints because they do not think that it is worth while if a doctor can retire or move out of the NHS to avoid the complaint being considered. The system is a deterrent to complaints, and we shall never know how

[Angela Smith]

many complaints have not been made for fear that they will not be taken seriously and that the doctor will not be fully investigated.

The vast majority of doctors deserve our confidence, but unless we are prepared to deal with the issues that severely test our faith in the system, we do a disservice to all doctors. Unless we tackle the real fears and concerns, we cannot expect the public to trust us, or the medical profession as a whole. When that situation develops, it undermines the work of many good doctors.

This is just one aspect of the reform of the ombudsmen's powers. It is a small reform, but it is important if we are to retain public confidence. I believe that we should considerably increase the ombudsmen's powers in this and in other areas. We cannot address that issue today, but this Bill is a welcome and necessary start.

I hope that the Minister will accept that the flaws in the system need to be dealt with as soon as possible. It is not only confidence in the medical profession that is at stake—as I have mentioned several times—but confidence in our own profession. If such problems are highlighted and we fail to act, we are failing to live up to our own responsibilities, and we have no right to criticise and complain about other professions not living up to theirs.

I hope that the Minister will accept the principles behind the Bill, note the strong support from both sides of the House, and favour early action.

9.57 am

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): It is with great pleasure that I support the Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith). He has been fortunate in the ballot, and I congratulate him on the Bill that he has allowed me to help him bring before the House. The hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) made a pleasant speech, and in reply to her worry about the ballot, I have to tell her that, having been in this place for 41 years, I have been one of the seven signatories only once. I think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden, who came into the House at the same time as I did, is more fortunate, because this is his second private Member's Bill. He had a Bill on—what was it?

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Meals on wheels.

Sir Peter Emery: Meals on wheels, which is a very important service. We move from meals on wheels to health.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I introduced that Bill at the behest of the Women's Royal Voluntary Service. I should like to thank my right hon. Friend for playing some part in this Bill. During my absence on official business, he gallantly stood in for me on First Reading: I am most grateful to him for presenting the Bill to the House.

Sir Peter Emery: That is very kind of my right hon. Friend. I think that gallantry is a slight overstatement, but I am delighted to accept it.

I shall be brief, because much of what needs to be said has already been said. I am also interested in the next Bill, the Food Labelling Bill, which would have a great effect on my constituents, and on the farming industry in particular. I want to ensure that that Bill gets a Second Reading this time.

It is obvious that it is nonsensical that someone can escape from investigation by leaving the service and saying, "That's it. Whatever mistakes I may have made, you can't go any further in investigating what I did, because I am no longer part of the service." That cannot be right, but it obviously was not considered during the passage of the original legislation. The Bill is designed simply to ensure that, when the action of any person working in the NHS needs to be investigated, that person will not be able to escape by resigning.

Such a requirement is desirable for two reasons. First, it would assure patients—our constituents—that genuine complaints will be investigated, and that no one will be able to thwart the process by leaving the health service. Secondly, it would enable those working in the service to state that any errors or complaints will be investigated fully and properly, irrespective of whether they are still so employed. The Bill proposes to insert after "if they are"—employed in the service, that is—the words

or were at the time of the action complained of.

That simple change is proposed in paragraphs (a) and (b) of clause 1(2).

Having had to deal with private Members' Bills when I was a Minister, I can tell the present Minister that civil servants are inclined to say, "This Bill deals with a minor issue. Many other matters need tidying up. Why not say to the Bill's promoter, 'We like your idea, but perhaps you will give way and allow us to introduce legislation that covers the wider issue more comprehensively'?" Those of us who have been in the House for a long time will have heard that sort of thing from Ministers of all persuasions, and I fear that the present Government may take the same line now, although I hope that they will not.

Of course the law could be strengthened in other respects. It is obvious, for instance, that some change is needed to the General Medical Council, and greater powers of investigation may also be necessary. A number of matters that are not in the Bill, however, might be covered under its general aegis. We accept that other aspects of the health service may need to be reformed, and we would support the Government in such action, but I plead with the Minister not to ask my right hon. Friend to withdraw his Bill and wait for the Government to act.

The Minister is fairly new in her post, but I am sure she knows that getting a private Member's Bill into the Government's programme is terribly difficult, and the more minor the Bill, the more difficult it is. If the Government took the line that I have described, even the little alteration proposed by this Bill might not be made for four, five or six years. I am sure that the Minister will be able to elaborate on other matters that need to be dealt with, but I implore her to allow my right hon. Friend and the Bill's sponsors their little but, I think, important amendment to the original Act. It is simple and definite, and could, we suggest, be implemented three months after the enactment of the Bill.

The Minister would do a disservice if she postponed such action, which I think should be taken immediately—indeed, it ought to have been taken some time ago. We have the opportunity now. The Bill has all-party support and we want the Government to add theirs.

10.5 am

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): I support the Bill, but I wish that it went a little further, especially in dealing with potential problems in the private sector. It does nothing to prevent someone working in that sector from engaging in malpractice which an ombudsman would not be able to investigate.

I have another concern, which may be answered later. How long after the retirement of a doctor could an action be brought? The arrangement in the Bill seems to be open-ended. While I accept that it is vital for patients to be protected, and to feel that they are protected, I think it equally important to prevent circumstances in which a doctor, many years after his or her retirement, could be brought before an ombudsman because of an action that took place a long time ago. That loophole must be closed.

The Consumers Association has raised several issues in that context. It points out, for instance, that important information about a practitioner's performance may never come to light. That should be dealt with, especially in the light of recent events. A doctor may retire from general practice, but then work as a locum or move to the private sector, and an ombudsman will not be able to investigate. It is vital that information is available to enable a complaint to be dealt with right through to the end.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The hon. Lady mentioned the private sector. I wonder whether she was as disappointed as I was by the Government's failure to take the opportunity in the Care Standards Bill to ensure proper regulation of clinical standards in that sector. Can I take it from the tone of her remarks that she would support amendments to that Bill to bring about such regulation?

Mrs. Dean: I am sure the Government will consider that. No doubt the Minister will respond to the hon. Gentleman's suggestion later.

People must feel that they have the right to take their complaints as far as is necessary. I hope that most people, whether or not their complaints are genuine, will approach their own doctors or dentists, so that the problem can be investigated in the surgery, as close as possible to its source. We all know of cases in which medical problems have not been diagnosed as early as they should have been. In such cases, people want to know that a lesson has been learned. Although we seem to be following America with litigation, most people do not want to take such action; they simply want to be reassured that when a mistake has been made—when, for example, a medical condition has not been identified, and the patient has been put at risk—the fact has been recognised and steps have been taken to ensure that the same thing does not happen to someone else. It is the same when, tragically, someone has lost a loved one. That person wants to feel that that is unlikely to happen again—that someone has learned a lesson.

People search for answers and for reasons, especially if they have lost a loved one. Most of the time, the questions cannot be answered, but people need to be able to talk. That is probably the most important thing that doctors, dentists and others can recognise. Although loss of life is less predominant in the dental profession it does occur. People need to know that they can discuss these things and to feel that the matter has been resolved. Following on from that, it is vital that people have confidence in the whole procedure. If the case goes ultimately to the health service commissioner, they will need to be sure that he will address the matter.

As the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) has said, it may happen in only a few cases, but it is appalling to think that someone can reach the stage of submitting a complaint to the commissioner, only to be told that the person concerned has retired. After retiring, that person may still operate as a locum. People would be afraid if they thought that someone who had been brought to the attention of the commissioner was treating them as a locum.

As I say, people should have confidence in the system. They should be able to feel that, once a case reaches the commissioner, the matter will be fully investigated. I can think of nothing worse than getting to that point and then finding that the doctor has retired. They must for ever feel frustrated. We all know of constituents who come to our surgeries who experienced some tragedy 10 or 20 years ago—not necessarily medical—and who still live with it. Unless they can get to the bottom of their difficulty, they are never able to put it to one side. I go back to the point: if the matter can be resolved as close to the problem as possible, that will be far better because people are then much more likely to get over it.

Throughout the medical profession, there would be less litigation if answers could be given sooner. I know that it is a vicious circle. People are afraid of being taken through the legal system and, therefore, of answering certain questions, but I wish that we could find a way around that so that people would feel that they could respond to a patient's anxieties and concerns and answer them properly. There would then be less litigation in the first place.

As I say, I am concerned that cases should not be open ended. Someone who, perhaps, has an obsession should not be able, years later, to disrupt the life of a general practitioner who has been happily retired for five years or so. We need to address that point, so that a case is not considered a long time after the event.

However, we should also be able to close the loophole to which I referred. I am not sure whether anything can be done through the Bill, or indeed through Government legislation—although the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) does not like that idea—so that we have more control of, and people have more redress over, those operating in the private sector. It concerns me that that is not dealt with in the Bill. It is incredible that the 1993 Act should be found to have such a shortcoming and that an alleged incident when someone was practising cannot be investigated. We should do anything that we can to close the loophole.

10.15 am

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): It gives me great pleasure to support what is a small but important Bill. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) on introducing it. I am one of those who remember him in his previous job as a

[Mr. Kelvin Hopkins]

television presenter on the excellent "Tonight" programme some years ago. I was rather surprised to find how long ago the programme was put on.

Sir Peter Emery: Do not remind us.

Mr. Hopkins: Indeed; it reminds me of how old I am, too.

At that time, I had no aspiration to become an hon. Member, but it gives me great pleasure to debate this important issue with the right hon. Member for Wealden and, indeed, to be on the same side.

The ombudsman concept is Scandinavian in origin. It is an important concept and institution in our constitutional arrangements. It is typical that it came from that civilising region—so many of its ideas have been initiated, adopted and imitated elsewhere. As a member of the British-Swedish all-party group, I take a great interest in Scandinavian affairs.

It is important for our constituents to have the right to take complaints to an ombudsman. They are known as ombudsmen rather than commissioners. I do not know about other Members' constituents, but mine refer to them as ombudsmen, ombudspersons or whatever, rather than commissioners, even though in law they are known as commissioners, I think. It is a vital backstop for constituents to pursue their complaints.

I want to follow up the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean). Many constituents become somewhat obsessed with their problems, particularly if they are medical. They come to me, or even go to the community health council, but they do not meet medical experts who can help them. If they have the right to pursue the matter through to the ombudsman, at least they will have the benefit of professional advice and comment. Neither they nor I possess such knowledge.

Importantly, the Bill eliminates certain loopholes. As we have heard, family health service providers can go into bankruptcy or liquidation. I do not suggest that they do that deliberately—but, who knows, if they are in serious difficulty with a patient and can get away with it, they might do that. If a practitioner were of a certain age, he could choose judiciously to retire just before a problem arose, if he realised that he had made a mistake but no complaint had yet been made. He could retire before the complaint came forward, perhaps even before the patient realised that he should complain. Some professionals are clever enough to be able to use such a ruse to escape being pursued by someone who has been wronged by them. Sometimes, it is a question of incompetence or lack of effort, rather than a medical misjudgment. Nevertheless, they can avoid being pursued.

I address my remarks specifically to general practitioners. They could apply equally to dentists, opticians and pharmacists, but I am most concerned about GPs because they face the whole range of human ailments. I understand their difficulty. If one is faced with the possibility of every type of illness and condition, to make a judgment in a 10-minute consultation is difficult. I do not underestimate that difficulty and I also understand that to keep up to date with medical practice and new discoveries is difficult. Nevertheless, sometimes they still have to be brought to account for mistakes.

General practitioners work under great pressure, partly because Britain's ratio of GPs to patients is not good. We have to improve it. The Government foresee a future when the ratio is better, so that our aspiration to be the best in the world is realised—but we are some way from that goal. I am concerned about the ratio, as are many other hon. Members.

I talk about my local GPs because that is my experience. Generally, I have a very good relationship with them; they are very good GPs. I speak with them occasionally. I also have a good relationship with the members of the new primary care group. We have meetings and, occasionally, we even have dinner together—including groups of GPs—so that we can keep up to date and in touch with one another.

Nevertheless, one hears—sometimes through the community health council, but sometimes through cases brought to me personally; I am sure that other hon. Members have the same experience—of cases in which patients have not been treated appropriately. In such cases, it is very difficult for patients first, to make a judgment, and secondly, to challenge a GP. In asking a difficult question, one may put at risk one's good relationship with the GP. We all appreciate those difficulties. Those patients are able to go to their CHC or to me, as their Member of Parliament. Ultimately, however, they have to be able to go to an ombudsman.

I should like to digress slightly to deal with one point, although I think that it is legitimately within the ambit of this debate. I believe that group practices are better than single GP practices in avoiding a patient's need to visit an ombudsman. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister and her colleagues to try to persuade as many single GP practitioners as possible to join together in group practices. Group practices are a way of avoiding problems, as doctors within the group are mutually supportive and are able to consult one another if there is doubt about a patient's case.

Recently, I had a case where a patient complained about one member of a group practice, went to another member, was diagnosed with a serious condition and referred to hospital. Previously, the patient had been prescribed analgesics and told to go home to bed. A second opinion can be important, and it is quite easy to obtain one within a group practice. Moreover, within such practices there are collective pressures on doctors to ensure that care standards remain high.

Although I have no statistics to support the contention, I suspect that group practices have fewer problems than single member practices have. I am not saying that single GP practices do not do a very good job in most cases. However, there are GPs who perhaps belonged to a group practice, did not have a happy experience there, chose to go out on their own and, subsequently, have had difficulties with certain patients. Those patients need to be able to go to an ombudsman.

I suspect that it is precisely those GPs, especially if they are older, who would be able to take retirement as a way out of facing a difficult situation—to avoid dealing with the complaint of a patient who has been misdiagnosed and treated wrongly in one way or another. Mistakes are possible in the best of worlds. However, I think that group practices are better at preventing most mistakes from occurring initially, and at dealing with them if they do occur.

I have a personal experience that demonstrates that there are differences between individual members of the community. Some constituents are professionals. Some, like me, may have a scientific and even quasi-medical background. Some years ago, I went to my GP and told him that I had an umbilical hernia and needed an operation. He was slightly affronted by my presumption and said, "I'll examine you and decide what's wrong with you." He examined me and said, "You have an umbilical hernia and need an operation." In such situations, my wife calls me "clever clogs". I hasten to add that I would not presume to make a self-diagnosis in every case.

Most members of the population are not capable of making a self-diagnosis, but have to rely absolutely on their GP's word for what is wrong with them. If one is given an analgesic for a malign tumour, for example, it is a serious mistake. Pressure on GPs must be maintained. Even good professionals must be kept up to the mark and know that there is a complaints procedure that really works. They must know that there are no loopholes that will enable them to escape their responsibilities.

As I said, most members of the population—most of my constituents—are not as pompous as I am and therefore do not think that they know what is wrong with them. They depend on their GP. It is absolutely vital that, when they go to their GP, they know that they are talking to a professional who is up to the job and who will do his or her very best to ensure that they are diagnosed and treated correctly. The Bill will help to ensure that every GP behaves appropriately and professionally towards their patients.

10.26 am

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) on coming fourth in the lottery for private Member's Bills. I aspire to obtaining such a slot, but suspect that I shall have to serve in the House for another 40 years before I do so. I may not make it. The right hon. Gentleman—who has made it—has chosen to address a very sensitive issue. Although I understand why he chose it, I should like to raise a few related issues, on which I invite interventions—particularly by the Minister—if I need to be put right.

I am what is known as a cynical individual. I thought that, originally, our national health service was based on the concept that our doctors are not employees, but contractors, and that we pay them as contractors. Under that contract, complaints are dealt with on an almost commercial basis. We are able to investigate complaints about the performance of specific aspects of the contract, but only on those specific aspects. Under the contract, the patient is less a traditional consumer—a consumer is able to choose a service and decide whether to pay for it—and more a recipient of the service. The health service commissioners look after patients' rights and welfare under the contract, to ensure that we are getting a good deal. That is one of the problems.

Let us suppose, as an analogy, that a garage down the road is selling Fords, Rovers and Mercedes, that someone bought a Ford from it, and that the car turned out to have a problem. How would we feel if, when the person complained, the garage owner said, "I no longer sell Fords", and that person had no contractual right to complain directly? Patients are in that type of ball game.

I have no problem with the Bill, which starts to address that issue, but I want to know why we are not going further in amending the legislation. Like the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), I think that regulation of the private sector should be tightened up. I am not against a nanny state, because we have a duty to protect our citizens from those who do not provide a good level of service, in whichever sphere it is provided.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins), who focused in his speech on single general practitioner practices, I should like to try to put the situation in the health service in perspective. I have frequent contact with the medical profession and I see my doctor regularly. At his surgery, we often spend five minutes on my case and 10 minutes on his, as he describes problems in the health service. What are some of those problems?

When my doctor joined his practice, there had been 1,200 applicants for the post. A few years ago there was another opening for a partner, but there were two only applicants. If we are to maintain high service levels, there will have to be competition in the profession. Britain is not, however, churning out enough well-qualified, good doctors to meet our needs. We therefore have many single member practices, located primarily—although this is not written in gospel—in the poorest inner-city areas. Many capable, good doctors decide to join a group practice in the leafy suburbs and shires of England. We shall end up with a different strata of service. How can an ombudsman, or commissioner, say that the level of service is not good enough?

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I follow what my hon. Friend is saying, but as a London Member I am concerned that he does not recognise the excellent work of dedicated general practitioners in group practices on housing estates, who carry out forward-looking work and are in the forefront of developing the NHS. I suspect that some of the practitioners to whom my hon. Friend is referring may be a little behind the game.

Mr. Jenkins: I did put in the caveat that I was not speaking specifically. Of course, the more challenging work needs to be done where health needs are greatest—in poor, deprived, inner-city areas. I am well aware that emphasis should be placed on urban areas. It all may look fine on paper, but if we ask the commissioner to hound down the bad doctors, he may say, "If we get rid of the bad doctors, who will take their place?" We do not have enough doctors to go round. The statistics show that the worst covered areas are in deprived inner cities. Doctors will not want to work in those areas because the work is hard and the rewards are not sufficiently good. They would rather have an easy life.

In considering the legislation, we must ensure that the commissioner is in a position not only to name and shame, but to question the Government.

Mr. Hammond: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on from single-handed practices, I remind him that single-handed practitioners bring value to the system in sparsely populated rural areas. I am sure that he will agree that in pressing the case for group practices, for all the valid reasons that he and the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) have outlined, he would not want

[Mr. Hammond]

that to result in denial of access in sparsely populated rural areas as people were forced to travel further to get to a GP.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We must be careful that we do not go wide of the Bill and get into a general health service debate.

Mr. Jenkins: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You jumped in just in time to stop me responding to that intervention. However, I totally agree with the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) about the problems in sparsely populated areas.

I am trying to set the legislation in the context of what is possible in the real world. It is no good passing laws that are unenforceable. Not only must we close the loopholes, we must discuss the role of the commissioner and how the providers of health care should be brought into line. That includes the role of the British Medical Association and the General Medical Council.

We should ask why it is so difficult to investigate the work of a doctor. I hate to refer to specific cases, so I shall speak hypothetically of a case in which a doctor who had been culpable of the death of a young child continued to practice for more than 20 years before his right to practice was withdrawn. Why are we not getting such people out of the system? Why are they not retrained?

I am very lucky in that the GPs in my local practice have worked together closely for the past three or four years. When they become a trust, one of the doctors will have the role of a mentor. One of his functions will be to draw up the standards of his colleagues. I welcome that, but who will drive up his standards? Who will watch the watchers? The health authorities will lose power when the cash goes directly to the trusts, and when that happens who will control them? I worry that if we do not have an independent commissioner to act on behalf of the patient rather than the purchaser, we shall force people to go to the law. However, lawyers will only take a case that is winnable.

As the hon. Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) said, we should also recognise that, on retirement, a GP should not be hounded until his dying day. There must be a reasonable time limit for investigations. However, a GP must not be placed in the position where he cannot work for the health authority or the NHS, but can continue to practice in the private sector in a practice that was purchased and built up using public moneys.

My local GP practice, as a former fundholder, was expanded using money that was not spent on patient care. The receptionist is employed by the practice. He is a contractor who gives me a ticket. I then go to a private shop where a pharmacist gives me drugs produced by a private company. The only time I meet an employee of the health service is when I go to hospital. Yet we speak as though we had a publicly run service staffed by public employees. It is not; it has always been a publicly funded private service. We must maintain safe scrutiny on behalf of the patients. At the end of the day, the commissioner must be the patients' champion.

My hon. Friend the Minister, in particular, must recognise that the Bill, welcome though it is, is only a small part of what must be a continuing programme to try to improve the delivery of a quality health service.

10.37 am

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) on securing his place in the ballot and selecting such an important subject for his private Member's Bill. Its long title goes beyond the specific matters in the legislation and raises wider issues.

Perhaps I should declare a sort of interest. Although I have never been an ombudsman, in my practice as a personal injury lawyer, I have taken a few pounds off the NHS in respect of medical negligence claims. Obviously, I have not done so since I was elected as I would not dream of pursuing my own party on such issues. Nor do I have the time to practise and be a Member of Parliament. However, my experience and that of my law firm in dealing with medical negligence cases against the NHS and the private sector provide a certain insight into how the NHS deals with complaints and how the ombudsman service works.

The reason why the Bill is so important is set out in the health service ombudsman's annual report on the health service commissioner for England, Scotland and Wales 1998-99 at paragraph 4.13 which states:

> It was inevitable that the experience of the first few years of my extended jurisdiction would raise problems caused by the wording of the legislation which governs my role . . . A further issue on which I have expressed my concerns to the Department of Health is my inability to investigate complaints against GPs who retire or cease NHS work after the events complained of—or even during my investigation.

He stated that he was advised by his lawyers that the wording of the 1993 Act

> precludes me from investigating such a complaint if the GP has left NHS work since the event complained of, and requires me to discontinue my investigation if the GP retires before or during my investigation. That occurred in two cases in 1998-99. In my view this is a clear injustice. It is unfair to complainants, and has the effect of giving GPs—and, by the same token, other FHS practitioners—immunity from investigation by me after they retire, which is not shared by clinicians employed by Health Authorities and Trusts: I may investigate their actions after they retire, in the context of a complaint against their employing organisation.

He also expresses the hope that there will be an early legislative opportunity to deal with the problem.

The words of the health service commissioner are important, because he raises the issue in detail, but the issue goes further. The right hon. Member for Wealden mentioned a case that was referred to by the Consumers Association in *Which?*, and the facts of that case support what he is trying to achieve. The facts bear restating, because they concern a reader, Mr. Peter Smith, who contacted *Which?* after the investigation into his wife's GP was dropped. *Which?* states:

> Peter's wife, Dorothy, a retired headteacher, died from leukaemia, and Peter complained to the ombudsman that Dorothy's GP hadn't diagnosed it.
>
> In the months before her death, Dorothy had visited her GP several times. But she was diagnosed only after she'd paid for private tests and another GP had acted on the results. Sadly, she died three months after this.
>
> Peter had complained to the Health Service Commissioner, but the Commissioner dropped his investigation on legal advice when he discovered that Dorothy's GP had retired from his practice.

That is a scandal and clearly reveals a loophole. The Consumers Association, in its briefing on the Bill, said that it

> means that . . . complaints, which have been deemed as worthy of investigation by the Health Service Commissioner's Office are not seen through to their logical conclusion . . . Important information about a practitioner's performance may never come to light while the individual practitioner can continue to treat other patients . . . Practitioners who are concerned about the outcome of the Health Service Ombudsman's investigation can simply retire from NHS practice as a means of avoiding having to answer for their actions—

and most importantly—

> Patients are denied their right to have their complaint thoroughly considered and investigated.

The right hon. Member for Wealden referred to the actions that have been taken by the Home Office to deal with that loophole in relation to the police service, in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. I shall not pursue that point, save to say that if it is important for police officers, it is equally important—if not doubly so—for doctors. In that context, Nick Stace, the senior public affairs officer at the Consumers Association, has said:

> GPs should not be allowed to get away with avoiding complaints by simply retiring. If GPs have got something to hide, there is even more reason for the public to know. Consumers want fair treatment. This Bill is an obvious first step in achieving this.

I also contacted Action for Victims of Medical Accidents and it also supports the Bill. It said:

> We welcome this Bill, which is intended to close a loophole that allows doctors to avoid investigation by the Ombudsman by retiring.
>
> The Ombudsman does not lightly undertake an investigation—

I shall give some of the statistics on that later—

> If a doctor has behaved in such a way that the Ombudsman has decided that his behaviour should be investigated it is important from the point of view of the patient or the patient's relatives that the investigation takes place. For the doctor to be able to escape being investigated simply by retiring is not only unjust but leaves the impression that doctors are not accountable.
>
> Lack of accountability has been the major issue for patients for years . . . It is only recently that the Ombudsman has been allowed to investigate matters of clinical judgment . . . That was a major source of frustration to patients.
>
> To those, however, who find themselves in the position where the Ombudsman actually is able to investigate, and agrees to investigate, only to have the doctor escape investigation by simply retiring, it seems a travesty of justice.

I echo those comments.

I also contacted the local medical committee in my local health service area of Barnet and it also supports the Bill. The BMA also supports the Bill, and has said:

> Retiring from the NHS does not prevent the GP to continue to practise as a locum—a temporary stand-in doctor—or to practise privately.

That is an important point when one considers the role that locums play in the NHS, especially in the inner cities—as my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) pointed out—in covering overnight care. GPs are run off their feet during the day and house calls at night are often done by locums or contracting services brought in by the GPs. Often, locums see patients in great distress, at times when they might not be entirely clear in their descriptions of their symptoms. The locums also do not know the patients' histories, and one of the great strengths of our family doctor service is the continuity that comes from the same practice looking after the same family for generation after generation. That can break down if a locum is called out to cover for illness or holiday, or to provide overnight care. There is, therefore, a greater risk that problems may arise with locums.

Mr. Jenkins: If a locum has no access to individual records and is called out, as part of a commercial activity, and then makes a mistake because of the lack of access to those records, is his competence or the system in question?

Mr. Dismore: Both would possibly be in question, but we have to be realistic. As it becomes more common for records to be computerised, we may have an answer to that problem, but it is inevitable that locums will be used. My concern is not the competent locum, who will bear in mind the conditions in which he has to operate—which may include not having a complete medical history—but those doctors who have retired from the NHS to avoid an inquiry by the ombudsman and who still practise as locums. Their competence may be in question, as well as their ability to operate in the circumstances that I have described.

It is important that the BMA welcomes the Bill. It supports the initiative

> to ensure that a complaint against a GP could be investigated regardless of whether or not the GP retired from the NHS and to remove the loophole through which GPs can evade investigation. Information as to the performance of the doctor revealed in the investigation would assist in the assessment of the GP as part of the revalidation process and as part of any investigation by the General Medical Council.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean), who is no longer in her place, made an interesting point about time limits, which are not addressed in the Bill. While I understand the point made by her and my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth, we must proceed cautiously. When considering the complaints procedure in the NHS, of which the ombudsman forms part and which the Bill aims to improve, we need also to consider the relationship between the complaints procedure and clinical negligence cases. If the time limits for complaints are less generous than those set out in statutory and common law, we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water, in that the only remedy then available to the patient who wanted to make a complaint after the time for complaint had run out would be to go to law. I am sure that we all agree that it would be better if we could devise a system that satisfied complaints without recourse to law.

Mr. Jenkins: It is one thing to have a time limit of, say, six years, but a catalogue of events may stretch back 20 years. Memories fade and records are not necessarily kept, so justice cannot be achieved after such a long time.

Mr. Dismore: I do not wish to start a peroration about the way in which the limitations legislation works, because that would stretch your patience a little too far, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I still keep up to date by reading the law reports in the quiet hours while waiting for late-night votes and many cases involve interpretation of the law on limitations. While we have a standard bar of three years for bringing a claim, there are many exceptions and it is important that those exceptions are translated into any complaints procedure in the NHS. The

[Mr. Dismore]

most important exception is the date of knowledge exception, because people may be injured by an incompetent doctor but not know that they have been injured until several years later when the symptoms re-emerge. We read frequently of cases in which patients have been troubled by something for several years and they are opened up and it is found that a bit from some previous operation had been left inside them. There is no way for patients to know about that, as they are unconscious during operations. All they know is that there is something wrong with them. We have to be careful about introducing time limits, and the limits set out in the legislation are the ones that should be introduced into the ombudsman process. Serious problems could arise if we were to do otherwise.

My main problem with the Bill is that it does not go far enough. The reports from the health service commissioners and from the Select Committee on Health, which has examined the matter over several years, point out serious problems with the original Health Service Commissioners Act 1993. Its most serious loophole was that it placed clinical negligence outside the complaints procedure. That loophole was closed by the Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Act 1996, but many problems remain. I hope that we will be able to plug more of the loopholes in the 1993 Act as we consider this Bill in Committee.

The Bill has an ambitious long title. It is to

Amend the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993.

That ambition is let down somewhat by the modesty of the amendment that it proposes. However, the scope of the long title would be sufficient to allow the concerns expressed by hon. Members of all parties to be addressed.

On 7 December 1999, *GP* magazine highlighted one of the problems of the existing system. It reported:

the Medical Defence Union's deputy head of advisory service, Dr. Patrick Hoyte, said the powers of the NHS ombudsman were so weak it was unlikely a GP would feel compelled to retire to escape a ruling.

He told *GP*: "The ombudsman can only name and shame. How much of a sanction that is is debatable. I'd be surprised if a GP would think of retiring to avoid an investigation.

I think in cases where GPs have retired it may be purely coincidental."

That may or may not be true, but the Medical Defence Union gives the game away when it states that the ombudsman has very few powers. The Bill may catch one or two more doctors who could be named and shamed, but it will not solve the problems of most of the patients who resort to the ombudsman.

The quotation in *GP* magazine is instructive. The Medical Defence Union's job is to insure doctors against clinical negligence claims, and it has done more than any other body to obstruct complaints being brought and satisfactorily disposed of. It tells doctors to be careful about what they say to patients for fear of compromising their legal position. It fights medical negligence cases tooth and nail and strings them out for years. It is part of the problem, not the solution. By rubbishing the ombudsman service in that way, it is ensuring only that there will be more work for the insurance companies, for whom more complaints brought through the courts mean more trade.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I respect the hon. Gentleman's wisdom, gained as a practising lawyer in this field, but I hope that he is not suggesting that the Bill should be dropped because it does not go far enough. Wider reform would be a matter for the Government, but we must get our priorities right and deal with what we know we can deal with. The Bill has raised no objections and is a modest but significant improvement on the 1993 Act. We should not wait for the grand legislative scheme that he is beginning to outline. It is hard for me to swallow the concept of waiting and throwing the Bill out at this stage. I cannot foresee the Government including the provision in a Queen's Speech, given that there is already a long waiting list of measures bidding for recognition by the House of Commons.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that whatever modest change the Bill may make should go ahead, and that we should not spend a great deal of time trying to do what we know the Government one day may wish to do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) has made an important point. The Bill before us is a very narrow piece of proposed legislation, and it is determined by its title and by its contents. The hon. Gentleman is looking at matters that could be amended at another time, and I remind him that we can consider only what is before us this morning.

Mr. Dismore: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, the Bill's long title states that the aim is to amend the 1993 Act. That is very ambitious, and I believe that it would be in order for us to table amendments in Committee to deal with the shortcomings in the existing system identified by me and other hon. Members.

I have no objection to the Bill. I support what the right hon. Member for Wealden is trying to achieve. However, the long title permits us to address other issues by means of amendments to the Bill in Committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Perhaps I can assist the hon. Gentleman. As I mentioned, the Bill's scope is determined not only by its title, but by its content. He must confine himself to the content of the Bill.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Hopkins: I am slightly worried by something that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) said. Will he say whether problems could arise at the interface between the areas covered by the Bill and the legislation that it amends, and the areas that are not? Is it not important to ensure clear definition so that the Bill's scope is as wide as possible? If the limits of its application are blurred, people might be able to evade its provisions.

Mr. Dismore: That is an important point. We have to look at the role of the ombudsman, which is clearly set out in his report. He states:

My core role as Health Service Ombudsman is to deal with complaints. My office is not at core an audit or educational body, although we do a lot of work to feed the outcomes of our work into those important areas.

The ombudsman is part of a much wider NHS system of dealing with complaints, and we have to see his role in that context.

I shall not test the House's patience by going through the whole NHS complaints procedure, but we must understand why people get frustrated when they bring a complaint against a GP who has retired or who goes on to retire. Before the ombudsman can get involved, the internal complaints procedure has to be exhausted. One of the problems with the internal complaints procedure is that it takes so long.

The first stage of the internal procedure is the local resolution, under which the health authority trust and the relevant primary care practices are required to establish procedures for investigating and resolving complaints. If that process fails, the second stage is the independent review panel. Patients and carers who are not satisfied with the outcome of local resolution are entitled to request an independent review to consider the complaint. If they make that request, the complaint is reviewed by a convener, who is usually a non-executive director of the relevant trust or authority.

Patients who are still not satisfied can refer the matter to the health service commissioner. The Bill seeks to solve the problem of GPs who retire before a complaint to the ombudsman can be determined.

It is my experience, and I am sure that it is shared by hon. Members who have had to deal with complaints against doctors, that the NHS internal complaints procedure can take many months to grind through the various stages. For example, I was told about the case of a woman who underwent a biopsy on her cervix, having been assured that it would not affect her fertility. The procedure was not properly carried out and in fact they sewed up her cervix. She was not happy: she obtained the medical records, made a complaint, the trust said that it had lost the records, she sent it copies, there was a lot of delay, no meetings were offered, the trust would not agree to an independent review, she lost faith and she litigated the case.

If it takes perhaps a year before a case even reaches the ombudsman and the ombudsman then takes another year to investigate it, the general practitioner concerned could have died of old age, never mind retired, by the time the case is concluded. We must examine the way in which the ombudsman looks into the complaints procedure. The point was made that GPs would retire anyway. They may not be doing it to avoid litigation or a complaint, but we must bear that eventuality in mind. If the complaints procedure takes for ever to exhaust, retirement before a conclusion is reached is likely to occur.

The other problem that may motivate GPs is the appalling attitude that doctors sometimes exhibit when complaints are made against them. They try all sorts of tricks to avoid complaints, which is regrettable. In his report, the ombudsman stresses—

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I have been listening with fascination to the hon. Gentleman's remarks. As I have the impression that he may be intending to continue for some time, and I know from experience that his energy is almost inexhaustible, could he give us an estimate of how long he intends to continue wittering?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not for the hon. Gentleman to concern himself about how long another hon. Member speaks. As long as he is in order, he is entitled to speak.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to you for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was talking about the attitude of doctors to complaints and the tricks that they sometimes try to avoid liability.

Mr. Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman is making a point about doctors' attitudes, does he think that doctors are different in that respect from other professionals, particularly lawyers?

Mr. Dismore: I think that there are good and bad in both professions. I would be out of order if I digressed about the way in which the Law Society is, or is not, trying to clean up its act. Reputable legal practices—including, I hope, my own—have proper complaints procedures, as required by the Law Society. They view complaints in the correct light—not as something to be frightened of, but an opportunity to work out what went wrong, put it right, learn from experience and improve the processes. Some doctors, however, do not regard complaints in that light, although the ombudsman made it clear in his report that he thought that the British Medical Association—the profession—viewed complaints more constructively.

I should like to answer the hon. Gentleman's question by quoting something from the magazine *Pulse*. It was said by the chair of the local medical committee in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Wealden and is revealing about his attitude towards complaints. Dr. Ted King was commenting on the Bill and I think that he was having a bit of a pot at the right hon. Member for Wealden, quite unfairly. Dr. King said, in opposing the Bill, that the mood was more about revenge than justice. He said that serious complaints could still be pursued by patients through the civil courts, so patients would mainly use the new law to pursue trivial grievances. Dr. King said:

> Most complaints are not serious—there is a large revenge element which occurs when patients don't get what they want.

Those comments were made directly about the Bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman is going wide of the debate before us. He cites cases of neglect or possible neglect, but the Bill deals specifically with doctors who seek to retire after a charge is made against them. That makes it a very narrow matter indeed.

Mr. Dismore: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I referred to that quote because it shows the right hon. Member for Wealden's own local medical committee having a go at the Bill and, presumably, indirectly having a pot at him. I am sure that he is far too clever a politician to have a go at the doctors in his constituency, but I do not see why I cannot at least answer on his behalf.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: I am surprised that anyone should wish to have a poke at me on this subject. I have always enjoyed very close and friendly relationships with the medical profession in my

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

constituency and elsewhere. Two members of my family are doctors, by the way, but that has nothing to do with the Bill.

Mr. Dismore: I assume from what the right hon. Gentleman says that neither of them are close to retirement.

My point goes back to what I was saying regarding the Medical Defence Union. If the ombudsman's service is to operate effectively and people are not to avoid liability by using the loopholes that exist and those identified by hon. Members, there will have to be a sea change in the way in which some—not all—doctors, approach complaints.

Mr. Hopkins: A propos the recent comments made by Conservative Members, may I say that I am finding my hon. Friend's speech particularly interesting and illuminating? Within the scope of the debate, I hope that he will make every point that he has at his disposal, because I am learning a lot from listening to him.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If I stray too widely from the matter before us, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you will bring me back to order. Perhaps I will be able to fill in the gaps for my hon. Friend in the Tea Room afterwards. The Bill raises important points, and I have striven to put it in context. We cannot look at the health service ombudsman without looking at how complaints first arise.

The BMA's efforts in continuing education and re-evaluation are important in this context. If I may refer to the recent intervention of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), my profession is concerned to ensure that lawyers have continuing education and keep themselves up to date. We have put in place all sorts of measures to achieve that. I am pleased that the BMA has recognised the need for re-evaluation of doctors.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is again straying from the scope of the Bill.

Mr. Dismore: Doctors who will be retiring because they are coming to the end of their life in practice are the most likely to require re-evaluation and retraining. That is why I think that what the BMA said is important.

You have told me clearly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you are not minded to allow me to deal with some of the wider issues that have been raised in the debate by other hon. Members. I had hoped to be able to say something about the problems of private medicine. Other hon. Members managed to get away with it, but I get the impression that I will not.

I turn to the important issue of sanctions. The ombudsman's service, as presently constituted, does not have the powers that it needs to deal effectively with cases. We heard earlier that it was pretty much a toothless tiger: all it can do is name and shame. If a GP retires and is not in practice, naming and shaming will not make much difference to him. I hope that, if the Bill proceeds to Committee, one of the issues that we shall discuss is the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): The sanctions that the commissioner can impose are important to the public and how they respond to his remit. Has my hon. Friend any idea as to what sanctions might be appropriate given that, for the patients concerned, what is often most important is that their grievance has been aired, listened to and dealt with positively by the commissioner?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The provision of sanctions is not raised by the Bill.

Mr. Dismore: That is a very serious omission, but I shall not try your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker, further.

Sanctions are not just a question of securing an apology or an ex gratia payment. They are important for doctors who, by retiring, try to avoid the liabilities that might attach to them. That point is addressed in paragraph 4.6 of the ombudsman's report.

Mr. Jenkins: My hon. Friend mentioned the length of time that it takes for an internal inquiry to happen and trigger the point at which the ombudsman is brought in. That time might allow the GP to come to arrangements regarding his retirement decision. If my hon. Friend is lucky enough to serve on the Committee considering the Bill—I doubt whether he will be—will he press the Minister to ensure that the ombudsman is brought in much earlier? People do not think that they will get justice if a doctor judges a doctor who judges another doctor and the process is made to drag on until the ombudsman, whom the public regard as their champion, is introduced.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I shall certainly not be taking part in the Committee.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point about the way in which medical complaints are investigated. However, I get the feeling from your previous remarks, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you will not permit me to go down that route. Perhaps that is unfortunate.

The health service commissioner's report makes an important point about when an investigation is kicked off but he does not follow it through. This is one of the ills that the Bill aims to address. In paragraph 4.6 of his report, the commissioner says:

> During 1998-99 there were other occasions in which complaints to me raised issues which I thought appropriate to pass to the regulatory authority concerned, because there was a possible risk to the health or safety of patients.

That is one of the points with which the Bill deals. He adds:

> However, the effect of the wording of the legislation governing my role is to restrict the circumstances in which I can pass such information to another organisation, such as the GMC or the Commission for Health Improvement. For example, I cannot disclose information to another organisation if I decide not to investigate the complaint, or if the matter of concern falls to be disclosed in one of my reports.

The Bill deals with doctors who retire, and that relates to the circumstances that the commissioner has described when his investigation cannot continue.

The ombudsman adds:

> As a result, paradoxically, I have less scope to bring concerns to the GMC, for example, than a private citizen has. And my medical and nursing advisers are in a potentially invidious position if they consider that they have a professional duty to act on concerns arising from their scrutiny of a complaint to me.

That is a particular ill with which the Bill seeks to deal in relation to GPs who retire, but only in so far as the investigation can continue. If the ombudsman decides for some reason that, after starting to investigate a complaint, he will not continue with it, he might not refer that information on to the General Medical Council or the Commission for Health Improvement.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I am bit concerned by my hon. Friend's use of the word "retire". A doctor aged 30 could easily retreat into the private sector while the heat was on. After the inquiry has been dropped, there is no reason why he should not return to the health service. I do not want my hon. Friend to give the impression that the provisions apply only to elderly doctors who have begun to get slack.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I would have liked the opportunity to comment on private medicine, but given the views that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have expressed, I suspect that you will not allow me to go down that route. However, other Members have raised that point.

We need to consider what people expect from the complaints procedure against a GP who has retired or one who has gone into private medicine, and the Bill will deal with cases involving GPs who retire. People expect to have their complaints properly and promptly investigated. They want to know what happened and they want to be sure that it will not happen to anyone else. Many of the problems that result in claims for medical negligence would disappear if we could create a system in which complaints are investigated and the doctors concerned apologise.

I can give an example from my own experience. I was a victim of medical negligence myself. I had to have an injection in a shoulder for a tendon problem. When I see a doctor in hospital I have always made it clear what I do for a living just to keep him on his toes. However, we became so involved in discussing that issue that the doctor injected the wrong shoulder—a classic example of getting the wrong limb. He immediately explained what had happened, what the effects would be, said that he was sorry and that was the end of the story. I have suffered no long-term ill effects—as far as I know anyway. The approach taken by that doctor is what we are trying to achieve by having a more effective complaints procedure in which the ombudsman is the pinnacle of the process.

The Bill may have implications for resources. We know from the ombudsman's report that the number of cases that he investigates is not that great compared with the total number of complaints that he receives. In 1998-99, he received 2,869 complaints, of which 119 were investigated. Of the 119, roughly half the complaints—62—were about clinical matters. His report suggests that two or three of those complaints would have been caught by the Bill, so quite a few complaints could be investigated under it.

I am concerned about the principle of quis custodiet custodes and making the ombudsman system work effectively. His report illustrates graphically the length of time that he takes to deal with complaints. I am concerned that the Bill may increase his work load to such a degree that he cannot deal with complaints effectively.

The end of the report deals with the number of cases and investigations that the ombudsman has handled. It takes up to a year—three or four years ago, it took even longer than that—to deal with a complaint and that simply undermines the whole system. If the Bill adds to his work load—he investigates only a small proportion of the total cases involved—even by only 10 or 20 cases and the resources are not there to enable him to do his job effectively, it will have a knock-on effect on other cases and the undesirable consequences that I described earlier. The complaints process will take longer, people will become unsatisfied and they will resort to law as the only recourse left open to them.

We need to ensure that the public have confidence in the complaints procedure. To do that we have to ensure that it is timely and effective. You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have prevented me from describing the ways in which the present system is not effective because it has no teeth. There are gaping loopholes in the Bill in relation to private medicine and Members on both sides of the House have referred to that. There are also many other problems, such as the lack of co-ordination between social services and the NHS.

Although the Bill deals with one small loophole, we should take the opportunity to address the wider issues. I am pleased that in response to the request from the health service ombudsman, the Government set up a wide-ranging review of public sector ombudsmen. That was done in March 1999, following the submission of a paper to the Government—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to continue that point. I remind him that Standing Orders of the House give the Chairman powers to prevent him from continuing in this manner, and he is getting close to the point at which I will invoke them.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was just about to conclude my remarks, which may cause relief to many.

I say to the right hon. Member for Wealden that although I welcome and support his Bill, it will not solve the problems of the ombudsman. The real answer to those problems is the conclusion of the review that the Government have set up to deal with all the problems of ombudsmen generally, including co-ordination.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Whatever the truth of that, the hon. Gentleman will agree that in the meantime we might as well take what is on offer and pass the Bill, and the Government can deal with the wider scheme much later. The Bill will not upset the Government's programme and does not contravene anything that they have proposed. I hope that if he cares to serve in Committee, the Bill will receive his support there.

Mr. Dismore: I said at the beginning of my speech that I have no objection to the Bill. It is worthy, but it is very little, and although its title is ambitious, the Bill will not fulfil those ambitions. I wish the Bill good luck in its remaining stages, but we will eventually have to address the other issues. I would be satisfied if the Minister, in her response to the debate, indicated that the Government will introduce much broader proposals very soon. If that process is going to take a long time, the right hon. Gentleman has a valid point.

11.22 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I shall be brief. Listening to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), I often have the impression that no one has told him that in this place, unlike in his previous profession, there is no meter ticking and he is not being paid by the hour.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) on securing his place in the ballot and introducing this small but important Bill. We are dealing with a simple solution to a narrow problem. The hon. Member for Hendon suggested that the work load of the health service commissioner might explode as a result of the Bill, but he was being disingenuous. Very few cases are affected by the loophole that my right hon. Friend has identified. The hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) described the health service commissioner as a backstop provision, after other mechanisms for dealing with complaints in the health service have failed. The Bill will therefore affect only a few people.

Mr. Jenkins: Although I accept that the Bill will affect only a few people, my concern is that the commissioner's existing work load is such that those few cases will lengthen the time in which cases are dealt with, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon said. We need to put in extra resources to ensure that that does not happen.

Mr. Hammond: I suggest that on resourcing the hon. Gentleman addresses the Minister.

To return to my point, although only a small number of people will be affected, at the moment those people are deprived, through the loophole, of the pursuit of justice. My right hon. Friend has introduced the Bill to remove that sense of injustice.

As hon. Members on both sides of the House have noted during the debate, this issue is, in broader terms, gaining increasing public awareness. There is the question of police officers who retire and avoid being pursued by the proper mechanisms for dealing with maladministration or misconduct. We amended the Protection of Children Act 1999, during its passage through the House, to ensure that it dealt not only with those whose misconduct was detected while they were employed, but with those whose crimes or misdemeanours were detected after their employment ceased. This Bill is riding a tide of public awareness.

The health service commissioner himself has drawn attention to the loophole, as the hon. Member for Hendon explained at some length by quoting from the commissioner's report. The problem arises because, unlike the secondary health care service—our hospitals—where the institutions are enduring and do not depend on the presence of individuals, most of our primary care services are provided by independent contractors, as the hon. Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) pointed out. Although primary care is publicly funded, the services are effectively privately provided. That means that when providers of general medical, optical and dental services retire or cease to offer those services to the NHS, they cannot be pursued by administrative mechanisms.

One of the objections to the Bill which has been mentioned by more than one hon. Member is relevance. It is suggested that because the health service commissioner has relatively blunt teeth, it is not conceivable that doctors would retire deliberately to avoid sanctions that are not very onerous. That misses the point. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden is suggesting not that doctors will retire for the explicit purpose of avoiding justice at the hands of the health service commissioner, but simply that when doctors retire or move out of the NHS, perhaps for reasons unrelated to complaints, those who are pursuing complaints may feel that they have been denied natural justice. Closing the loophole will address that.

There is a wider issue of the effectiveness of the health service complaints procedure and the question of whether the commissioner needs stronger powers. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) said, those concerns, legitimate though they are, are no excuse for inaction when in this private Member's Bill we have the opportunity for action without any cost to the Government's legislative time.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden and other hon. Members have drawn attention to questions about the role of the General Medical Council and the possible extension to the private sector of procedures for dealing with complaints and medical malpractice issues. Although we cannot debate that this morning, clearly there is a need for properly regulated mechanisms in the independent sector to ensure that patients are treated safely and properly, whether they choose to get medical treatment in the NHS or the private sector. It is the Government's primary responsibility to ensure a safe framework within which patients may make that choice.

I hope that the Government will in time recognise that and examine the health sector with the same evenhandedness with which they now propose to examine the residential and nursing care sector in the Care Standards Bill. Under that Bill, regulation of local authority and private sector provision will, for the first time, be placed on an even basis.

There is clearly a balance to be struck between the public's right to protection and the profession's need to self-regulate. Self-regulation must be seen to be working, and the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) made an important point about public confidence. It is in the public interest and that of the professions themselves that self-regulation works properly and is seen to do so. Even with proper, effective self-regulation, there will be a role for the health service commissioner as the final tier of the administrative complaints system in the NHS.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden has made modest proposals to deal with a problem that is highly specific, glaringly obvious, not very widespread, but none the less important. The Opposition will be sympathetic to Government proposals to improve the health service over time, but whatever the Minister can tell us today about the Government's wider intentions in the long-term should not be used as an excuse for inaction now. I hope that the Government are minded to allow my right hon. Friend's Bill to proceed to Committee for more detailed examination.

11.31 am

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I shall be brief. I am one of the Bill's supporters and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) on introducing it.

Having served with him in Committee and during late-night sittings in the Chamber, I have great admiration for the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). I admire his assiduity and the breadth of his parliamentary interests, but I seem to recollect that the length of his speeches is subject to a singular elasticity. If longevity becomes a punishable offence, he will face a lifetime ban from the House.

The subject of the Bill mirrors the frustration experienced by members of the Public Accounts Committee on numerous occasions when we have dealt with the national health service. I do not say that there is anything wrong with the trust structure of the NHS, but because of that structure incompetent, inefficient senior administrators who have failed need not leave the health service. All they have to do is leave one trust and move to another, picking up their severance pay on the way. Thus, they escape any penalty and avoid any risk of dismissal from the health service.

The target for which the right hon. Member for Wealden aims is a modest one, but it needs to be hit. The practice of using retirement as a means of evading accountability is well understood in this country's police forces, nowhere better than in the Metropolitan police, as the PAC discovered. The problem is greater in other spheres than the health service, but it must be addressed wherever it exists.

The issue of unfairness has been debated, and I shall not repeat points on which we all agree. One of the trends exacerbated by the problem is the greater use of litigation. I am not one of those who deplores the use of litigation in connection with the health service. I have sat through numerous inquiries into failures of the health service, although I should add that it has also had many successes. Nevertheless, the fact that litigation has become an appropriate response has to be deplored.

Many people are driven to the law because of the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the current systems, both in the NHS and the medical profession generally. Because the NHS has failed and the profession refuses to address the problem correctly, we have been forced down the American route, whereby litigation has in many cases become the sole outlet for the dissatisfaction and frustration felt by many of our constituents. We in south Wales have recently had the experience of a local man—not a constituent of mine—dying in a Swansea hospital after the wrong kidney was removed. That should not have happened. When such things happen, there must be accountability. There has to be justice for the family.

I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) has left the Chamber, because I wanted to issue a caution to him in connection with private Members' Bills. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know that I would never challenge your judgment on debate in the Chamber. However, as we are always told when we attempt to raise Committee matters on the Floor of the House, certain matters are for the Committee to deal with. The Chairman of the Committee might use his discretion to allow a far wider debate of the matter in hand. I caution my hon. Friend against attempting to exploit that in terms of amendments to the Bill.

All my experience as a Member of Parliament leads me to believe that the wider a private Member's Bill's scope, the less chance it has of reaching the statute book. In my 36 years in the House, I have never drawn number one in the ballot. We all dream of getting a great private Member's Bill passed, but only a few such Bills—four or five—are passed in the lifetime of a Parliament, and those only get through when the Government provide extra time. A private Member's Bill that goes the normal parliamentary route stands a far greater chance of reaching the statute book if it is well focused and kept within the minimum scope necessary to achieve its intended objectives.

If my hon. Friend becomes a member of the Committee, I encourage him to use whatever breadth the Chairman allows to air broader issues relating to the commissioner, but he should not attempt to insert extra provisions in the Bill that would make it far harder to get through Report, which is extremely limited and easily sabotaged.

11.36 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I welcome the opportunity to debate the important issues raised by the Bill introduced by the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith). The role of the health service commissioner is extremely important. Although the national health service has procedures for dealing with complaints, there are inevitably some cases that even its best endeavours cannot resolve to the complainant's satisfaction. When that happens, the commissioner provides an essential additional option for complainants, who might otherwise be left without the assurance that their complaint has been taken seriously and thoroughly investigated.

We have heard several useful contributions this morning; I shall refer briefly to some of them. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) expressed doubt about the wisdom of congratulating those who draw numbers high up in the private Members' ballot on their achievement. I am reminded of Napoleon's response on being told about the abilities of one of his generals: he asked, "But is he lucky?" We all know that both ability and an element of luck are needed for success in politics. I therefore congratulate the right hon. Member for Wealden on his luck and join my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon in congratulating him on his choice of Bill.

My hon. Friend is a supporter of the Bill, as are many eminent right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House and some outside organisations. My hon. Friend raised the question of the review of the complaints procedure as a whole. That takes us outside the remit of the Bill.

With great charm, the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) offered a caution about civil servants who might advise Ministers that, although the Bill is worthy, more can be done at a later stage, so it is best to do nothing now. That is the civil service rephrasing of "God, make me virtuous, but not yet." I hope that my colleagues and I will be able to resist temptation. The right hon. Gentleman also reminded the House of a previous achievement of the right hon. Member for Wealden. His contribution may be regarded as small, but he helped many older people and NHS patients by broadening access to meals on wheels. Today's Bill follows in a good tradition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) raised the important issue of time limits, to which I shall return later. In that context, she raised the question of

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

clinical standards in the NHS and in the private sector. It is important to realise that the NHS is a managed service, whereas the private sector is regulated. Thorough regulatory powers introduced in the Care Standards Bill will ensure, using various methods, that proper clinical standards are observed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) paid tribute to the ombudsmen and reminded us of some of the other enlightened developments from the Scandinavian countries. He was correct to point out that we have among the lowest general practitioner complements in Europe, and we therefore need to train more doctors. I am delighted that he intends to support the Government in that, rather than suggesting that we should all follow his example by diagnosing our own illnesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) questioned whether control and regulations could be taken wider. I tend to agree with other hon. Members who have commented that the fact that this is a small measure should not be allowed to detract from its contribution to ensuring better services. The Bill should be seen in a wider context.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) is now using his considerable legal skills to support the House and the Government, rather than pursuing medical negligence cases. Even though that will deprive some members of the public of his skills, I believe he does a much better job in this place. He raised the issue of sanctions and raised one concern which I shall take the opportunity to put right.

The commissioner has in the past expressed concern about his inability to pass information to other bodies. That problem was resolved in the Health Act 1999, which amends the Health Service Commissioners Act 1993. Since October 1999, the commissioner has been able to pass on information when he considers it necessary in the interests of patients' health, safety and welfare.

Finally, I express my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) for sharing his considerable experience of how to ensure the success of private Members' Bills. I congratulate him on being a sponsor of the Bill.

On the issue of other professionals, my right hon. Friend may be interested to know that, with regard to possible disciplinary action against police officers following retirement, the Home Office is taking the matter forward in the light of recommendations made in the report on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. I hope that we not only aspire to being a joined-up Government, but will show that that can be achieved.

Returning to the substantive matter of the Bill, may I take the opportunity to put on record the Government's admiration of, and gratitude for, the work of the commissioner and his office? Many of the speakers this morning confirmed my experience as a constituency Member. We are often faced with distressed or desperate constituents who come to see us as their last chance of getting their problem, whatever it may be, sorted out.We all know that it can take all our reserves of tact and sensitivity to deal with such situations, yet the commissioner's officers face them every day, and it is important to acknowledge the effort and commitment that that demands.

It may be useful to give a little background to the present situation. Until April 1996, the health service commissioner could not investigate complaints about family health services practitioners—that is, general practitioners, family dentists, pharmacists and opticians. They were explicitly excluded from his jurisdiction. Nor could he consider complaints about matters of clinical judgment, and the extent to which he could look at complaints about independent providers of health care to NHS patients was limited.

That changed in 1996, when the current NHS complaints procedures came into force. In parallel with those reforms, and in order to provide a consistent system for all NHS patients, the Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Act 1996 extended the jurisdiction of the commissioner to bring family health services providers, and complaints involving clinical judgment, within his remit. It also removed the limitations on his capacity to investigate independent providers.

The widening of the commissioner's remit represented the biggest change to his jurisdiction since the role was originally established. For the first time he was, and is, able to investigate complaints about any aspect of NHS treatment and services, regardless of where or how it was delivered. No one should underestimate the importance of that.

Nevertheless, as the right hon. Member for Wealden explained, there is a loophole in the wording of the 1996 Act. Sections 2A and 2B have been interpreted as requiring that the individual or organisation being complained about must still be providing NHS services at the time of the commissioner's investigation. If they are not, they are outside his jurisdiction. I understand from the commissioner's office that there have been a few cases where he has felt obliged to accept legal advice that he could not investigate a particular complaint because the practitioner involved had ceased to provide NHS services.

The right hon. Member for Wealden seeks in his Bill to plug that loophole by amending the wording of the 1996 Act so that, for example, retired GPs, or independent providers who have sold up, will remain subject to investigation by the commissioner.

I have considerable sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman's view on that. I also know that the commissioner himself has expressed concerns about the situation. Not only has he written to officials in the Department of Health, but he raised it in his annual report for 1998-99. I agree that it seems intrinsically unfair that complainants should not be able to pursue their concerns simply because the person about whom they wish to complain has retired. I understand also that it could be seen as a way for recalcitrant practitioners to avoid facing up to their responsibilities.

I should like to believe that the vast majority of practitioners would never behave in such an unprofessional manner, but I suppose the reality is that some will, given the opportunity offered by the loophole. Moreover, there is a further element of unfairness in that it is not a problem in the hospital sector, because it is the hospital trust as an organisation which is the subject of the complaint, not a particular individual in it. Thus the commissioner can investigate even if the clinician involved has retired, left the country, or whatever. It does not seem right that a complaint involving a retired hospital doctor can be pursued while one about a retired GP

cannot, so I understand and sympathise with what the right hon. Member for Wealden is trying to achieve in his Bill.

Opponents of the Bill may argue that, even if it were enacted, it would still not be possible to make GPs or private nursing home owners co-operate with the commissioner's investigations. That is not true. The commissioner has the same powers as a judge when it comes to obtaining evidence, papers and so on. I am certain that he would not hesitate to use those powers if he considered it necessary. However, they are useless if the individual involved is not within his jurisdiction in the first place. The key point is to get those ex-practitioners within his jurisdiction, as the Bill seeks to do.

I must also consider these issues from the perspective of accountability and trust. We take the accountability of GPs very seriously indeed. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told hon. Members on 1 February, the relationship between individual doctor and individual patient is built on trust. For that relationship of trust to work, GPs must be accountable for what they do. My right hon. Friend was speaking in a very different context on a very sombre occasion, following the sentencing of a GP for a series of crimes which Mr. Justice Forbes, the judge presiding in the trial, described as a calculating and cold-blooded perversion of his medical skills.

The independent inquiry that we have announced, chaired by Lord Laming of Tewin, will examine all aspects of that case and make recommendations to protect patients in the future. The inquiry will consider all the circumstances and it would be wrong of me to pre-empt that by dwelling on the case today.

However, there are two reasons why I have referred to it. The first concerns loopholes. As the right hon. Member for Wealden explained, there is a perceived loophole in the wording of the 1996 Act. We are not afraid to close loopholes where that is necessary. In the case to which I referred, we found that the way in which the NHS tribunal works meant that the NHS would continue to pay a person convicted of most serious crimes for about another month following the conviction. That was inconceivable, and we took action immediately to make sure that it did not happen.

We also found that there was nothing to require a doctor to disclose to prospective partners or to a health authority a past criminal conviction or a previous professional censure. In the case to which I referred, the doctor had a past conviction for obtaining and misusing a controlled drug and he had a record with the General Medical Council, but in the past that appeared to count for nothing. That, too, must change. There was also no requirement for GPs to report deaths in their surgeries or other serious incidents to health authorities. That, too, needs to change.

The case also put the existing powers and processes of the General Medical Council under the spotlight. We have said that the GMC's involvement in that case will be examined by the inquiry, so that lessons are learned and recommendations for reform made. However, we are also acting quickly to give the GMC the powers that it says it needs. They include: interim suspension, to enable the GMC to take action in the public interest; a new committee to consider interim suspension, with much greater lay involvement; and an ability to strike off for life except in the most exceptional circumstances. I repeat that we are not afraid to close loopholes when necessary in the interests of patients.

The second reason why I mention the case is the need for greater accountability of clinicians for the benefit of their patients. For a relationship built on trust to work as it should, it is important that patients can be assured that they can complain if they have a problem, that their complaint will be taken seriously and dealt with properly, and that if something has gone wrong, it will be put right.

The Government and the medical profession are taking action to modernise regulatory structures and to identify and deal with poor performance because of the need for better accountability of clinicians. That is why the GMC is developing proposals for assessment and revalidation at five-yearly intervals of all doctors' licences to practise. We are urging the GMC to keep up the momentum of developing those proposals.

To strengthen and underpin that work, the chief medical officer produced recommendations, which were published in November 1999, in his report "Supporting Doctors, Protecting Patients". His recommendations are comprehensive, and form part of a modernisation programme designed to prevent, identify and deal with the small minority of doctors whose performance gives cause for concern, and to take quick action to remedy that. For example, the chief medical officer proposes that there should be an annual appraisal of all doctors. That is a key proposal.

Appraisal will cover all aspects of a doctor's performance, including compliance with contractual requirements. The chief medical officer proposes that health authorities should be able to suspend a GP when the circumstances suggest that patients may be at risk. Until now, health authorities have been unable to do that. He further proposes that GPs' participation in external clinical audit should in future be mandatory. At present, it is not.

Consultation on the chief medical officer's proposals finished at the end of February. The GMC's proposals for assessment and revalidation will need to tie in with them. We shall now consider the responses as a matter of urgency, but we shall press ahead as quickly as possible with measures that benefit and ensure the safety of patients.

The need for true accountability means that we shall also apply the system of clinical governance to all doctors. That will promote high standards of care and ensure accountability in a way that has not existed before. It will place quality at the heart of health care by ensuring access to effective, prompt, high-standard care whenever a patient is treated in the NHS. Clinical governance provides NHS organisations and individual doctors with a framework for quality improvement.

Too often, we hear of incidents that occur in the NHS that should have been avoidable if the lessons of past experience had been properly learned. That is why we asked the chief medical officer to convene an expert group to examine the mechanisms whereby the NHS currently analyses and learns from adverse health incidents, and to make recommendations for improvements.

The main components of clinical governance are clear lines of responsibility and accountability for the overall quality of clinical care; a comprehensive programme of quality improvement activities; clear policies aimed at

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

managing risk; and procedures through which all professional groups can identify and remedy poor performance. It is about a positive, demonstrable change of culture to one of learning, so that quality infuses all aspects of the NHS's work. Our aim is a coherent framework for clinical quality improvement, on the basis of best activity and practice, and with the highest standards.

All those steps, which will improve the accountability of doctors without preventing them from getting on with their job of treating and caring for their patients, are essential and will be established. They will provide assurance and reassurance for patients. We have a responsibility for that.

However, we also have a responsibility to ensure that we are scrupulously fair to the practitioners and providers who could be affected by the proposals in the Bill. The right hon. Member for Wealden expressed the hope that the measure would not be perceived as providing for a witch hunt.

One of the key elements of any complaints process must be that it is fair to all parties. The proposals in the Bill would potentially leave the practitioners and providers involved susceptible to investigation by the commissioner indefinitely. To me, that seems just as unfair to those individuals as the current system—as perceived by those who object to it—is unfair to complainants. Speaking as a lawyer, may I say that even the legal system recognises the unfairness of indefinite liability in civil cases, and sets limitation periods. I therefore believe that if the extension to the commissioner's jurisdiction were introduced, it should not be an indefinite power, but should be appropriately time limited. That would remove the permanent sword of Damocles that would hang over the heads of those individuals—most of whom, we must remember, will have been committed hard-working people with no reason to suppose that they might be complained about. It will also deal with the perceived risk that I mentioned earlier of less scrupulous practitioners retiring or resigning simply to avoid investigation.

However, determining an appropriate time limit is not easy. The commissioner has a time limit within which complaints must be submitted to him. It is generally not more than one year after the complainant becomes aware of the events being complained about. However, I appreciate that the commissioner has discretion to waive the time limit in special circumstances.

Mr. Dismore: I have concerns about the time limit, which I expressed in my speech. I am worried about the mismatch between complaints through the complaints procedure and possible legal action. If one of our aims in improving the ombudsman's service is to get rid of litigation, does my hon. Friend believe that there is a case for reconsidering time limits to try and achieve that objective?

Ms Stuart: We need to have a time limit that matches other procedures and does not add to confusion, but that streamlines the process. One option might be to apply a similar time limit to complaints about ex-practitioners: a year under potential discretion. However, there are issues involving the way in which the commissioner should be expected to deal with cases in which he decides to exercise his discretion to waive his time limit, with the effect that the ex-practitioner will have been out of NHS practice for more than a year.

Another option might be to go for the three-year limitation period used in most cases by the civil justice system. That would be in line with practitioners' civil liabilities. Claims can still be brought against them after they have ceased NHS practice. That would also deal with circumstances in which the commissioner decides to apply his discretion to his own time limits.

Mr. Hammond: Can the Minister make it clear whether she is talking about a time limit for the initiation of the complaints process at its first level or for the commissioner's involvement? If the process at the lower tier had already started, would she allow it to continue without limit or is she saying that there should be no capability in any case to refer a retired person to the commissioner after a certain time had expired?

Ms Stuart: I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify that. The perceived loophole is that a practitioner is beyond the scope of existing measures if he is no longer in the NHS when a complaint is made. The issue is how long he has been out of the NHS and the time limit on pursuing him after he has left the service. If the Bill is to progress, we need to discuss an appropriate time limit, and the health service commissioner may have views on the most practical way forward. An open-ended time limit is unsatisfactory at this stage and I do not think that it would either help the commissioner or be fair to practitioners. We need to consider further what would be an appropriate time limit to take forward.

Mr. Alan Williams: In that case, will my hon. Friend consider the Government's tabling an amendment in Committee to deal with that problem and so perhaps make the Bill acceptable to them?

Ms Stuart: That is a useful way forward and I thank my right hon. Friend for his suggestion. If the Bill is to proceed, the Government would want to table an amendment. That would allow us the time to think things through in more detail and consult with the appropriate bodies.

Mr. McWalter: Does my hon. Friend not agree that the Bill would be a great improvement on current law even without such a change, and that we should consider it from that perspective?

Ms Stuart: I do. The Bill is a way forward and would be an improvement.

May I share some of the Government's concerns? A practitioner may still get off the hook if the time limit is brief, but we have to reach a compromise between what is fair and what is workable for all parties concerned. We must also remember, of course, that the commissioner does not have indefinite powers to investigate. The amendment that the Bill offers would not change that in any way.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the current situation is that there have been cases of the commissioner beginning an investigation only to have to discontinue it because the

practitioner resigns or retires. For example, in a case involving one GP, the statement of complaint was issued, but the commissioner was informed that the GP was due to retire in two months. As there was no way that a proper investigation could be carried out in that time, he had no choice but to decide not to pursue the case.

It must be absolutely heartbreaking for complainants in such cases—who have been led to believe, in good faith, that their concerns will be properly considered—to be told that that will not happen after all. It must also be incredibly difficult for the ombudsman to have raised a complainant's expectations only to have to disappoint him. The right hon. Member for Wealden eloquently explained Mrs. Fisher's case, which is a good example of the current problem. Tabling an amendment that set a time limit would still allow such cases to be caught, and, in the example that I gave, the commissioner would have been able to continue his investigation, irrespective of the GP's retirement.

The right hon. Gentleman and other speakers mentioned the review of the organisation of public sector ombudsmen that is under way in the Cabinet Office. We should all be fully aware of the review as we were invited last year to participate, via a survey of all Members of the House. Nevertheless, I want to say a few words about how the initiative is progressing.

The review was set up by the Government in March 1999 in response to proposals made by the Commission for Local Administration, the parliamentary commissioner and the health service commissioner. Against the background of more integrated services, which the Government have been working hard to develop, the ombudsmen felt strongly that the time was right for a wide-ranging review of the way in which they conducted their respective business and suggested the creation of a single body. That would do away with potential conflicts of jurisdiction, which they believe are intrinsic to their current structures.

The review's terms of reference did not point the review team down particular avenue. Value for money and the best interests of complainants featured as key issues to be taken into consideration. In reaching its conclusions and formulating its report and recommendations, the team consulted widely among the representative and professional bodies, central Government Departments, local government departments, members of the public and academics, and I understand that the Consumers Association submitted evidence. The team also canvassed the views of all Members of the House.

However, the review raises the issue of how useful the timing of the Bill may or may not be. Irrespective of the detail of the report's recommendations, the very nature of the review, and the terms of reference it was given, makes it more or less inevitable that the jurisdictions of all the public sector ombudsmen, including the health service commissioner, will need to be scrutinised very carefully. That process must be comprehensive and thorough. The aim must be to ensure that we have mechanisms that are modern and dependable. They must live up to the expectations of the general public who will be using them, and must be fit for the 21st century.

I shall not pretend to the House that this change can be made quickly. Indeed, I firmly believe that it would be a grave mistake to try make it quickly, because the matter is too important to rush. However, it is also important to close the loophole identified by the Bill. There is an argument that, in the context of this major review of the ombudsmen, now is not the time to be making changes to his jurisdiction. That is a fair point. We know, however, that the current wording of the 1993 Act is already causing problems for the commissioner, and it is right that, having been given an opportunity to resolve this difficulty via this Bill, we should do so.

At its heart, the Bill is about professional accountability. As I have explained, we take that extremely seriously, and are taking action on a number of fronts to support and strengthen GP accountability in particular. The Bill offers another way of doing that, and it would be perverse for the Government not to support any proposal that achieves that aim. The right hon. Member for Wealden may like to know that officials of the National Assembly for Wales are content with these proposals.

12.7 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: With the leave of the House, I should like to thank the Minister for the commitment that she has just made—subject of course to our looking favourably on the time limit that I understand she is to suggest. I would certainly be willing to consider that, in the hope that we could gain the overall support of the Committee. I am grateful to her for that offer.

Question put and agreed to.

Read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Food Labelling Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

12.7 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

In presenting the Bill, I shall describe how and why I came to select the issue of honesty in food labelling, explain the scheme and the contents of the Bill, and emphasise the opportunity that the House and the Government have to enable vital legislative progress to be made, which this issue deserves and which the people of this country, both consumers and producers, demand.

As the House knows, I had the honour and privilege to be elected only seven months ago to represent the constituents and interests of Eddisbury. My constituency covers south-west Cheshire. I took my seat on the day before the House rose for the summer recess, so I had, in effect, only been in the House and seen the way in which it works for a few weeks when I came 10th in the private Member's Bill ballot—not only to my surprise, but to the surprise and, in some instances, consternation of right hon. and hon. Members. Comments such as, "He's only been here a few minutes" were at the generous end of the wide spectrum of remarks that flooded my way when the result of the ballot was announced.

In common with other right hon. and hon. Members who gained places in the high and middle orders of the ballot, I was immediately confronted with a truly staggering quantity of mail that poured in from individuals and organisations, all urging me to adopt their suggestions for a Bill. It amounted to a menu of scores of worthy and, occasionally, wacky causes.

To understand why I stuck with my first instinct to introduce a Bill that would provide for simple, clear and, above all, honest labelling of foods in this country—for reasons that will become apparent, the Bill is designed to encompass England and Wales; I shall refer to the position in Scotland and Northern Ireland later—it is helpful to rewind the clock a little to the by-election that brought me to the House in the first place.

Being elected in a hard fought by-election in a marginal seat is an invigorating and exacting experience, as other right hon. and hon. Members who have won their seats in similar circumstances will testify. The great benefit of the experience is that, during by-elections, issues of key relevance to local electors—in Eddisbury, in my case—are played out in the relentless glare of publicity on the national stage, and in the intense atmosphere generated by a three-week campaign.

At the point where the west midlands end and the north-west starts, Eddisbury's profile—its main town of Winsford, containing 27,000 people, its northern villages and its rural communities, covering by far the greater part of the constituency geographically and bordering Wales and Shropshire—is typical of the country as a whole. Its opinions therefore constitute a fair weathervane of the issues that confront all the people of the country. It was all too painfully clear during the by-election campaign that farmers in south-west Cheshire and throughout the country were experiencing desperate times. As has been acknowledged by Members in all parts of the House, their plight has only worsened in the months since then, but those who have survived continue to deliver products of the highest quality, despite mounting losses.

At a time when the public are ever more conscious of, and concerned about, the British farming crisis, more and more consumers want to support farmers by buying British whenever and wherever they can—not only on the basis of quality and value for money but, perhaps crucially, because of their recognition that our farmers are producing food to the highest standards of production, and, in the case of livestock, because of the exemplary animal welfare practices insisted on, and robustly policed, by the United Kingdom. In many instances, however, our farmers and producers face intensely unfair competition from importers of foodstuffs in countries whose inferior standards of production and welfare mean that their production costs are considerably lower.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): Every word that my hon. Friend has said about hard-pressed farmers, especially pig producers, applies to the many pig producers whom I represent. I hope that we shall find a way of giving his Bill a fair wind.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. I believe that the issues raised in my Bill affect constituents and farming communities up and down the land, and that the Bill has a general application. It was clear to me that the feeling in Eddisbury typified the mood in much of the country, and I hope that we can make progress with the Bill so that we can help farmers and consumers.

We should consider the interests of farmers in conjunction with the powerful mistrust and lack of confidence that has developed among consumers in recent years. Food labelling has been shown to be misleading. There have been well-publicised instances of products that appear from the label to be British, but in fact come from outside the country. There is an overwhelming need to secure simple, clear, honest labelling. The Bill's purpose is to ensure that labels and marks relating to the country of origin and the standards of production of food presented for sale enable consumers to make an informed decision about which food they want to purchase.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Does my hon. Friend agree with me, and with farmers throughout south Cumbria, that perhaps the most scandalous example of the misrepresentation to which he refers is the application of a Union jack to products that have merely been packaged in this country, and did not originate here? Would his Bill not help to correct that damaging misrepresentation?

Mr. O'Brien: As my hon. Friend knows, I share his deep affection for south Cumbria, and any measure that helps farmers there—and, of course, those in south-west Cheshire—has my full support. My hon. Friend may well find that the example he has given is referred to a few paragraphs later in my speech.

The Bill meets the demands of my constituents and the needs of consumers and food producers throughout the country. Therefore, my decision to introduce it, in effect, made itself. It was for me a simple, clear and honest choice. The cause is not only worthy, but is a real opportunity to be effective in tackling an issue of the utmost seriousness to the people of this country, whom we all represent in this House.

Although the crisis in the farming industry was a key factor in my decision to introduce the Bill, it is intended not to be, nor to form part of, a nationalistic, anti-competitive buy-British campaign, but rather to give the force of law to simple, clear and honest food labelling, so that consumers have the facts that they need to enable them to make an informed choice. If that information results in consumers choosing to buy British-originated and produced food, for whatever reasons, all well and good.

Since announcing my decision, I have been genuinely taken aback at the scale and warmth of support that I have received for the Bill. It carries the hopes of farmers, producers and consumers up and down the land. That support starts in the House, and I am grateful for the cross-party support that I have received in launching it. It is truly an all-party measure. If it reaches the statute book, it will be a credit to the House and, I believe sincerely, to the Government—who will, I fervently hope, even at this eleventh hour support it and allow it to make progress.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Has my hon. Friend had any communication from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about the Bill? Might one not have expected that he would immediately have been called in, congratulated and helped? Has he encountered that attitude?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. As it happens, I did not receive such an invitation. There has been some contact between the National Farmers Union and MAFF in relation to the Bill. I have had the benefit of being briefed on that contact, but at a personal level the answer is no.

I pay tribute to the sponsors of the Bill, who traverse the political spectrum. As well as the support of my hon. Friends the Members for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser), for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray)—who I see is in his place—for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing), for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson)—who represents my neighbouring constituency and with whom I share the largest milk field in Europe—for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) and for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), I have the support of Members from the Government Benches: the hon. Members for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) and for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin). I am delighted to have the support, too, of the Liberal Democrats in the form of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), who I am pleased to see in his place.

Amplifying the support for the Bill, I refer the House to early-day motion 445, which is in my name, that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), the shadow Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—I am most grateful to see him here—his shadow agricultural team colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), and, as of this morning, 60 other right hon. and hon. Members from the Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Ulster Unionist and, let me emphasise, Labour Benches.

The early-day motion states:

That this House, noting the Prime Minister's statement in his speech to the National Farmers' Union of Tuesday 1st February, in which he promised to introduce new labelling guidance to make sure foreign goods are not passed off as British simply because they have been processed in Britain, calls on the Prime Minister and Her Majesty's Government to support and give speedy passage to the Food Labelling Bill introduced by the honourable Member for Eddisbury which would put the full force of the law behind clear, simple and honest labelling, address those very concerns on labelling raised in the Prime Minister's speech and provide for a fair deal on labelling for both consumers and farmers.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I, too, wish to express strong support for the Bill. I hope that there will be rapid progress today, not least because it might give an opportunity for my Bill later. In relation to simple, straightforward and non-confusing labelling, may I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the importance of organic food? A huge proportion of organic food in this country is imported: three quarters, approximately. The consumer is not aware of that, but it is relevant to his Bill. I hope that, together, we can make progress in both directions.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Although many points need to be made on the issue, I shall try to keep my remarks to their absolute minimum. However, I hope that with the full consensus on the issue that I fervently hope will emerge in this debate, his Bill will soon be considered. If we can establish the principles to ensure simple, clear, honest and not misleading labelling, by passing my Bill the hon. Gentleman's concerns on organic foods—and concerns on various issues on which I have received correspondence from all sorts of interested groups—may be dealt with more effectively. However, addressing all those issues will require a much wider and more detailed debate.

Early-day motion 445 asked the House to implement the Prime Minister's promise. I tabled it on Tuesday. On Wednesday, however, the Government tabled a negative amendment to block my early-day motion. It was signed only by Labour Members. I am not sure whether Whips' narcs is an unparliamentary expression—I see that my own Whip nearly took the words out of my mouth—so I shall not use it

Nevertheless, intriguingly and surprisingly, on the same day—Wednesday—as signing that negative, anti-British-consumer, anti-British-farmer amendment, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman)—who is Chairman of the Education and Employment Committee, of which I am privileged to be a member—signed the all-party early-day motion 209. That early-day motion was signed also by the hon. Members for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) and for Erewash (Liz Blackman), both of whom also signed the negative amendment to my early-day motion.

Early-day motion 209, on stall and tether-produced pigmeat, states:

That this House is deeply concerned about the import of cheap pigmeat from countries which use sow stalls and tethers, systems which have been illegal in the United Kingdom on cruelty grounds since 1st January, following the agreement of the House in 1991; believes that these imports are undermining the United Kingdom pig industry; condemns those supermarkets, caterers and public procurement agencies which are continuing to sell or use imported pigmeat derived from foreign herds which use sow stalls and tethers; believes that United Kingdom stall and tether-free pigmeat should have a marketing premium over imported pigmeat produced using

[Mr. O'Brien]

sow stalls and tethers; believes that the marketing premium is dissipated in the absence of mandatory labelling as to production method; believes that consumers are being misled by the absence of mandatory labelling of production method on pigmeat products; calls on United Kingdom supermarkets, caterers and public procurement agencies to support the United Kingdom's newly-raised sow welfare standards by selling or using only stall and tether-free pigmeat; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to introduce legislation similar to that recently enacted in Switzerland requiring meat produced by methods which would be illegal in the United Kingdom to be labelled as such.]

The final words of the motion specifically state that the House

believes that consumers are being misled by the absence of mandatory labelling of production method on pigmeat products; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to introduce legislation similar to that recently enacted in Switzerland—

which is outside the European Union, of course—

requiring meat produced by methods which would be illegal in the United Kingdom to be labelled as such.

Even more intriguingly, the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Sawford) not only was one of the first six signatories to Wednesday's negative amendment to my early-day motion 445, but, on the same day, signed the all-party early-day motion 62. Only yesterday, the hon. Member for Sunderland, North (Mr. Etherington)—who was an early signatory to early-day motion 62—signed the negative amendment to early-day motion 445. Early-day motion 62 calls for mandatory country of origin labelling across the European Union. Oh dear, what a tangled web those Whips weave.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another hon. Member about whom we need to know more? In the House, the Agriculture Minister said:

I want to clamp down on misleading place of origin descriptions.—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1126.]

Was he perhaps a signatory to my hon. Friend's early-day motion?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend, as usual, makes such a very good and insightful point. However, I did not spot the Minister's name on my early-day motion. As for the Minister's use of the phrase "clamp down", my hon. Friend will have to wait for my mid-term peroration on this part of my speech to hear how that has been handled.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not usual for Ministers to sign early-day motions? His negative remarks on that point should, therefore, not be misconstrued. I also hope that the hon. Gentleman will not go too far down that road, as there are clearly some defects—which I am sure we shall tease out—in his rejected Bill. Nevertheless, I am sure that many people support his objectives and want them to be realised. The more constructive he is, the more likely he is to achieve his aims.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and of course I wish to be constructive. However, I have to paint in the background against which I am introducing my Bill. Although I appreciate that we belong to different parties, and that different Back Benchers will hold different views, I am trying to understand the mixed messages that have come from the Government on the issue—for which they are responsible and accountable.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Brien: Let me finish this point first.

In trying to understand the background to the Government's thinking in the context of introducing the Bill, it seemed to me that, in their rush to get Labour Members to put their names to the negative amendment on Wednesday, the Labour Whips have caused mayhem, muddled thinking and great embarrassment to some of their own Back Benchers. This may be a sign of confusion or panic or both. It is certainly a great disappointment to their constituents.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was certainly not confused when I signed the amendment to his early-day motion and I hope to explain my views later in the debate.

Mr. O'Brien: As ever, I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's brief contribution to the debate. He is completely exonerated from the charge of signing three completely contradictory early-day motions. That was the point that I was elucidating earlier. I promised to give way to the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins).

Mr. Hopkins: A few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman glossed over the significant difference between pursuing legitimate changes in EU legislation—with which I would agree—and pursuing changes in national legislation that would not be acceptable within the EU framework. There is a crucial difference which I hope to address in more detail later in the debate.

Mr. O'Brien: I shall address those issues in some detail. Of course they have been disclosed to some degree in the amendment to early-day motion 445. I was aware of them previously, and I have conducted some fairly detailed research. I hope that I will be able to demonstrate that there are other arguments that suggest that the Bill may not face the insurmountable obstacles that the Government think it will face vis-à-vis the EU.

Against that extraordinary and somewhat baffling background, I am pleased to introduce the Bill today. More positively, I am pleased that it has been welcomed by the National Farmers Union, the National Pig Association and the Consumers Association. I should like to express my appreciation and gratitude to the NFU and the NPA for the extensive time, expertise, encouragement and assistance that they have given me in drafting and publicising the Bill.

On Monday, I was presented with a petition in support of honesty in food labelling with more than 3,000 signatures from people from the north-west of England. Hon. Members on both sides of the House represent people in the north-west. The petition forms part of a larger petition of more than 52,000 signatures collected by the NFU and others up and down the country in support of the Bill and the principles contained within it.

There is a widespread feeling that the current position on food labelling is simply not adequate and that the necessary improvements to the labelling of food in Britain

need the full force of the law behind them. That point was supported by the Consumers Association on behalf of the consumers of this country who have said that, in empowering consumers, the Bill is a step in the right direction.

As I have said, the Bill seeks to ensure that consumers are properly informed about the country of origin and the standards of production of food that is presented for sale. I believe that the Bill can achieve those aims by putting the full force of the law behind honest labelling.

Under the current food labelling regulations, a pork pie labelled "Produced in England" could have been made with Belgian or Brazilian pork. The consumer is unaware of the origin of the ingredients or how the product was made. The justification for the Bill can be summarised in the following words:

> We produce some of the best food in the world to exacting quality, hygiene and animal welfare standards. Our industry should get the credit and the premium for it. Consumers need to know when they buy food labelled as British, it is British food produced in Britain.

Those were the words of the Prime Minister in his speech last month to the NFU. In the same speech he announced that new guidance would be issued on country of origin marking,

> so that the consumer can choose, not be misled, and the farmer gain credit for local-sourced produce and British quality standards.

I agree with those aspirations, but I also believe that consumers can never have 100 per cent. trust in food labelling unless they know that the full force of the law stands behind them, defending their interests.

Mr. McWalter: Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that the advice given by MAFF to trading standards officers on 1 February this year would specifically rule out the idea that somebody could label a pork pie "Produce of Britain" or "Produce of England" if the pork was actually Belgian? The current trading standards regulations would mean that the pork pie would have to be labelled "Belgian pork, finished in Britain" or words to that effect. I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman is right in his portrayal of the current situation.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful for that detailed intervention and I shall deal with those points later. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of the operation of the trading standards officers. I do not know whether it is true that the 1 February guidelines, which were an attempt to toughen up the position, will rule out such labelling, and that point goes to the heart of whether we need a statute that gives the force of law. It could be argued that the guidelines are an exhortation—

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Bill falls foul of European law, that must also apply to the guidelines if they have any real effect?

Mr. O'Brien: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a forensic point. The guidelines would be in contravention of European law only if they had the force of law. If they do not, there is nothing to which the European Union could object because they are only advice. We will want to hear a little more from the Government on that point.

The full force of the law needs to be behind consumers' interests. One of the reasons why the public demand for better food labelling has grown recently is the high profile food safety scares, such as the Belgian food scare and the revelations about French farming practices. Those scares have challenged the public faith in food labelling and mere guidelines are not enough to allay those fears.

The Government response will, I believe, be that the labelling guidelines issued on 1 February have the force of law. Let us be clear about those guidelines. They have been issued to trading standards officers to indicate how the Government expect them to discharge their duties with regard to misleading food labels. The guidelines facilitate only the prosecution in court by trading standards officers of, for instance, pork producers who import Dutch pork packed in the UK and sell it as British. In truth, those producers do not just label the pork as British, they label it "Produced in Britain", which is not necessarily caught by the current regulations, as the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) sought to establish.

If the argument that the current regulations are sufficient is advanced by the Government, I do not believe that it will hold water. The preamble to the guidelines is, unlike today's food labels, simple, clear and honest. It states specifically that the guidance is "informal, non-statutory" and that the notes should not be taken as an authoritative statement or interpretation of the law, because, as it continues

> only the courts have this power.

Therefore, the guidelines are not even a statutory code like the "Highway Code".

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Perhaps I should make it clear to the hon. Gentleman, because he does not seem to understand the point, that the guidelines interpret the law that the previous Government passed while putting into effect a European directive that the previous Government also passed. It is the terms of that directive, to which the previous Government agreed, that make the Bill's proposals contrary to European Union law.

Mr. O'Brien: I listened carefully to the Minister, and I acknowledge that the previous Government introduced the food labelling regulations and implemented the EU directive. The Minister is right that the guidance notes do not have statutory force, but are intended to give guidance towards legal enforcement. However, nothing has changed since 1 February except that the guidance has been reissued. We know that the law that existed before did not address the problem, with the result that the deep unease about labels that might be misleading has persisted since 1996.

The 1 February guidelines may lead to some improvement, although we may have to wait a little longer to be sure. However, the nature of the law has not changed. The same legal base for enforcement remains in place; only the guidelines have changed. I therefore believe that my point is valid, despite what the Minister said.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The Minister will know that the guidelines may help trading standards officers enforce the law in cases of misleading labelling, but they do not have the force of law.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Ministry may have been given defective advice? Clause 3 deals with welfare standards and does not ban EU produce in the way that

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

the French banned British beef. For example, EU pigmeat can come into this country freely. Does my hon. Friend accept that the Bill merely seeks to make it clear to consumers that food complies with the higher animal welfare standards required of British farmers?

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend, although I hesitate even to confirm the legal case that he presented with such erudition. However, it is absolutely right to emphasise that a precedent was set when the British acceded to the French demand that British beef be labelled as such in France. That matter is being considered by the European Court of Justice, but we believe that it is contrary to EU law because it amounts to a ban on importation. My right hon. and learned Friend has pointed out that clause 3 would not impose any form of ban on imports; it merely requires that information be made available that would allow a comparative reference to be made. That would give consumers the ability to make an informed choice, something for which they have been crying out.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have witnessed something extraordinary? He has just received advice, in Parliament, from a former Attorney-General, yet the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has not made the slightest move to determine whether its legal advice on the matter is right or wrong.

Mr. O'Brien: I defer to my hon. Friend's longer experience in the House. I have been here such a short time that I did not know what to expect in terms of the procedure involved in introducing the Bill. It did occur to me that the Ministry might want to be in touch with me to find out whether there was common ground between us. I published the Bill at the proper time, and although I was slightly disappointed that no contact was forthcoming, I assumed that that was normal.

It might have been very helpful to discuss the Bill with the Ministry. I do not know of any hon. Member who questions the principles behind the Bill, and it is disappointing that the debate has centred on technicalities. I shall turn to the details later, but earlier contact with the Ministry would have ensured that the opportunity represented by the Bill would not be missed, as it would have allowed us to hear learned advice of the sort given by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell).

The guidelines do not even amount to a statutory code in the same way that the "Highway Code" does. The Government say that they expect trading standards officers to operate using the guidance but that is not the same as saying that they must. The exchanges and interventions that have taken place have underscored that point. In her response, will the Minister give a simple, clear and honest answer to a simple, clear and honest question: how many prosecutions have there been for misleading labels on country of origin?

What consumers are asking about foods, here and in other countries, is where does it come from and how is it made? The voluntary undertaking by the British Retail Consortium in November 1998 and the regulations have made progress, but not enough. Otherwise, consumer mistrust of misleading labelling would not be persisting and growing. The force of law is needed—hence my Bill.

The Bill builds on, rather than detracts from, the current position on food labelling. Hon. Members will note that its long title states that it makes further provision for consumers of food to be informed about the country of origin and standards of production of food presented for sale by labelling, marking or in other ways. That takes into account the recent introduction of the Food Standards Act 1999, which established the Food Standards Agency. The Minister will recall that the Government later inserted an amendment in another place after strong prompting, it has to be said, from my shadow agriculture team colleague, Baroness Byford. That amendment made it clear that in the context of what is now the 1999 Act, the interests of consumers include the labelling of foods. The reference to being informed is a direct lift from the phrase "informed" decisions from the Food Standards Act.

Clause 1 contains the definitions to which I shall refer back when the terms appear in context, save that I highlight the fact that the Bill has been drafted to sit on all fours with the existing food labelling regulations of 1996. It incorporates by reference many of the terms used in those regulations, given the thinking and experience that lie behind those existing non-statutory provisions—which do not have the force of law—a statutory basis.

Clause 2 provides a requirement for food to be marked or labelled at the point of sale to a consumer—the purchaser, rather than the person who consumes all the food—with the particulars of the country of origin. In the case of a single-ingredient food, such as a joint of beef—preferably on the bone—or an orange, that would be simple enough. However, clause 2(1)(a) also provides for the possibility of more than one country of origin, requiring all countries of origin to be identified. For instance, a single-ingredient product such as lettuce may be sourced from different countries. In its pre-packed form, mixed-leaf lettuce may be sourced from different lettuces from different countries but is presented for sale as one food item. The label would simply have to state all the countries of origin, even where, in a pre-pack, the single item—each individual lettuce leaf—could not necessarily be identified as having come from one or other of the countries of origin. The label might read that the countries of origin were countries A, B and C.

That is what the consumer needs. If for any reason, he or she prefers products from a certain country, the necessary information would be available for him or her to make such an informed decision. If the consumer wants to buy a product, such as beef, from one particular source country, the information would be there. As for my second example of lettuce, in exercising that choice, the consumer may want to purchase lettuce from elsewhere, from a supplier who can be sure, as evidenced by the labelling, which can be legally relied upon, that the lettuce comes from, say, the Channel islands—any why not?

Clause 2(1)(b) makes provision for food products containing more than one ingredient. It would be impracticable and an unjustified burden to provide the consumer with the information with which he or she can make an informed choice, by labelling the country of origin of every ingredient, such as seasoning and other additives. In any event, those matters are well covered and are available as information on labels under the present regulations requiring identification of ingredients. Therefore, the Bill would require only that the identity of the country or countries of origin of each major ingredient is on the label.

For the purposes of the Bill, I have defined a major ingredient, as set out in clause 1, as one that forms more than 25 per cent. by weight of a food product. That is straightforward. The weight of constituent ingredients of a food product is already generally a requirement under the existing food labelling regulations and a food producer will have the information when the ingredients are sourced. The more than 25 per cent. by weight threshold is a proposal that balances the need for relevant information—that is information that tends to affect consumer preferences—against introducing an over-burdensome or irrelevant set of requirements.

I freely accept that the threshold may be an issue that Members wish to debate further. I look forward to that opportunity today and, I hope, in Committee where we can consider the issue in greater detail. In the case of a pre-cooked and packaged shepherd's pie, the country or countries of origin of both the meat content and the potato content would need to be identified. In the case of pork sausages, the country or countries of origin of the meat content would have to be identified, but not the origin of the seasoning.

Clause 2(2) goes to the heart of one of the most crucial matters in the Bill. It addresses an issue of the greatest concern to producers and consumers that has led to mistrust and lack of confidence in labels. When a food has been packaged and processed in a country other than the country of origin, under my Bill, the country of origin would be shown at least as prominently as the particulars of the country where the food has been processed or packaged.

Let us consider the example of chickens bred in Thailand. They are stuffed with hormones that are illegal here and across the European Union. However, they are imported into this country or another EU state and processed and packaged in that member state, and they appear on our supermarket shelves with a label identifying them as being produced in the EU or even in a named member state. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) pointed out, if they are packaged and produced in this country, the package may even carry a Union jack on them. No wonder shoppers feel anxious and are mistrustful of labels when they learn the truth from stories, such as the Thai chicken scandal, that naturally receive wide coverage in the media.

I am sure that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, do not wish to consume food which you find, despite today's misleading but wholly legal labelling, is sourced from a country where the animal welfare, health and hygiene standards fall far below the standards we impose on farmers in this country.

In the opening speech in the debate in which I made my maiden speech, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food stated his position on this issue:

> I want to give clear, unambiguous information on the real place of origin, not place of processing or place of slicing; I want to clamp down on misleading place of origin descriptions; and I want to make further progress by lobbying the European Commission and other member states for a system of clear country of origin labelling.—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1126.]

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I have been noticing with great pleasure that the Minister has been nodding assent to my hon. Friend's recent remarks in his carefully worded speech. Does he agree that it is important that the Government allow the Bill to proceed to Committee and that that should not be put off by arguments that it might be challenged on the ground that it would constitute measures equivalent to quantitative restrictions on imports? That is far from clear and there is every reason to think that the Bill could be put into a form that would comply with EU law, even if it does not already.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. It is my fervent hope, on behalf of the consumers and producers of this country, that the Bill will be allowed into Committee. I do not hide the fact that I am a single Member of Parliament and brand new to this place and, among everything else that goes on, it has been hard work to get the Bill to this point. I would welcome the chance to have it considered in Committee, where there are more resources at the disposal of the parliamentary process, to hone it and to focus on the important issues, such as those raised by my right hon. and learned Friend. I hope that the Government will see fit, at this eleventh hour, to nod assent and, subject to the will of the House, allow the Bill to go to Committee.

Mr. McWalter: Is the hon. Gentleman confirming that if the Bill can be made European compliant by a series of steps, he will take those steps to amend it in Committee, in so far as he can, so that when it returns to the House, the European objection cannot be made against it?

Mr. O'Brien: It is incumbent on us to seek to make any law passed by the House European compliant. My point is that the proposals are not necessarily in contravention of European law, although they bear examination. However, we should not lose sight of the principles that we are trying to establish of simple, clear and honest labelling of country of origin and production standards. The latter point raises the compliance issues, and I shall deal with that in more detail.

In addition to what the Minister of Agriculture said on 28 October last year, when he used the phrase "clamp down", on 1 February this year he said:

> I am determined to stamp out misleading labelling.

How does a Minister clamp down on or stamp out something other than by the force of law? The Bill would fulfil those commitments, by ensuring compliance through legislation rather than relying on voluntary guidelines, codes of practice or mere regulations.

Mr. Letwin: I saw the Minister shake her head earlier. As my hon. Friend has had the chance to talk to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), the former Attorney-General, does he agree that if the Minister of Agriculture intended to clamp down on and stamp out those practices and he sought to achieve that by guidance, he would be presumptively doing whatever the Bill is trying to do effectively, and if the Bill is in contravention of European law, the Minister's actions are so too?

Mr. O'Brien: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a forensic intervention, and I believe that I understood it and that it contains a serious point. *[Interruption.]* I would expect Labour Members to laugh a little, out of embarrassment. However, my hon. Friend has made a valid comparison.

[Mr. O'Brien]

The law exists to be properly argued both by precedent and by measure against statute or code. I am a former practising lawyer, although nobody would want to take advice from me because I have not engaged in the law for the past 10 years. I do not want to make a cheap point, but there is a cultural difference between the legal approach and thinking of this country, with its law of precedent culture, and those of continental Europe, with its Roman codification law.

We negotiate and arrive at a concluded position in law, to which we then hold. I know from many years of business experience in all countries of Europe that European legal culture consists also of negotiating and arriving at a concluded agreement, but as circumstances change and things go wrong, that agreement becomes, in effect, a statement of what was agreed on the day, but everything is still negotiable. My hon. Friend's point, which I have developed, is therefore important and ought to be given the serious consideration that it deserves.

The second limb of the Bill provides for the labelling of production standards for the food's raw materials. Countless surveys and much market testing reveal that after the BSE crisis and the more recent Belgian food scare, and following the strenuous efforts by producers, retailers and UK Governments of both colours, British consumers believe, rightly, that their benchmark today is the production standards that are required and applied in this country. However, well-publicised stories of misleading food labelling mean that consumers cannot be sure that the food that they buy is not from a country with inferior production, hygiene and animal welfare standards and that has led to a collapse in the public's faith and trust in food labelling. Clause 3 therefore provides that information be given to consumers by ensuring that, when a food's country of origin label under clause 2 discloses that it is sourced in a country where food production standards are

> different from, and less demanding than, the production standards applicable in England and Wales,

the label or mark is required to state that fact.

Clause 1 defines production standards as

> the minimum legal requirements relating to husbandry which must be observed by food producers, including requirements relating to animal welfare, food safety and environmental protection.

I do not pretend that it has been easy to come up with a workable definition of production standards such that international differences in standards can be measured. I believe that that has been achieved, but there might be scope to tighten the definition in the Bill, and I should welcome assistance from the Government and other hon. Members in ensuring that the clause avoids any vagueness in a legal sense. Again, that is a matter to be considered in Committee. Clause 3(2) provides that in deciding

> whether, in relation to any food derived from livestock, the production standards in another country are less demanding than those applicable in England and Wales,

reference should be made to the standards applicable in England and Wales, namely

> codes of recommendations for the welfare of livestock

which are, from time to time, issued under the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 and which remain in force.

As has been mentioned, that clause causes concern in the Government and other circles that the Bill might be incompatible with relevant single market rules. I do not believe that the obstacles are insurmountable. Food labelling is undeniably an area of EU competence and national Governments are not free to impose requirements that could be restrictive within the single market. I am aware that the Government are nervous at the prospect of Her Majesty's Government being prosecuted in the European Court of Justice if the Bill becomes law. I can well comprehend that that would be embarrassing, given that France now faces court action—albeit protracted, while our farmers continue to suffer unjustifiably from French action—for flagrantly contravening EU law by banning British beef unilaterally. However, those fears are less than well founded. Even if there were a possibility that the Bill is incompatible with EU law, that clearly has no procedural bearing on the ability of the national Westminster Parliament to enact the legislation.

I was genuinely disappointed and appalled to hear the response of the Minister of Agriculture to a question asked by the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead. On being asked whether he agreed

> that the best aid that the pig industry could receive would be to have a proper system of labelling,

he replied:

> The legislation introduced through the private Member's route—

that is, my Bill—

> is clearly designed to skirmish with the European Union, whose competence labelling is, rather than to solve any problem that is faced in the United Kingdom.—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 389-90.]

That was an unworthy, wholly cynical and improper answer. I can assure the House and the Minister, who is not present but whose right hon. Friend the Minister of State is, that thoughts of skirmishing with the EU have played no part in my thinking, or to my knowledge that of anyone else who has been involved with the Bill. On the contrary, I have taken great pains to avoid any clash with the EU. Lord knows, this country plays by the rules, often to its cost—certainly, to the desperate cost of our pig farmers.

It is fair to say that the Government have acted in response to Conservative and, at times, Liberal Democrat initiatives on food labelling. Is it not about time the Government stepped up to their duty to match the Opposition parties' determination to deliver the right food labelling laws for the people of our country and to lead on the issue in the rest of Europe? My submission is that, with our experience and expertise in food labelling, this country should seek to lead Europe on that issue. If passed, my Bill would enable the Government to adopt a trail-blazing line in their continuing, but tortuous—with no timetable or sign of a speedy or even timely resolution—discussions with Europe. This country's food labelling laws could be the standard for the rest of Europe. I am sure that our European partners would welcome our initiative and leadership.

I learned to my surprise that when the Minister of Agriculture made his cheap and churlish remark about my Bill, he had not taken the trouble to read it. Since then, he has had it impressed on him by consumer and producer organisations outside the House, which have a great interest in my Bill becoming law, that it is a serious proposal for a series of measures that deserve close and sympathetic attention and support from the Government.

I was therefore pleased to see that a spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had responded to a journalist's request for a comment the day after the Minister's remark in the House. When asked about my Bill, the spokesman said that MAFF was

> sympathetic to what Mr. O'Brien is trying to achieve.

On the EU and its relationship to the Bill, I do not understand how it is possible for clause 3 to be in contravention of EU law when all the UK's food production and animal welfare standards comply, at the very least, with all applicable EU laws and regulations.

As we know, not only do we police and enforce those regulations rigorously—in contrast, sadly, to many of our fellow member states—but we implement them sooner. Witness Denmark and its decision not to implement, under the same EU directive applicable to us, the banning of stall and tethered pigs until 2006 or 2007.

The UK has an honourable record of going much further than the EU directive in animal welfare measures. The Government can be concerned about EU law contravention only where we go further, with higher food production and animal welfare standards.

If that is so, are the Government honestly saying that for the sake of keeping sweet with our European partners, we must allow into this country food products whose production and animal welfare standards are inferior to those imposed on our own farmers and other food producers?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and I am sure that he is not suggesting that we should stop food products coming in if they comply only with EU standards. The point that he is making so effectively is that we are entitled to have higher standards in this country. Under EU law, a member state is always so entitled. All that his Bill asks is that consumers should know whether the product that they are choosing complies only with EU standards, or also with the higher UK standards.

Mr. O'Brien: That is exactly right. The terms of the Bill have been deliberately designed, in my best attempt to keep them simple, clear and honest, to give information. The Bill is not prescriptive or penal. I find it baffling that the Government might not allow the Bill and clause 3 to progress. It is critical that our consumers are aware of products whose production and processing has been inferior to the standards applied in this country.

Existing EU law is flexible in its interpretation—a point that has been touched on. For instance, as part of the Agriculture Minister's doomed attempt to appease the French Government over the illegal ban on British beef, the Government acceded to French demands that British beef should be labelled with its country of origin. The European Commission ruled that that was legal under EU law.

We are not alone in wanting the Government to stand up for our national interests within the EU. I shall not take up the time of the House with the Swiss example of negative labelling as Switzerland is outside the EU and the measure would indeed contravene EU law, which my Bill avoids, but I shall highlight the example of Sweden—an EU member state, that has not been taken to the European court.

Swedish Farm Assured—SFA—announced on 28 October last year that all meat products bearing the new SFA logo would be traceable by consumers with internet access. An individual code on each packet would allow a consumer to visit the SFA site, www.healthy-tasty.com, trace the product back to the specific Swedish farm on which it was produced, and find out

> about the method of its production and transportation to the shop of purchase.

Announcing the scheme, SFA stated:

> We believe that to be competitive in this market we have to provide something extra—to us that means consumer confidence. SFA can provide detailed information on where food comes from and how it is produced.

Perhaps the most telling example is the latest French one. Mr. Jacques Lemaître, president of the National Pork Federation in France, and Mr. Jérôme Bédier, president of the French Federation of Commerce and Distribution, signed an agreement of intent on 9 February to allow the identification of the origin of pork sold throughout retail outlets in France. The arrangements will initially apply only to fresh pork, but it is intended that they will be extended to processed products in due course. Under the scheme, traceability is assured throughout the stages of production, slaughtering and processing, and retail outlets will provide the information. That is expected to be possible for approximately 85 per cent. of the pigmeat that is currently produced in France. Mr. Bédier said:

> This is a natural development stemming from what has been put into place for fruit and vegetables and—

pitifully, as we know—

> for beef. Consumers want to know more and more about the origin of the products they buy.

Mr. Lemaître said:

> Meat producers are quite happy for the customers to know where their animals come from; it is an important factor in gaining confidence in our products.

There is also the amazingly termed "swine stamp" in Brazil. That is relevant because of the World Trade Organisation for the global marketplace in which pigmeat competes. The Swedish and French examples also state that they believe that their new provisions conform to WTO requirements. Unlike France and Sweden, will the United Kingdom, under this Government, impede our producers' competitiveness while the next trade round grinds on? If so, liberalisation without better food labelling will mean that any producer who does not produce to the lowest cost will be lost in the price-driven global marketplace.

Clause 4 covers the method of marketing or labelling foods. It provides that food for sale should show the information that the Bill requires

> on the food's packaging; on a label attached to the food's packaging; on a label that is clearly visible through the food's packaging.

That is straightforward. As we know from the plethora of labels that bombard consumers about other matters on foods, and in the instances of good practice under voluntary arrangements, information about country of origin and standards of production is sometimes seen.

[Mr. O'Brien]

Clause 4(1)(d) covers foods that are not pre-packed or packaged. It would require a shelf marker or show card in a clearly visible location. The provision relates to loose goods such as fruit, vegetables, and jointed and cut meats in butchers' shops.

To ensure accurate, reliable and therefore honest information at the point of sale to the "ultimate customer"—the defined term in the food labelling regulations of 1996—clause 4(2) covers circumstances in which food is sold on in the wholesale chain. It provides that the information required by the Bill appears on the "outermost packaging" of the wholesale pack of food. It encourages, but does not make mandatory, the provision of that information in commercial documents, which relate to the food. That information is currently known and, in today's commercial world, it is often held electronically by individuals and enterprises in the supply chain. Clause 4(2) tries to ensure that the information is simply captured and passed along the chain in a clear, reliable and honest manner.

Some retailers have expressed the anxiety that the Bill would mean extra cost. I do not believe that, because the information is factual and has to be known by all parts of the supply chain. Ensuring that the information is captured, collated and printed on labels throughout the supply process is simply an administrative matter. There are examples that show that such labelling is easily possible. Ten days ago, the Tesco chain, which has launched a scheme to help British farmers to sell more produce in the 650 Tesco stores, agreed to label clearly the country of origin under the Tesco farming initiative 2000.

Extending such a scheme countrywide will require the force of law, and I am in discussion with a company that has compiled a database of all ingredients of all foods. It tells me that data on country of origin and methods of production are readily available. In today's information technology world, it is economic and reliable to access, use and display the information.

The Bill intends to achieve simple and clear, as well as honest, labelling. Consumers do not want to be faced with a mass of information that is difficult to interpret or requires too much time to assimilate. Although this is best left to detailed consideration in Committee, discussions that I have held with all sections of the food industry and, above all, with consumers, suggest that accreditation through, for example, a kitemark, may be the best way in which to proceed.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Would not a Union jack be enough?

Mr. O'Brien: A Union jack is always a welcome sign to—I hope—all hon. Members. However, it has been abused in recent times. Examples of that have already been given. We need to think of something new that would engender absolute confidence. That is the point of the Bill, welcome though I always find the Union jack.

A kitemark that can be protected, policed and not abused may be the best way to proceed. In addition, quality could be certified by labels such as ENG for England and WAL for Wales or, in due time, SCO for Scotland and NI for Northern Ireland. They could provide accreditation and certification that the food came from a particular country or region of origin and had been produced according to its production standards—that is, the minimum legal requirements applicable to that food in that country.

There has been considerable discussion and that has led to the National Farmers Union, Tesco and others taking action to develop a British farm assurance mark—a kitemark aimed at informing shoppers which food products are reared or grown nationally. That approach would also help to cover the other example addressed by clause 4: food sold to consumers by catering establishments.

Subsection (3) would ensure that consumers being served food in catering establishments would have the opportunity to inform themselves of country of origin and standards of production either before or when that food was presented. Restaurant menus would not be required to carry a food label for country of origin and standards of production for every item, but they would be have to carry—as is already the case for genetically modified foods—a statement, kitemark or other emblem stating the country or countries of origin of the major ingredients of all items and whether production standards inferior to this country's might have been involved.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman for a little while and I am puzzled by clause 4(3). Is he saying that menus would have to say whether an item contained monosodium glutamate, E numbers and everything else? That would run to pages before a customer got to the list of food.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman's point would have been valid had he been in the Chamber a little earlier, although I am sure that he was kept away purely by other commitments. The provision would apply only to major ingredients—ones that form 25 per cent. by weight of a food. I made that point previously and, if there is any deficiency with his learned skills in respect of interpreting the Bill, I should make it clear that that is certainly what is intended. However, I must say to him in all candour that I am not convinced that the Bill's drafting necessarily achieves that aim as there is a doubt: catering organisations may not be consumers in the normal sense of the word and restaurant meals may not be precisely food "presented for sale", which would therefore be labelled in the manner envisaged under the Bill. Again, I would welcome the House's assistance.

Clauses 5 and 6 deal with normal matters and I draw the House's attention to the fact that Mr. Alex Johnstone has introduced to the Scottish Parliament a Bill relating to meat labelling and country of origin. There may be difficulties in this example between England and Wales and Scotland following devolution—let alone between this country and the rest of Europe—but, timetabling and the approval of both Houses of Parliament permitting, the two measures could ride in tandem and ensure a level playing field.

I shall move toward a finish. As I have taken a number of interventions, my speech has run on a little longer than I expected.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Will the hon. Gentleman take a further intervention?

Mr. O'Brien: Yes.

Angela Smith: We are approaching the end of our proceedings and I may have the opportunity to contribute so I should be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments on the drafting of the Bill. Clause 3 refers to when

> production standards for that food are different from, and less demanding than, the production standards applicable in England and Wales.

I am not sure whether that wording would stand up in court. Has it appeared in any other legislation and does he have examples? Is he confident that it will work?

Mr. O'Brien: I am not aware that those particular words have been lifted from existing legislation and it would be a legitimate matter for the Committee to consider. I believe that they were the most felicitous words that I and others could devise to ensure that we give effect to the Bill's principles and clause 3 in particular.

The Government are clearly aware of the great concern among consumers. Their spokesman in the other place, Baroness Hayman, recently launched a consultation on food labelling that happens to coincide with the debate on the Bill. She has said that she believes that consumers have a right to clear, informative labels to help them make "informed choices" about foods.

It is clear what consumers want, so why wait? The Government should use the opportunity of the Bill to deliver what consumers and producers are crying out for on food labelling. I do not believe that it is necessary to wait for yet another consultation period. The Minister for the Cabinet Office said on the "Today" programme this week:

> I don't yet trust the labelling that I see on foods.

She also said:

> We have got to have clear labelling for people to make their own choices.

The Government now have a chance to do that.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman has quoted a number of Ministers, but I wonder whether he has carefully considered the Prime Minister's speech to the National Farmers Union, the main theme of which was the importance of ensuring that British consumers have access to good quality information about good quality food. That is also the theme of the hon. Gentleman's Bill.

I shall take this opportunity—as I may not get another—to quote the Prime Minister on that occasion. He said that the Government envisage

> a trebling of the area under organic farming by 2006.

The Prime Minister's words may come to haunt him if the Government do not give the hon. Gentleman's Bill—and, dare I say it, my Bill—a fair wind.

Mr. O'Brien: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman's intervention gave him the opportunity to cover a slightly wider point, but I shall not pursue that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for fear of losing your support.

I intended to refer to the Government's present policy on genetically modified foods. However, I am conscious of the time and others want to contribute, so rather than go into that in detail I shall just cite the phrase, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. What is sauce for GM foods must be right for other foods: they should also have labelling information about the country of origin and standards of production. If GM food is about anything, it is about standards of production as much as about ingredients. However, I shall refrain from commenting on what some call the Prime Minister's policy U-turn on GM foods.

My Bill would protect the well-being and freedom of choice of our citizens, and, above all, the health and safety of our children, who eat every type of food. It would lend great weight to this country's proud tradition of leading the world in animal welfare. It would be viewed positively by everyone, and is a rare chance for the House as a whole—and the Government if they truly care about honesty in food labelling—to achieve a political win-win. I commend the Bill to the House, and I hope that it has a speedy passage on to the statute book.

1.17 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to the debate. I welcome the initiative of the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), and I am grateful to him for echoing a question that I asked the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about the labelling of pigmeat.

The Bill is somewhat schizophrenic—and I am not sure whether a Committee can sort out schizophrenia. If I am asked to serve on the Committee considering the Bill, I hope that I can do my bit to put the patient in a better state. Those are slightly harsh words, but I think the Bill has a Euro-clobbering dimension, even though that may not have been intended. To get the Bill to be more Euro-compliant will prove quite taxing, although there is absolutely no doubt that the current labelling regime is highly prejudicial to British farmers and British agricultural production.

I have already given the House a brief account of my experience in trying to buy British bacon in a Somerfield supermarket in Stevenage, and I now have the opportunity to mention it at greater length. There was a cabinet full of bacon, but it proved almost impossible to buy a product that was recognisably compliant with the high standards of British pigmeat production that the hon. Gentleman rightly wants to protect. I found the words "produce of Europe", in minuscule characters, on most items; in other cases, it was "Dutch", "Danish", or something else. It was difficult to find any British bacon—but there at the bottom of the cabinet was a packet on which "Wiltshire cured" was written in extremely large letters. When I picked it up, I saw yet again, in the tiniest possible writing on the underside, "produce of Europe". I do not think that that necessarily meant that curing in the Wiltshire style had taken place in Wiltshire, and it certainly did not mean that the pigs had been reared in a way that complied with this country's higher standards of animal welfare. Eventually, I managed to buy some organic bacon at the store down the road.

We are told that there are currently 31 protected labels—"Wiltshire cured", "Newcastle Brown", "Scottish salmon" and so on—but that does not alter the fact that

[Mr. Tony McWalter]

there are far more than 31 misleading labels. It is a nightmare for the trading standards officer who genuinely wants to prevent consumers from being misled, and, because the Bill makes a real effort to confront the problem, I welcome it. I did, however, describe the Bill as schizophrenic, and I want to identify some of the problems associated with it.

Clause 2—which is, in a sense, the core of the Bill—states:

> Food which is sold to a consumer shall be marked or labelled with . . . the country . . . of origin.

Currently, British producers have every right to tell consumers that their food was produced in Britain: indeed, they have the capacity to use any kind of labelling that they want to use, as long as it is not regarded as market-obstructive.

I have much sympathy with those who are angry about the fact that the Union jack can be used by those who merely packaged the product at the end of the process. Let me say in passing that in one part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland—which, admittedly, is not directly affected by the Bill—the Union jack, unfortunately, has other connotations. Producers there have tried to get around the problem by featuring a bunch of violets in an attempt to convey a Northern Ireland identity; but most people in Northern Ireland still do not know what the logo really means.

That is the difficulty with labelling. What does a logo say about the product? Requiring a product to be labelled with the particulars of its country of origin is very different from permitting it. Under the Bill, if producers in America, for instance, have not stated on the label that 28 per cent. of the product comes from Mexico, 32 per cent. from Peru and the rest from the United States, the food in question will not be eligible to be sold. I deliberately cited countries outside the common market because strong country-of-origin regulations often apply to products imported to the European Union, although the Bill does not really deal with whether those regulations are consistent with the regulations mentioned in it.

Again, in the EU itself, the Bill might take us well out of kilter with what other countries would expect. The Bill's emphasis and compulsion would mean that such a product would not be eligible to be sold in this country. Obviously, it would be a strongly restrictive way in which to deal with the matter.

Mr. Letwin *indicated dissent.*

Mr. McWalter: I see that the hon. Gentleman is expressing dissent. I will be happy to take an intervention if he thinks that I have got something fundamentally wrong.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful for that invitation as I was about to ask the hon. Gentleman to allow me to intervene. I do not understand why he believes that it is restrictive to force people to declare what they are selling. Regarded in its positive light, what is the nature of the restriction in the Bill?

Mr. McWalter: If we could introduce the policy in an all-European Union way, one bit of the EU would not say, "You must meet some additional condition that you do not have to meet in the rest of the market." The Government's general aim is to achieve an all-EU system of labelling, working through the Codex committee to get the whole of the EU to agree on co-ordinated rules about country of origin—but if one country decides to make it 33 per cent., and another, 50 per cent., that will introduce precisely the constraints on market lubricity that the free market was designed to avoid.

Mr. Letwin: I accept that both from an international point of view under Codex and in relation to the EU itself, there is every advantage in universalisation. No one is challenging that. The question is: in what sense is it a restriction? Where is the precedent for supposing that it is a restriction in law to force transparency concerning country of origin, or any other marking? I know of no such instance.

Mr. McWalter: It would be a restriction if other countries, in producing and labelling their products said, "Gosh. We cannot now send the product to Britain because it has imposed an extra condition." Perhaps they have not been so careful about their tracing, which, as we have heard, is at least possible in places such as Sweden, so there is an element of compulsion.

I want British consumers to get to the position where, instead of being confronted by a cabinet full of stuff and having no idea where it came from, or what the welfare conditions governing its production were, they know about the products and can support British farmers. However, if we are to make the Bill Euro-compliant, as opposed to Euro-clobbering, we may have to be much more careful about such unilateral compulsion. The Committee will have to examine whether it can get round that potentially major difficulty.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I emphasise that there is no attempt on my part to engage in any Euro-clobbering. In response to the hon. Gentleman's intervention, I said that Euro-compliance would be required, but, although I acknowledge the technical and cogent point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), the issue is about leadership. Europe is looking for a steer. We have the expertise and experience to give that leadership. What really concerns me—the hon. Gentleman's comments do so, too—is that the Government, by failing to support a Bill that would provide an opportunity for change, are hardly demonstrating that they wish to go any faster than at the slowest pace, supporting the lowest common denominator of the EU. My feeling is that, on this issue, we have a real opportunity to demonstrate leadership, and that others will want to follow us.

Mr. McWalter: I am not convinced that the hon. Gentleman is quite right about that. The Government are taking a lead on the labelling initiative precisely because of the major difficulties precipitated by the BSE crisis and other events. Nevertheless, I think that the hon. Gentleman's Bill will help in achieving the objective that he described, and that the Bill and this debate are a wonderful mechanism for concentrating Agriculture Ministers' minds, so that, when next we ask them questions, they will be able to show that they really are giving such a lead.

I am sorry to say that clause 2 is undoubtedly not Euro-compliant. However, I look forward to debating that point in Committee and to examining the relevant European statutes, to determine whether there is a way in which the sense of the clause could be reformulated and reintegrated into the legislation.

Some countries will say that, for some products, country of origin is not a relevant issue. Clause 2 would require every producer of every commodity to provide a type of traceability. Such a requirement should not apply to many products, and producers would regard one as only an incumbrance and an irrelevance.

Mr. Bermingham: Before my hon. Friend leaves clause 2, I should like to deal with the matter of a 25 per cent. threshold. Clause 2(1)(b) states that

where the food has more than one ingredient, particulars of the country or countries of origin of each major ingredient

must be included on the label. In jam or preservative, for example, 40 or even 50 per cent. of the ingredients may come from one country, whereas the other 50 or 60 per cent. come from five or six other countries. The label would be wholly misleading if it said that the product was English, as it could be made essentially from ingredients from France, Germany and elsewhere.

Mr. McWalter: I was not planning to dwell on clause 2(1)(b), but my hon. Friend's point is correct. However, I think that the Bill would require only ingredients meeting the 40 per cent. threshold to be labelled. I might also add that such a jam would be rather luxurious compared with those that are usually found in my household.

Clause 3 is currently very unsatisfactory, providing for labelling of food that has been produced to a quality that is "less demanding than" those applying in England and Wales. It is a clear example of how concentration on one commodity—pigmeat—could create major difficulties for other products. We all think that—although there is still room for improvement, and there is an awful lot more room for improvement in mainland Europe—British pigmeat and bacon are produced to the highest animal welfare standards.

Let us, however, consider the case of chocolate. If the provision in clause 3 were applied elsewhere, the Belgians, for example, could say, "Your chocolate is not chocolate at all. Furthermore, your product is produced to standards less demanding than ours." The Belgians would require us to label our inferior chocolate stating, "This is not chocolate", or "This chocolate is produced to lower standards". Some time ago, I had the pleasure of visiting a Belgian brewery. The Belgians were strongly of the view that their production methods resulted in beer of an infinitely higher standard than our British methods. Although we all know that our British beer is massively superior to Belgian beer, they feel that the hygiene standards and the quality of the hops that they use meet much higher specifications.

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): As I represent Burton, I must say that the quality of water in Burton produces our excellent beer.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I agree that we should have the highest regard for the quality of water in Burton, particularly when it has been adjusted in a British brewery. However, attempting to assess whether a product is produced to a more or less demanding specification lands us in one hell of a mess.

Clause 3 states that if food is produced to a less demanding standard,

a reference to that fact shall appear on the mark or label of that food.

So the manufacturer has to state on the label that the food has been produced to standard B or standard Z rather than describing the production method. It is unfeasible to expect manufacturers of products to state explicitly that they produce lower-quality products.

Having talked about the schizophrenic character of the Bill and drawn attention to the provisions that seem particularly Euro-clobbering—

Mr. Bermingham: In relation to beer, has the hon. Gentleman considered the position of McEwans brewery in Scotland having to label its beer as being of a lower standard than English beer? That would cause a riot.

Mr. McWalter: I take my hon. Friend's point. The reference to beer has got several of my hon. Friends extremely excited. Opposition Members have not joined in, but I have no doubt that they are also experts in the subject. Be that as it may, it is clear that the proposal would create difficulties.

Let me draw another dimension of the Bill to the attention of the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien). Some mechanisms in Europe might achieve his aims without violating European law. In Italy, there is a chain of supermarkets—I think that it is called Italmart—that sells only Italian produce: its wine counter, for example, sells no French or German wine. That method of favouring domestic production does not seem to fall foul of European regulations. Perhaps we should have a supermarket called Anglomart.

The current voluntary system of labelling gives people the opportunity to exercise choice. The hon. Gentleman may have missed one crucial point. We must establish a distinction between requiring people to [illegible] goods and prosecuting people if they label them in a misleading way or make an untrue claim about a product's ancestry—for example, by giving the impression that a brand of gin comes from Plymouth when it has never been near that part of the country. Incidentally, I believe that that label is one of the 31 protected labels.

It is important to prosecute those who mislead, and to encourage, support and give Government help to those who wish to provide labels that will allow people to exercise their choice of British products produced to a higher specification. At the same time, we should try to make progress in achieving better labelling throughout Europe. The Bill contains some useful provisions, but after it has been rid of its schizophrenic character, I suspect that some of its clauses will no longer be with us.

1.41 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I speak as a sponsor of what is a good Bill. It will be popular with consumers and producers, and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) drew attention to the fact that it had received the specific support of and co-operation from the Consumers Association and the National Farmers Union. My constituency is not primarily an agricultural

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

one, but I have pig producers and farmers in it, and they have been desperately hard hit by the agricultural crisis affecting the whole country. I well understand that other hon. Members have much wider experience of the problems, but I wish to emphasise that we face a practical problem now and the Bill is not simply an academic exercise.

The Bill is popular without being populist and would have several desirable outcomes. I wish to comment on some of the incipient criticism of the Bill that it is in some way Europhobic. If my reading of the Bill had suggested that, I would not have been a sponsor of it. Although I hate to say so, perhaps I am to some extent an alibi for the hon. Member for Eddisbury, should he come under fire from some hon. Members on that point. I do not doubt that some people will support the Bill for Europhobic reasons, but that is nothing to do with me, guv.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) has had the clearest assurances—ones that I would also wish to hear—that it is the intention that if the Bill goes forward, endeavours will be made to make it Euro-compliant. There is no point spending time and passing legislation that is not. I would be just as disappointed if the Bill were to be kicked into touch because it was thought to be Europhobic as I would be if I thought that it was receiving support because it was Europhobic. We need to make it clear that the Bill is not about Europhobia, it is about protecting British production, industry and consumers, and ensuring that an element of informed choice is available to those who purchase from shops in this country.

Mr. Tyler: I endorse the point that my hon. Friend has just made. Does not the fact that other member states have similar legislation give the lie to the suggestion that the basic premise for the Bill is Europhobic? Those other member states have greatly benefited their consumers and producers as a result.

Mr. Stunell: That is true, and we have already heard about the provisions being made in Sweden and France and the retail method of tackling the issue in Italy. Perhaps some entrepreneurs may read *Hansard* and see an opening for such retail practice in this country. For every member state—and others, such as the Swiss—there is a serious issue in ensuring that consumers have the knowledge to make an informed choice about the food products on sale. The Bill goes a long way in the right direction to achieve that.

I am a keen supporter of what might be called the European project, which I hope will go forward further and faster. However, I do not believe that every rule and regulation currently in place is right. I am not afraid to say when things are wrong and need to be changed. It is clear that gaps and deficiencies exist in the regulations covering food retailing, standards and labelling. I am happy to support the Bill, as it will push forward the process of correcting those deficiencies.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead made a valid point when he said that the Bill offers an opportunity to exert a little pressure on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to be more proactive. The hon. Member for Eddisbury said that he wanted the Government to take a lead in European negotiations on labelling. I hope that the Minister will assure the House that that is exactly what the Government are doing, and that they will use the Bill as leverage in those negotiations. I hope that they will tell their European counterparts, "We've got trouble at t'mill, and the lads aren't happy. There's a Bill going through Parliament and we need to press the case it makes." The Minister should not reject the reform proposed by the Bill, but embrace it and take it forward.

The Bill is not perfect. I am exploring the wording of a ten-minute rule Bill that I want to introduce on retail packaging, and I have discovered that the matter is not as easy as I suspected. The hon. Member for Eddisbury is to be congratulated: he has arrived here in a flash of light after the Eddisbury by-election and produced out of his back pocket a Bill that is good, even if it is not perfect.

The Bill is a worthwhile step in the right direction. I support it and am happy to sponsor it. It is certainly good enough to merit a Committee stage.

Mr. Bermingham: The substance of the Bill can be found in clauses 2 and 3. Will the hon. Gentleman tell me how any court in the land would interpret clause 3(1)? Against which codes, practices or other measures will the qualitative standards of clause 3(2) be set? Clause 3 is a nightmare.

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman seems to have made an eloquent plea for inclusion in the Committee that will consider the Bill. I should be more than happy to serve on the Committee with him, which would mean that we could debate the point in more detail.

The Bill is not perfect, but it is good enough to go into Committee and for the Government to use as a lever in Europe. I urge them to do so.

1.48 pm

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): I am pleased to participate in this debate, as the many farmers in my constituency are very worried about the present state of agriculture. They, and the consumers in my area, are keen to ensure that good and fair labelling accurately sets out the country of origin of produce on sale in shops and supermarkets.

My only reservation about the Bill has been expressed by other hon. Members, and it has to do with its compatibility with EU law. The National Farmers Union wrote to me and emphasised that

> the application of the legislation to the selling of food to catering establishments as opposed to supermarkets and other shops are technical issues which can be examined closely at a later stage in the parliamentary process.

I should be interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister whether that is a possibility.

I was reassured by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) that he was not trying to skirmish with the EU. I can understand that that might be the reason for a Bill such as this, as many Opposition Members seem to believe that this Government have invented the current crisis in the agriculture industry. We are picking up the pieces of many years of problems in the industry, and labelling is part of that. It comes from the problems of BSE and the fact that, thankfully, we have brilliant welfare standards. I have visited pig farms in my constituency where the people who work with the animals are delighted that conditions are now better.

The better welfare standards that this country enjoys, certainly for pigs, were extra to the European requirements. We implemented the regulations to a higher standard than was the case in other parts of Europe. That is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that other European countries are behind us. They are, but that is because we chose to implement the proposals as we did. I am pleased that we did, but unless we sell and market our produce here, showing that we produce the animals according to better standards, our farmers will be at a disadvantage against their European competitors.

The situation in agriculture is desperate, as Ministers are well aware. I welcomed the announcement at the beginning of February about tightening up the labelling guidelines. We all want to be able to go into a supermarket and know what we are buying and where it comes from. It is difficult to look at bacon on the shelves and know, without studying it—perhaps even getting the reading glasses out, for those of my age and older—where it was reared and processed.

The news this morning referred to the launch today of farmers markets in London, with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in attendance. That is an important initiative which has been adopted in my own constituency. It provides the opportunity to consumers to buy direct from farmers in this country and know where their food is coming from. Supermarkets are also being pressed to ensure that their labelling is correct.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) touched on my next point. If the Bill were enacted and we labelled our food in accordance with its provisions, could we insist that other countries labelled theirs similarly? As my hon. Friend said, it is not a case simply of Europe but of the rest of the world. Could we tell American producers to label their products in a certain way to sell them in the United Kingdom? Or would the Bill affect only food produced in this country? Is there any difference between what the Bill would do it if referred to labelling British produce only, the Swedish Farm Assured mark, the recent NFU kitemark initiative and the Meat and Livestock Commission Quality Standard Pork Mark? Would not the Bill simply duplicate what the NFU has already done?

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I wish to clarify the position. The Swedish Farm Assured mark specifically includes the method of production in the information. Traceability includes being able to check on the methods of production in a positive and factual sense. That is the difference between the Swedish scheme and the NFU's current proposals for a kitemark.

Mrs. Dean: I would have thought that the NFU's kitemarks would be designed to show that the product was British and had been produced according to the standards of this country. Therefore, it would differ little from the Swedish system. However, I am willing to receive further information on that.

Mr. Bermingham: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend. From the wording of clause 2, I assume that any food sold in this country would have to bear a label showing the country of origin and the country of manufacture. The NFU's point about kitemarks is a good one. We would know for certain whether food was English produced and manufactured.

Mrs. Dean: I fully support the NFU's proposals for kitemarking and I congratulate it on its initiative. I also welcome the Government's intervention in trying to ensure that we know the country of origin of the products that we buy in our supermarkets. I welcome any proposal that would help agriculture in this country and the farmers in my constituency.

If the Bill progresses, I hope that it will be practical and will meet EU regulations. I question whether Swedish Farm Assured is any different from the NFU kitemark. It is important that we do all we can to help farmers. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

1.57 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I do not want to speak for more than a few minutes because I have somewhat justifiably been accused of volubility. We have already debated the Bill for some time, and I am anxious to see it proceed.

I wish to make three brief points. The first is purely technical. I do not understand the arguments of the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter)—which were made in good faith—that it would be a restriction of trade to impose transparency requirements where there is a non-differential. I do not believe that the jurisprudence would support that interpretation and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) does not believe it. However, the hon. Gentleman may be right and the answer can be teased out in Committee.

Mr. McWalter: If one buys a packet of peanuts, the label often says that they are the product of several countries. Nobody is that fussed about which countries they come from. Such products might need a wholly different tracing system if they are to arrive on our shelves at all. That is just one example among many where the country of origin is not currently made known.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman neglects the fact that a particular measure—this is as true under the Codex Alimentarius as it is under the European provisions—that imposes a cost on producers is not a prima facie reason for classing it as a restriction of trade if the effect is non-differential between the imported and the home product. I do not understand why the hon. Gentleman takes the view that he does. Much more importantly, I do not understand why the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food takes it. It will have its reasons—they are probably not the hon. Gentleman's reasons—but I think that it has been misadvised. However, that point will come out in Committee and I hope that it will eventually be satisfactorily resolved.

My second technical point is about clause 2. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) would probably agree that the rest of the Bill could be ditched if clause 2 could stand. It is the bit that matters. We want to ensure that people are not misled—I use that word advisedly—into buying things that they think are produced in Britain, but are not in any layman's definition

[Mr. Letwin]

produced in this country. That aim is shared with the Ministry and with the Prime Minister, to judge by their comments, and I take what they say at face value.

If a restriction in trade is imposed as a result of the form in which the aim in clause 2 is achieved, many other modalities are feasible. One, for example, would be to reverse the burden of the clause, and make it a ban on people labelling food in a certain way—such as labelling it "British"—except in certain circumstances. That would avoid imposing on people who import goods the necessity of labelling them as having come from other places. There are thousands of such modalities, and no doubt much drafting work can be done, but I do not have the slightest doubt that clause 2 could be drafted to be entirely consistent with the Codex, with European regulations and indeed with the spirit of competition.

My third point is overwhelmingly the most important. Normally I try not to speak in terms that are pejorative or party political, beyond the genuine disputes between us about matters of policy. However, on an administrative basis, there is a disgrace. It is acknowledged by all parties that the Bill seeks, however hamfistedly and improperly—we shall find that out in Committee—to achieve an aim that the Agriculture Minister and the Prime Minister are on record as seeking to achieve.

It is not as if the Bill descended on the House two and a half hours ago without prior notice. It was published, and it was known that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury would introduce it. The Ministry had ample opportunity to approach my hon. Friend, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire and other colleagues who are concerned with these matters and who have corresponded extensively about it, and talk through the Bill.

When I assisted in the promotion of the Referendums Bill as a private Member's measure, I received exactly that courtesy from the Home Office. It contacted my colleagues and I and we discussed the Bill. We did not reach an agreement, but at least there was a constructive effort between the Department and the Bill's promoter to turn it into the best possible Bill in the Department's view, within the limits of the promoter's willingness. It could then be debated in the House. My hon. Friend assures me that no such process occurred in this case. Why not? Why has not the Bill been redrafted in such a way that it comes as close as possible to being compliant? There is no excuse for that when the Agriculture Minister maintains that he cares about achieving that result.

I am sure that the Minister of State will tell me that she and her colleagues spent a great deal of time with bureaucrats in Brussels trying to improve things, and I have no doubt that that is true and that Ministers have genuinely been trying to get a European result. However, here we have a potential UK-based result that may take effect much sooner, and the Ministry has failed to take it seriously. That will be recognised as a disgrace by farmers in my constituency and those of other Members from all parties. It is an extraordinary and unreasonable way to conduct these affairs.

I am grateful that I am not the Agriculture Minister and so are farmers. I accept that he has a ghastly role. However, if I were the Minister, the first thing that I would have done when I heard that my hon. Friend was promoting the Bill was to call him in for a chat and ask, "What are you trying to achieve, and can we achieve it?" This is an ideal opportunity; it is a legislative slot.

Mrs. Dean: Does the hon. Gentleman know whether the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) contacted the Ministry to seek advice before he drafted the Bill?

Mr. Letwin: No, but no less a body than the National Farmers Union did so on my hon. Friend's behalf. It is pretty extraordinary that although the Minister knew that the Bill was being supported by organisations representing farmers interests, such as the NFU and the National Pig Association, as my hon. Friend showed, and by consumers interest groups, he did not try to iron out problems in the Bill as far as possible before this stage. I accept that the Standing Committee will do more.

The Government must want the result that the Bill would achieve, so I can only assume that they have become so terrified of any domestic action that they simply bring down the barriers on any discussion of domestic action. All activity must be focused on discussions in Brussels and other Governments in the Codex. That is an extraordinary error of judgment and a bad way to go about administration.

We have the opportunity to take domestic action that will have an immediate effect. Even if there is a scintilla of doubt about the Bill's compliance and it is challenged, that challenge will take many years. I am sure that the Minister of State knows that it would also take many years for her to persuade Governments in the EU and the Codex negotiations to change anything material. We are dealing with a contrast between fast action and slow action and the Ministry has decided to shred the fast action and go for the slow action. That is particularly bad because the Prime Minister and the Agriculture Minister should not be saying that they want urgent action when they are ensuring that there will be no urgent action.

Mr. Bermingham: The hon. Gentleman heard me say earlier that clauses 2 and 3 are extremely badly drafted; they will not stand up in any court of law. Would he not be sensible to persuade his hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) to withdraw the Bill until someone can redraft those clauses?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman might well be right to say that clauses 2 and 3 are badly drafted. However, first, the Ministry had the opportunity to help to redraft them before the Bill was introduced; and secondly, the clauses can still be redrafted—the mistake can be cured in Committee. There is no reason to withdraw the Bill, whereas there is every reason to press ahead with it and find out whether something can be fashioned. It is up to MAFF to exert itself to get the Bill into as good a shape as possible. If, contrary to advice received from the House of Commons Library and relevant QCs, it turns out to be genuinely impossible to fashion legislation that will work, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury and I will both accept that. However, that is not what has happened so far and the dereliction of duty that has occurred must quickly be redressed.

Mr. McWalter: I seems to me that, in many ways, today's debate has moved matters on to the point where we feel far more confident that there is a sense of unity

and purpose. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will lose his enthusiasm for lambasting and get on with the work of advancing the debate.

Mr. Letwin: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. If the Minister tells us that the Government will now adopt a constructive attitude to the Bill, I shall be happy to withhold further lambasting. My lambasting is to be regarded in an historical light if, as I hope she will, the Minister tells us that the Government intend to proceed in a spirit of conciliation. In pursuit of that fresh spirit, I shall now sit down.

2.7 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) on his success in the ballot, on his choice of subject—one that is of great interest to every consumer and farmer in this country—and on his excellent and lucid speech in which he dealt convincingly with most of the objections raised. No one who has spoken in this excellent debate has attacked the principle of the Bill; the concerns expressed have been about points of detail. I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) say that he hoped to serve on the Standing Committee; I, too, hope that that will be possible.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) went to the heart of several important issues relating to the Bill. The measure is timely and it neatly unites the interests of both consumers and farmers. As several hon. Members have said, there is growing outrage among the public about defects in the current labelling laws. When consumers come to appreciate the true situation, they are shocked. It is wrong that products that do not contain a single ingredient that has been produced in this country may be labelled as British. That is outrageous, and many would regard such practices as a fraud on consumers who are deceived into buying the goods.

As concern over the scandal mounts, many organisations have tried to respond on a voluntary basis. I welcome the steps taken in respect of the British kitemark label and the co-operation between the National Farmers Union, the Meat and Livestock Commission, the Food and Drink Federation and the British Retail Consortium. All those bodies are doing good work and they have our support. The more that can be achieved on a voluntary basis, the better, but it would be better still if we could take the route signposted by my hon. Friend's Bill. Agriculture now faces its worst crisis for two generations. One response to that crisis should be the introduction, with no qualifications, of honesty in labelling—a principle to which the Conservative party is wholly committed.

Individual sectors of agriculture have been mentioned, including pig farming. I was disturbed to learn during the debate that a complaint originating within the House of Commons has been made about the protest that has been in Parliament square for the past month. I cannot believe that that complaint originated from an Opposition Member, and in that I believe that I can speak with some confidence for the Liberal Democrats as well.

I hope that if a complaint has been made by a Labour Member, steps will be taken to withdraw it, and that the Minister will make it clear that until the pig farmers who are protesting outside have had their concerns reasonably addressed, as the Prime Minister suggested would happen when he spoke to the NFU conference, the Labour party is happy for their entirely peaceful protest to continue.

There is concern about poultry meat, as we heard, and about some of the beef produced in France, which was the subject of two recent reports. Last year the European Commission inspectors exposed illegal feeding practices taking place in France, and in the past few weeks another European Commission report has uncovered serious deficiencies in the way in which France deals with suspected cases of BSE.

Meat produced under those conditions is entering this country, consumers are buying it, and they have no knowledge that it comes from France, despite the serious anxieties to which those European Commission reports give rise.

The problems encountered by British pig farmers producing to higher standards than many competitors abroad, the dangers to consumers of eating poultry that has been produced using growth-promoting substances that are banned throughout the entire EU for health reasons, and the dangers of eating meat that may have come in from France and which may be contaminated—all those problems would be directly addressed by the measures in the Bill.

Not only is the Bill badly needed, it is needed now. The gravity of the crisis is due in part to the enormous increase in import penetration. British farmers are experiencing difficult conditions—much more difficult than they were before 1997. That is partly because of the level of sterling, a factor outside the Minister's control. As a consequence, competition from imports is probably more severe than it has been for a long time. With the huge growth in the international trade in food products, the need for honesty in labelling is greater than ever.

We have heard many times in recent months from the Prime Minister, from the Agriculture Minister and other Ministers of their support for the principle of honesty in labelling. Today they have an opportunity for that support to be put into practice by allowing the Bill a Second Reading.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury recognised in his opening speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset confirmed, that there may be deficiencies in the drafting of individual clauses, but the time to address those is in Standing Committee. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury would welcome the chance to explore in more detail some of the concerns that have been raised during the debate.

If revisions are needed to make the Bill entirely consistent with our EU obligations, my hon. Friend and I are ready to support them, as long as the thrust of the Bill is not destroyed. I hope that in dealing with the EU requirements, Ministers and the House will be robust in their defence of British interests. That is necessary at all times, and it would certainly be needed in relation to the Bill.

If the Government decide to talk the Bill out today or use any other mechanism to block its progress to the next stage by denying it a Second Reading, they will be sending a clear and rather chilling message to consumers and farmers throughout Britain. Every rural community will be listening eagerly to the Minister's remarks and to the outcome of the debate.

[Mr. Tim Yeo]

If Labour is not willing to offer support during the present crisis by allowing a Second Reading to a Bill that does not add a single penny to public spending and that embodies the principles that Ministers claim to support, Labour will be judged by its actions, not its words. It will rightly be judged harshly and condemned for denying the House a chance to examine in more detail a measure that is entirely constructive in its approach.

If the Bill does not get a Second Reading today, all those fine phrases from the Prime Minister and other Ministers will be exposed as utterly worthless. There is time for the Government to support the Bill, and I urge them to do so.

2.15 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The debate has been interesting and worth while, and many valid points have been made. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) on his good fortune in securing such a good position in the ballot and on raising an important issue.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) pointed out that I nodded much during the speech of the hon. Member for Eddisbury. I do not apologise for doing that because I agreed with many points that he made. My initial reaction to the Bill was understanding, sympathy and support. However, when I examined the few clauses in the measure, I had severe reservations about it. In the short time available, I hope that I can explain the reasons for that to the House. Hon. Members from all parts of the House have asked questions about the Bill's feasibility.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) pointed out, the substance of the Bill is contained in clauses 2 and 3. The problems of compatibility with European law that several hon. Members pointed out unfortunately exist. As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, the previous Government helped to effect that European law. Clauses 2 and 3 contravene EU law and that means that the Bill contravenes it.

Consistency is important. The hon. Member for Eddisbury said that he was worried about any suggestion that the Bill contravened EU law and that it was not his intention, even if it was that of others, to "clobber"—I think that was the word he used—EU law through the Bill. However, clauses 2 and 3 would do exactly that. They would mean acting unilaterally on matters about which we agreed under previous legislation to act in the framework of the European single market. Despite the Euro-scepticism that reigns among Conservative Members, the Conservative party and certainly the Liberal Democrats have a strong commitment to the operation of the European single market, which is important for our industry. It is important for agriculture as well as other industries.

Various sectors of agriculture export to other EU countries and it is important to safeguard those exports and ensure to the best of our ability that the European market works fairly. I am the first to admit that many aspects of that European market do not work fairly. The Government are seeking to tackle those aspects.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the Minister agree that if we pass a law that is incompatible with treaty obligations, the European Court will strike it down?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend is right. There is no doubt that the substance of the Bill could result in European legal action being pursued. It is important for us to be consistent and the Government have rightly said that we obey European laws to which we have agreed.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury rightly pointed out why we so strongly deplore the French attitude to our beef exports. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) urged us to be robust, so I should report to the House that I was at an annual international agricultural event in Paris yesterday to promote British meat products with members of the Meat and Livestock Commission and our own agricultural commun[illegible] We sell lamb and sheepmeat to France in considerable quantities and it is therefore important to convey our support for those products. I also held a press conference that firmly criticised the completely unjust unilateral action taken by the French Government and repeated why British consumers have confidence in the high standards that we have introduced, to which Members on both sides of the House have referred.

Given the clear incompatibility of the substance of the Bill with European legislation, I was surprised that two Liberal Democrats spoke in support of it. I remind the House that we had to pay compensation when we introduced legislation that was struck down in the European Court of Justice—even legislation that appeared to be less at risk of being struck down than the Bill. It might have been useful for the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire—the former Attorney-General—to have listened to that point. The most striking example is provided by the Factortame judgment under which the Merchant Shipping Act 1988, which restricted the registration of fishing vessels and was designed to deny Spanish quota-hoppers access to United Kingdom fish quotas, was struck down in the European Court. Substantial compensation had to be paid.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk said that the Bill would not cost the Government anything. If it were implemented in anything like its current form, it could be extremely costly to the United Kingdom and could damage our reputation considerably. Although I agree that the principle behind what the hon. Member for Eddisbury is trying to achieve is dear to all our hearts—it has been the subject of a number of Government initiatives so far—it is simply impossible for us to give the Bill fair passage, knowing what its implications would be.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) hopes that the Government will use the Bill as a lever in our arguments with other European countries. Although I am happy to listen to his advice, it is unnecessary because we are already taking action in that respect. I do not want to take a party political approach because there is a lot of common ground between Members on both sides of the House, but I believe that we have been far more active on labelling issues in the EU framework than the previous Government. Indeed, some complaints about the state of EU legislation have arisen from directives into which they entered.

We are strongly committed to giving the consumer relevant information and there is no difference between us on the information that consumers want on labels. We are helping to create a system whereby consumers get more information now, and in the future we will be able to satisfy some of the hon. Gentleman's understandable aspirations.

The Government were taken to task by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). He blamed us for not being proactive enough on the Bill. I was once fortunate enough to get a much lower position in the ballot than the hon. Member for Eddisbury, and I wanted to introduce a public safety information Bill. I immediately approached the Department and sought a meeting with the relevant Ministers. Unfortunately, they did not accept my sensible measure. The hon. Gentleman could have come to us. He received support from the National Farmers Union, so I contacted that organisation to explain where we agree with it on labelling initiatives and the reasons why the Bill is not acceptable.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Ms Quin: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue, I shall come to the point that he specifically raised.

During the debate, many hon. Members have said that it will be possible to deal with some of these issues in Committee. Obviously, if the Bill proceeded into Committee we would have to tackle them. However, it would be tantamount to an abuse of parliamentary procedure to expect a Bill to go into Committee when its two substantive clauses are, in the Government's view and in the opinion of legal advisers, in contravention of Acts already on the statute book and of EU law. The two substantive clauses are incompatible with European law.

We believe that to achieve the goals that the hon. Member for Eddisbury rightly wants to achieve, it is far better for Ministers to pursue the initiatives that they are already taking, and to spend time building up support in the European Union for our objectives, rather than to spend a huge amount of time in Committee on a Bill, the substantive elements of which are not compatible with European law. I think that there has been widespread understanding of that position during the debate.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury also mentioned the importance of the devolution aspects of his proposal. I assure him and the House that Ministers in my Department have regular meetings with the corresponding Ministers and Secretaries in the devolved legislatures and organisations. We are keen to move together on issues to which single market considerations apply, and when we need to present a common position to the European Union to get the changes that he and the Government want to achieve.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the proposed Bill in the Scottish Parliament, which I understand is at an early stage. As he recognised, that Bill refers to labelling of meat, so it is a much narrower measure than his Bill. I think that he would agree that it makes sense to make our approaches compatible. That is not an argument against devolution, of which I am an enthusiastic supporter, but it is a reason to support the approach taken by my Ministry and the Government, which have worked in harmony with representatives of the devolved Administrations to try to ensure that we present a united front on European and single market issues.

During the debate, many references were understandably made—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 9 June.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

ORGANIC FOOD AND FARMING TARGETS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 10 March.

BUILDING SOCIETIES (TRANSFER RESOLUTIONS) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 19 May.

Committees

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Ordered,

That Mr. Desmond Browne be discharged from the Select Committee on Public Administration and Mr. John McFall be added to the Committee.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

That Mr. Bob Blizzard be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Mr. Phil Sawford be added.—[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

Silicone Breast Implants

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am pleased to have the opportunity to bring the House's attention to an issue that affects more and more women in the United Kingdom as well as abroad, on which I believe the Government have so far failed to take decisive action. I first became aware of the health risks associated with silicone implants when I was approached by a constituent whose case will, I believe, interest the House. It raises concerns about the safety of the operation as well as the product itself, but it is the latter that I shall consider in detail.

Dawn contacted me in September last year, having already suffered from the adverse effects of breast implants for more than a year. In June 1998, she found that the implant in her left breast had ruptured and needed to be replaced. In July, the implants were removed and replaced with others; however, Dawn found that the implants had made one of her breasts larger than the other. Moreover, it appeared that the scar tissue was infected.

A course of antibiotics was prescribed in an attempt to resolve the problem, requiring Dawn to return to hospital every week for 10 weeks. However, her condition deteriorated further: holes developed in her breast, requiring her to return to hospital for a further course of antibiotics. It culminated in her being rushed to hospital, where a doctor found that the implant was beginning to fall out. I apologise for going into such detail, but the detail highlights the concern felt by many about the safety not just of the operation, but—as I shall demonstrate—of the product itself.

Further intervention was required: an implant was removed. Subsequently, the wound had to be left to heal, with no stitches, so that the infection could be cleared. That obviously had a detrimental effect on both the physical and the mental well-being of my constituent, who, after what should have been a straightforward operation, was experiencing pain and—because she could not work for a long period—loss of income. She described herself as having been depressed and even suicidal. Moreover, she developed a peptic ulcer, which I think her doctors would suggest was a result of the stress that she experienced.

A further operation was performed to replace the implant, which left my constituent feeling numb on her left side down to the waist. Apparently, she was told that that was perfectly normal. For a further two months she had to visit the doctor every couple of weeks, and was taking painkillers and other medication.

By April, my constituent's doctor was still concerned about one of the implants, which he thought might have encapsulated. There was concern that her lymph glands were swollen. That evening, she was in such pain that she had to be admitted to hospital. After that series of operations, both implants were removed. The doctor informed her that, during removal, staff had had to remove a benign lump from her breast and—this is key—had found silicone around the lymph glands in her armpit.

My constituent continues to suffer the pain and anguish associated with the operation and with what happened subsequently. She continues to see various specialists to

try to get the matter resolved. It seems that hers is not a lone case. She has been in regular contact by e-mail with concerned women throughout the world who are experiencing similar problems. Apparently, she is receiving up to 50 e-mails a day from different parts of the world. People are passing on information about the impact that Dow implants may have had on their health.

Silicone Support UK, which runs a helpline for women with similar problems, has told me that it has been in contact with no fewer than 2,000 women who are suffering from similar symptoms, so it is by no means a unique case. It appears that many thousands of women are affected in the UK and in other countries. I am sure that each hon. Member will have constituents who have health problems that would appear to be associated with either the operation to put the implants in, or the implants themselves, which I learned today contain no fewer than 37 constituent parts; they contain different chemicals or metals. It is not just inert silicone that is contained in implants, but many other materials which Members would find less acceptable and would say were in no way inert.

The problems associated with silicone implants that have been reported by different women range from partial paralysis to arthritis, severe allergies, chronic fatigue syndrome and memory problems. As hon. Members may know, a moratorium on silicone implants exists—except for clinical trials, in the United States and Canada—and they are banned in Australia, Japan and France, so what are the UK Government doing? I would not want to accuse the Government of doing absolutely nothing. Historically, action was taken when public awareness was perhaps at its height. In 1992, the Department of Health set up an independent expert advisory group to investigate the association between silicone gel breast implants and connective tissue disease. Apparently, it found no evidence of a link and no reason to alter existing policy.

In 1993, public anxiety was such that a breast implant registry was established at Salisbury district hospital. Apparently, the registry was to form the basis for future research projects. In 1994, the Medical Devices Agency of the Department of Health, which has continued to keep the issue under review, published a further analysis of the health risks of silicone implants and reached the same conclusions that had been reached in 1992. It is worth noting that medical health professionals are under no obligation to report incidents to the agency: there is a voluntary arrangement, which is a source of concern.

In 1997, the Government set up an independent review group to review all the evidence of possible health risks. The history is that, as concern has mounted, the Government have naturally wanted to reassure the public and be seen to be doing something, but being seen to do something is about all that it amounts to.

Let us examine a specific example. The breast implant registry at Salisbury district hospital was set up in 1993, nearly eight years ago. A parliamentary question that I tabled recently has identified that, since the registry was established, no research has yet been published.

The purpose of the registry is to collate information on breast implants, to enable research to be undertaken on the basis of that information and identify potential problems. However, although the registry has been up and running for seven years, no research has been published. I have been told that only one research project is under way. If one research project is all that the registry has been able to achieve in the past seven years—perhaps the Minister will correct me if it has accomplished more than that—it is not a terribly great achievement.

The registry contains details on 40,000 implant recipients, the ages of whom range from 12 to 80. The registry's scientific co-ordinator states:

> Current uses of the registry are concerned with improving and extending this process, raising awareness of the process, increasing the proportion of total procedures that are registered, internal audit with collaborating centres and assisting with some vigilance and safety concerns.

Perhaps the Minister will say precisely how the registry has been able to raise "awareness of the process" and how the proportion of total registered procedures has increased since the registry was established in 1993.

The fact that no research has been completed might explain why no findings have been published. Surely the Minister will agree that, so far, it seems to be a case of activity for its own sake, rather than to serve a specific purpose. I wonder how the registry is informing the Government's policy. I should also like to know how much money has been invested in the registry. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that issue—if not now, then later, in writing. The registry does not so far seem to have been terribly good value for money.

The independent review group was established in 1997, to review all the evidence on possible health risks, and it reported in 1998. It identified various problems and made various important recommendations. The key issue is information and advertising. Hon. Members may have seen advertisements in various women's magazines, such as the one I am holding, which mention the "Natural look", "Natural feel" and "Natural push-up" of implants. There is nothing in the advertisements about the possible health and safety implications of implants. As a doctor told me, the results that are demonstrated in photographs in such advertisements are always perfect, whereas, as doctors accept, in many cases, the results can be anything but perfect.

What response has there been to the independent review group's recommendation that better information on implants should be provided? The Advertising Standards Authority and the Government are considering how best to deal with the matter, and they will seek to ensure that information on the risks of implant surgery is made readily available. However, it is another case of action in progress, but nothing delivered. The absence of advice for women on breast implants is a major stumbling block.

The independent review group also recommended that all patients undergoing surgery should be able to obtain free of charge comprehensive information from a designated body. I was told in the answer to my parliamentary question that such information would be available by the end of 1999, but that information has still not materialised. Will the Minister clarify when that freely and readily available information on the operation—to inform women of the risks, and perhaps of the financial costs—will be available to the general public? I have been told that information from the European Union on implants could be made available, but has been refused as inappropriate or not good enough for the United Kingdom. If that is not good enough, could we have something very quickly that is?

[Mr. Tom Brake]

The Government banned soya bean breast implants one year ago, after reports of 74 adverse incidents among the 5,000 women who had received such implants since they were introduced in 1995. Apparently, they were banned in accordance with the precautionary principle. Perhaps the Government were concerned about genetically modified organisms in soya when they banned those implants on the basis of the precautionary principle, which is now being advanced as a reason for scaling down the use of genetically modified organisms.

The deputy chief medical officer commented last year:

> The Medical Devices Agency has received reports of local complications in a small number of women who have trilucent implants. There has been no evidence of permanent injury or harm to health . . . However on the precautionary principle we consider that no more of these devices should be implanted.

If those particular implants have been banned on the basis of the precautionary principle, there is at the very least a persuasive argument for the Government to ban silicone implants, as has been done in many other countries. I know that the Minister will not concede that today, but I hope that she will give me the modest assurance that the Government will agree to look at the matter again, perhaps with a greater degree of urgency than has been demonstrated so far. For my constituent, Dawn, and thousands of women like her, that is the very least that we can demand.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) for raising this issue, which is of great concern to many women who have, or are thinking of having, breast implants. I should also like to take the opportunity to express my sympathy for his constituent. No one underestimates or doubts the considerable distress that she has suffered.

Currently, there is much confusion about silicone breast implants and we are determined to get straight, evidence-based information, validated by Department of Health experts, to women and general practitioners, so that they can take appropriate decisions about their own health care—including women who have had implants and those who are thinking of having them.

The hon. Gentleman will know that a systematic review of the evidence is the way to get a rational debate on the issue. I am grateful for the opportunity to reassure him that the Department of Health does not just wish to be seen to be doing something about it, but is doing something and to share that information with the hon. Gentleman and the House.

Regulations are in place throughout Europe and they include essential requirements for safety and performance which apply to all medical devices, including breast implants. It is important to acknowledge that there are risks inherent is all medical procedures, but the regulations require that any risks associated with medical devices are considered acceptable when balanced against the benefits arising from the use of a device.

The Department of Health's Medical Devices Agency identified the breast implant device to which the hon. Gentleman referred—the one filled with soya bean oil rather than silicone gel—as possibly unsafe and it was withdrawn from clinical use last year. In the same way, the MDA identified potential safety concerns several years ago in relation to polyurethane-coated breast implants and took steps to ensure that these implants were no longer used. When we first became aware of concerns in these cases, and in the case of silicone breast implants, we started by reviewing the available data and took action.

In the case of silicone gel breast implants, the data reviewed provided consistent reassurance that risks to patients were no greater than for other implants.

The possibility that silicone gel breast implants might cause connective tissue disease was first suggested in 1991. I shall not repeat the review process that the hon. Gentleman accurately identified. He also drew attention to the setting up in 1993 of the National Breast Implant Registry at Odstock hospital in Salisbury.

In spite of the reassurances, many women remained convinced that their breast implants may have been the cause of the debilitating illnesses they were suffering. Precisely because of those continuing concerns, one of the first actions the Government took when they came to power in May 1997 was to ask the chief medical officer to take a fresh look into the issues surrounding silicone gel breast implants.

The CMO set up an independent review group with the task of reviewing the possible health effects associated with silicone gel breast implants and the issues relating to pre-operative patient information examining.

The IRG is chaired by Professor Roger Sturrock, an internationally acknowledged expert in rheumatology. The findings of the IRG were published in July 1998, and I shall outline some of the actions that were taken as a result of those recommendations. I shall briefly summarise its conclusions. First, silicone gel breast implants were not seen to be associated with any greater health risk than other surgical implants. Secondly, the IRG found no evidence for an abnormal immune response to silicones or for any link between silicone gel breast implants and any established connective tissue disease.

Those conclusions are corroborated by the earlier assessments by the Department of Health, the American Medical Association, the Canadian Independent Advisory Committee, the National Science Panel appointed by the US federal court, and the Institute of Medicine of the US National Academy of Science. Importantly, the IRG also pointed out that the information provided to women undergoing breast implantation was of poor quality, and that that needed to be addressed.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the recommendations made by the IRG and I shall take them step by step. In relation to information for patients and the consent required, the IRG recommended that information should be provided to patients about benefits and risks and the likely financial implications. It also recommended that a specific consent form should be developed, incorporating all the relevant issues. In response, we set up a small group led by Baroness Emerton of Tunbridge Wells to produce independent advice for women considering breast implants. A team comprising health care professionals, women who have had breast implants and representatives of other interested organisations—including the independent sector—has produced an information booklet. The booklet was issued widely for consultation—because it is important that we get it right—between July and September last year, and 100,000 copies will be

published at the end of the month. The booklet will be available through the NHS health literature line on 0800 555 777, the Health Information Service, NHS Direct and on the Department of Health website.

The IRG also expressed concerns about the control of advertisements. The Department of Health has discussed those concerns with the Advertising Standards Authority, and we are working with the ASA on the standards that we think advertisers should observe, with a view to involving the ASA in action against those producing materials for the public that could be misleading and dangerous to health.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned adverse incidents and the Medical Devices Agency published guidance on the reporting of breast implant-related adverse incidents in 1999. That was circulated to plastic surgeons, to hospitals and clinics in both the public and private sectors and to manufacturers. It includes advice to manufacturers on which incidents they have, by law, to notify to the MDA. The guidance is also useful to plastic surgeons and other health service staff, who can report adverse incidents directly to the MDA's adverse incident centre. Over the past two years, we have spent some £50,000 investigating adverse incidents with breast implants.

In relation to standards of care, a Royal College of Surgeons committee, under the chairmanship of a leading plastic surgeon, Mr. Michael Brough, is now developing clinical guidelines for breast implant surgery. Those will also address the issue of consent.

The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that the Care Standards Bill, currently awaiting Report stage in the other place, will introduce a new framework and recommendations for control of the independent health care sector that will benefit women who use that sector by imposing clinical standards, complaints procedures and monitoring.

The IRG also recommended that registration of implants with the National Breast Implant Registry should be compulsory. In the UK, reporting by clinicians is an aspect of good professional practice rather than a legal requirement. The entry of data onto a registry also requires consent by the patient. Therefore, registration cannot be made compulsory.

The intent behind the IRG's recommendation can, however, be met by increasing compliance. Since 1994, more than 40,000 implants have been registered. It is important to note that the number registered in 1998 was almost four times the number registered when the register was established.

The cost of the national breast implant registry to date is £200,000. This year, the MDA has increased this level of funding by £20,000, to allow an increase in compliance monitoring.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked what had been done with that register. It is intended to be used as a research tool. There is no consistent picture from international research to date on local complications associated with breast implantation, such as rupture and contracture. That is why the Department of Health is planning a study to look at this, based upon patients registered in the first years of the breast implant registry. It is only now that we can use registry data as a basis for such research, as reliable answers on the incidence of local complications cannot be obtained until at least five years of data have been acquired.

We must wait even longer for any registry-based research into systemic diseases, such as connective tissue disease, since those diseases would not manifest themselves until about 10 years after implantation. However, between 2 million and 3 million women around the world are estimated to have received breast implants, and the IRG agreed that the question of the incidence of systemic disease has already been addressed by studies from North America and Europe.

Finally, the IRG recommended that a steering group be set up to organise research, and that new information should be kept under review. In March 1999, the Department of Health's research and development division established a steering group to monitor current research and to consider areas and approaches for new research of high scientific quality. The group includes a consultant plastic surgeon, an emeritus professor of immunology, a representative from industry and Professor Kent Woods, the chairman of the NHS health technology assessment programme.

In January, it considered the results of research on antibody tests carried out on Dutch women with silicone gel breast implants. The Dutch work is thorough, but so far it has failed to show any association between antibody test results and the degree of disability in the women examined. However, the IRG continues to meet about twice a year to review any new evidence related to its remit, and we are committed to continuing to respond to its recommendations.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for giving way and, given the time, she may have to respond in writing to the questions that I want to ask. First, will she clarify whether the voluntary arrangement about reporting incidents requires patients' consent? Will personal details be stripped out of the information, so that an accurate picture can be built up about the problems associated with certain products?

Secondly, when will the Department complete the study using the register, and what will be its terms of reference?

Ms Stuart: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Royal College of Surgeons is reviewing the data consent form to ensure increased compliance. The terms of reference for the research based on that data have been framed to accommodate the fact that immunological data must be acquired over a period of 10 years.

I turn now to information available on the Department's website. The internet is a powerful tool, but it carries much unreliable information. The Department's website ensures that women have access to reliable information.

Finally, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government's financial commitment to this matter is not inconsiderable. Since April 1997, we have spent in excess of £800,000 on the monitoring programme. That covers £450,000 for MDA staff time, £250,000 for the IRG, and £100,000 for the national breast implant registry.

The Government are determined that women should have access to reliable information, and to continue to research and monitor an issue that causes a lot of concern to women. Some of that concern may be unnecessary.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 6 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Child Poverty

1. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What action he is taking in co-operation with other Departments to meet the Government's objective of eliminating child poverty. [111829]

9. **Mr. Derek Twigg** (Halton): What progress the Government are making in tackling child poverty. [111839]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We have pledged to eradicate child poverty over the next 20 years and to halve it within 10 years. Nearly 1 million children will be lifted out of poverty by the end of this Parliament as a result of measures already announced.

Fiona Mactaggart: I congratulate the Government on their ambitious target for tackling child poverty. Does the Secretary of State agree that ending child poverty is not just a question of making more money available to families with children, but also a question of tackling poverty of opportunity and of aspiration so that children have access to learning and to a rich cultural life? What is my right hon. Friend doing with other Departments to deliver that for children in Britain today?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. What holds children back is not just the lack of income but the lack of educational opportunities and, in some cases, poor housing and other disadvantages. We are working across Government to ensure that people's opportunities are improved. My hon. Friend will be aware that, last September, the Government published a paper entitled "Opportunity for All" which set out how we are working with other Departments—particularly the Department for Education and Employment—on initiatives such as sure start, which are designed to ensure that children who are born into disadvantaged backgrounds get the help that they need, through their parents, to raise their expectations and increase the opportunities available to them.

Mr. Twigg: I, too, welcome the Government's statement that they intend to eliminate child poverty. That is in stark contrast to the Conservative Government, who did not recognise that such a thing as poverty existed. I welcome the fact that 13,000 families in my constituency are benefiting from the increase in child benefit, and 3,500 families will be helped by the working families tax credit. I am particularly pleased that £2.2 million will be invested in my constituency on the sure start programme, benefiting around 1,400 families. That will be important in tackling the various problems that cause poverty. Does my right hon. Friend agree that local authorities have an important role in the sure start programme and that it is important that they are involved—not least because many have anti-poverty strategies?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right to say that it is important for the Government and local authorities to work together. I am glad that he mentioned sure start. As constituency Members of Parliament, we see every day the problems that arise where young children are born into homes where not only is there not enough money, but very often nobody is in work. Those children have low expectations and they will not do as well as other children. The sure start programme is designed to ensure that children in that position get the extra help that they need from the time that they are born until they go into nursery school and primary school. The Government are committed to eradicating child poverty, and that is essential. It is not just a moral issue—it makes economic sense; something the Conservatives never realised in nearly 20 years in government.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I am sure that everyone welcomes those targets in principle, but will the Secretary of State tell us how the steady growth in means-tested benefits will help to eliminate child poverty when factors such as the working families tax credit, in combination with other taxes and benefits, leave an ever-increasing proportion of households facing marginal rates of tax and benefit withdrawal of more than 80 per cent? What sort of message is he sending to the next rising generation about helping themselves?

Mr. Darling: The clear message that the working families tax credit sends is that work pays. The problem that we faced—the problem that the Conservative party left us—was that there were far too many households where nobody worked and where nobody had worked for a long time. It was beyond doubt that some people were in the absurd situation of finding themselves worse off as a result of going into work than they would have been on benefits. Since 1997, the Government have ensured that the barriers that people face when going into work are reduced and that work is made to pay. The working families tax credit will benefit 1.5 million families, who will be better off as a result of going into work. That makes sense in terms of getting them off the dole and into work, and it is good for the families concerned who come to accept that work is a central part of life—again, something that the previous Government did nothing about in almost 20 years.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Will the Secretary of State explain briefly the distinct roles in tackling child poverty of child benefit, the working families tax credit, the child care credit, the children's tax credit, the

integrated child credit and the employment credit? How on earth does he expect an average family to understand this Heath Robinson structure? Why does he not go for the boldest reform of them all, and create a structure that families can understand?

Mr. Darling: The one thing that all those benefits and help have in common is that the Tories opposed every one of them. As I said to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), we are determined to ensure that work pays and we want to use every lever at our disposal to achieve that end. The number of children living in poverty trebled under the previous Government, and that was because of a lack of income in the house and far too many people without work—something that we are not prepared to tolerate.

Mr. Willetts: The Secretary of State talks about using every lever at his disposal, but a report from the Government said that problems of co-ordination are becoming more acute. The Prime Minister has set up the social exclusion unit; the Chancellor has taken over benefits policy for the Budget, and a poverty tsarina is running policy on poverty from the Cabinet Office, so the most radical idea in the Labour manifesto will be dismantling the Secretary of State's Department. What does that tell us about his record?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman ignores the fact that, during the nearly 20 years that they were in power, the Tories did nothing about the eradication of child poverty. Indeed, one of my predecessors, now Lord Moore, famously tried to prove that poverty did not exist. This Government accept that many people are excluded when they should not be, and that is why we set up the social exclusion unit to deal with problems such as homelessness. We are determined, through the Department of Social Security, the Treasury and every Department, to eradicate poverty, and all Departments are working together towards that objective. It is interesting that all that the Tories can do is sneer at those efforts to give children and other people the opportunities that the Tory Government denied them.

Passported Benefits

2. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of the level of welfare and other passported benefits on the incentive to work. [111830]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Helping people move from welfare benefits into work is a key element of our welfare reform agenda. We are tackling the problems of the unemployment and poverty traps and ensuring that work pays. The introduction of the national minimum wage and the working families tax credit has, for the first time, guaranteed a minimum income of £200 per week for those moving off benefits. Tax and benefit reforms have also addressed the poverty trap and allowed low-income families to keep more of every pound that they earn.

Mr. Bercow: I acknowledge the Minister's reply. What comfort can the Minister offer today to my constituent, Marguerite Day of 23 Chiltern avenue, Stone, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire HP17 8QZ, who has been out of work for seven years through a back injury, who is unable to accept a part-time post as a phlebotomist at £80 a week because she would lose a string of benefits and incur hefty transport costs and to whom the Minister's standard letter of 18 January this year was of no use whatever?

Angela Eagle: If the hon. Gentleman will write to me with the details, I will look into the case. As the Government have recognised, the important thing to remember is that individual barriers to getting back into work are precisely that, and they need to be tackled individually. That is why we are setting up the personal advisers in the ONE service, and we are trialling that service in 12 areas, including that of the hon. Gentleman. It may well be that a visit to a personal adviser could help his constituent a great deal.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Does my hon. Friend agree that the vast majority of people would rather work than claim benefits? Therefore, is she as encouraged as I am that, in Benchill, the area in my constituency that for years has had the highest proportion of families dependent on benefits, unemployment fell by 21 per cent. last year alone, youth unemployment by 30 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 43 per cent?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is right. People should remember that youth unemployment is down 60 per cent. since the Government came to power; long-term unemployment is down 50 per cent.; 41,000 lone parents are now in work, as are 34,000 of those who joined the new deal for the over-25s and 185,000 of the under-25s; 2,180 disabled people are on the new deal for disabled people; and more than 1,000 on the new deal for partners of the unemployed are now in jobs. What did the Conservatives do? They opposed the new deal.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I acknowledge that much has been done to provide incentives to get people off welfare and into work, but will the Minister look carefully at the recent work that has been done at the centre for analysis of social exclusion at the London school of economics in analysing some of the American experience? The Americans are a bit further down the line than we are, and it is worrying that people who are at the bottom of the pile, especially lone mothers in the American context, are worse off now than they were. Will the Minister give a categoric assurance that the other half of the adage "Work for those who can, but support for those who cannot" is equally respected, and that there will be as much support for those who genuinely cannot work as there is effort made to incentivise those who can?

Angela Eagle: The American system is very different from the UK system. We always keep an eye on what is going on in welfare-to-work issues around the world, not only in the United States. The important thing to bear in mind is that the Government have ensured that work pays: we have introduced the working families tax credit, new child care opportunities, sure start, and we have also done much to help lone parents. We have also spent a great deal of money on increasing the premium for children in the income-related benefits. We are thereby trying to balance both sides of the equation.

Incapacity Benefit

3. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What recent representations he has received from disablement groups on incapacity benefit. [111831]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We have received a number of representations on incapacity benefit from organisations representing disabled people, principally on matters relating to measures in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999.

Mr. Dalyell: What are the reasons for the underspend on disability benefits of £754 million, as reported by the National Audit Office?

Mr. Bayley: The National Audit Office report's figure of £754 million represents the difference between forecast expenditure and actual expenditure. However, the number of people claiming and receiving disability living allowance has continued to go up. In the latest year for which figures are available, there was an increase of 62,000 people receiving the allowance.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister regret means-testing incapacity benefit and thereby damaging genuinely disabled people—the very vulnerable people whom the Conservative party tried to help when we were last in government?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Lady continues to perpetuate a myth. A means test takes regard of income and capital, and incapacity benefit has not been means-tested. We have introduced a system that takes some account of occupational pensions, for the simple reason that such pensions, when paid early on grounds of sickness, serve the same purpose as incapacity benefit.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my hon. Friend accept that the Labour party has campaigned for disabled people over many years, through the work of people such as Lord Alf Morris and Lord Ashley? I am sure that my hon. Friend will not mind my candour, but I hope that we shall not have a repeat of what happened in Parliament over incapacity benefit last year.

Mr. Bayley: I can reassure my hon. Friend that, over the lifetime of this Parliament, the Government's expenditure on disability benefits will have risen by £1 billion, in real terms.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Notwithstanding his answer to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), does the Minister accept that a massive amount of incapacity benefit is not taken up? Would he accept that there is therefore no reason to go ahead with the planned, but much opposed, cuts in the benefit?

Mr. Bayley: No, I do not accept that. Some people with an entitlement to disability living allowance do not claim it, for a variety of reasons—perhaps they do not know about the benefit, or perhaps they do not regard themselves as sufficiently disabled. We are always considering ways to ensure that the benefit is paid to those who are entitled to it. However, the hon. Gentleman should also bear it in mind that 40 per cent. of those who claim disability living allowance do not meet the entitlement conditions. So encouraging more people to apply would simply mean that more were disappointed, and that the waiting time for people who need the benefit and who qualify for it would be even longer.

Benefits Agency

4. **Mr. Syd Rapson** (Portsmouth, North): What steps his Department is taking to improve the ways in which the Benefits Agency communicates with the public. [111832]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We are improving the way in which we notify and explain decisions to people. We have redesigned leaflets around age groups and life events instead of benefits, making them simpler and easier to follow. We are working through one-to-one personal advisers in the new deals and the ONE service to help people take up the opportunities open to them, which is crucial to our success in tackling poverty. We are also investing in our service to pensioners, so that we can take claims and deal with queries over the telephone.

Mr. Rapson: I thank my hon. Friend for that very good answer. However, is there any way for the Benefits Agency to use the vast network of sub-post offices to underline the Government's commitment to enabling claimants to carry on receiving their benefits through post offices? That would also allay the fears of the 20,000 people in Portsmouth who have been seriously misled by a Liberal Democrat campaign into believing that their benefits will not be paid through a post office. The campaign has succeeded only in worrying a lot of people who should not have to worry about such matters.

Angela Eagle: People must be very careful that they are not seriously misled by Liberal Democrat campaigns. I assure the House that, even after the move to automated credit transfer, people will still be able to choose to access their cash at a post office if they want. The Post Office and the Department of Social Security have recently launched a joint poster explaining that, which should be available in post offices. I hope that it is displayed alongside the petitions.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The Liberal Democrat's communications appear to be more effective than the Government's. Could the Minister address herself to another aspect of Government communication in respect of the current payments to assist people in meeting their mortgage costs when they are unemployed and on income support? Is she aware that many of my constituents do not believe that they have received adequate communications and explanations about why, since June last year, the rate of 6.6 per cent. that has been set by the Department has not been increased? As a consequence, many people are finding their mortgages increasingly difficult to meet and are in greater debt. Could the Department improve its communication in that respect?

Angela Eagle: There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the availability of mortgage interest support for those who become unemployed. We are trying, with the Council

of Mortgage Lenders, to do some more work to persuade people that they need to take out mortgage interest protection for the first nine months when they are not entitled to any benefits.

The hon. Gentleman is referring to the composite interest rates that are used to calculate this benefit. They were introduced a few years ago because of the proliferation of different mortgage interest rates. There were more than 1,000, and it was impossible to calculate them. People need to realise, when they are contemplating a mortgage, that, if they become unemployed, the composite mortgage interest rate will apply. The state will pay not what people owe on their mortgage but the standard interest rate. That is a matter of record.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my hon. Friend confirm that some 700,000 pensioners are eligible for income support, but do not claim it? We have heard for some time that the Department intends to publicise those matters, but many people in my constituency are still surprised when I tell them that they are eligible to claim. Can my hon. Friend go into more detail as to how the Government propose to bring the message home that, if people are eligible for benefits, there is no shame in claiming them?

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is right to say that there is absolutely no shame in claiming the benefits to which one is entitled. The Government will shortly be making an announcement on this very subject. I hope that she will participate in the take-up campaign when it gets going.

Benefit Fraud

5. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): What recent representations he has received from outside organisations about his policies for tackling organised benefit fraud. [111833]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): A number of organisations were consulted as part of the review of organised benefit fraud. They are listed in the report, which is in the Library.

Mr. Leigh: Does the finding of the Government's Scampion report that there was insufficient information, or no interchange of information between local authorities, on benefit fraud underline the need for a single national benefits investigation agency to co-ordinate these matters and ensure that we crack down on fraud?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman makes one good point in particular. In the past, the flow of information between the Benefits Agency and local authorities was not satisfactory. We changed that when we came to office so that, by the end of this financial year, any local authority that wants it—and nearly all of them do—will have access to the Benefits Agency computer systems and the Benefits Agency will have access to council computer systems to cross-match data. Cross-checking DSS records and other state records, as well as local authority records, has already saved £150 million. So it is important that councils and the DSS work closely together, and some people, in some parts of the country, have already seen the results.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Does the Secretary of State accept that one very useful measure to counter organised fraud would be to get every local authority not to redirect girocheques to safe addresses? Does he accept that one estimate suggests that £400 million would be saved by universalising that move? Would that not pay for a huge campaign to ensure the take-up of income support among our older pensioners? That being so, will he set a time limit for all the laggards among local authorities to sign up to that scheme within the next two months?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend is right: I attach much importance to stopping the Post Office from redirecting mail—that is why I announced just such an initiative almost a year ago. I am glad to say that an increasing number of local authorities now operate a scheme; I am confident that all of them will do so before too long. It saves substantial sums. What is surprising is that the previous Conservative Government did nothing about the problem.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Last summer, the Government set themselves a target of a 10 per cent. fall in benefit fraud by 2002, yet the latest departmental figures show a negligible fall, described by the Secretary of State's own civil servants as not statistically significant. Will he reaffirm that target, or is this another case of the DSS talking tough and achieving little?

Mr. Darling: Of course the Government are adhering to those targets. The hon. Gentleman should know better than most that there are several problems within the system that will take some time to remedy; for example, the computer systems that we operate will have to be replaced. In addition, the move to make direct payment of benefits into bank accounts, of which his party is critical, will save substantial sums lost in fraud. Furthermore, we have insisted that people must now establish their identity to the satisfaction of benefit officers before they can obtain benefit. That will save £1 billion during this Parliament alone—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman can wave documents as much as he wants, but he must face the fact that, unlike him, we are not just talking about reducing the amount lost through fraud; we are taking concrete steps to do so by tightening up the gateways to the benefit system and making it more difficult for people to fiddle the system. If they fiddle the system, they will get caught—as a growing number of people are finding out.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend referred to establishing one's identity to the benefit officer. What is our position on the use of national identity cards in that matter? Are we still wholly opposed to it?

Mr. Darling: As far as I am aware, no one is suggesting that we should introduce a national identity card system. There are many difficulties with that—not least the expense of setting it up. There are means to identify people at present: everyone has a national insurance number; and it is possible to ascertain people's

names and addresses. All those matters are common sense—to coin a phrase. It is curious, therefore, that the Conservatives did nothing about it during the 18 years that they were in power. Perhaps we are about to find out why.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): What does not make sense is to boast that numbers are going down based on figures that the Department described as statistically insignificant. The Secretary of State does not seem to understand what is going on. He talks about computers, but Scampion points out that much of the anti-fraud initiative is written down—it is being carried around manually. He refers to local authorities talking to the Benefits Agency but, according to Scampion, the problem is that local authorities are not talking to one another. They cannot tackle organised fraud because they are not passing on good tips. When will the right hon. Gentleman do something about fraud? When will he actually establish something? Is this not the purest example of all talk and no delivery?

Mr. Darling: I admire the hon. Gentleman's panache. He refers to the fact that local authorities do not always give us the information we need.

Mr. Pickles: They do not.

Mr. Darling: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman points that out. When we telephoned Brentwood to find out why we were not receiving the information to which the Government are entitled, we were told that it was an apparent oversight by the benefits manager, who was away from the office. That is happening in his own local authority. That authority is not telling us what we need to know. Instead of asking me what is going wrong, he should ask his own council why it is not collecting and giving us the information that we need.

Mr. Pickles: Brentwood is a Liberal Democrat council.

Disabled People

6. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce the barriers to work faced by disabled people. [111834]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): For those—*[Interruption.]* It is nice to see warfare break out on the Opposition Benches.

For those on incapacity benefits, we have introduced a 52-week linking rule as well as removing restrictions on voluntary work. We have also introduced the disabled persons tax credit and, next week, we will make regulations that will remove barriers that might prevent disabled people from taking part in work trials or work placements while on benefits.

Mr. Hoyle: I welcome the Minister's answer and the pilot schemes that have been introduced, but what plans has he got to ensure that there will be a national scheme so that all disabled people will benefit and will be able to have support when they apply for jobs?

Mr. Bayley: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. Under the previous Administration, people with long-term and intractable health problems or disabilities were simply shunted off unemployment benefit and the jobseeker's allowance and dumped on to incapacity benefits. With the pilot studies operating under the new deal for disabled people, we have shown that it is possible to get back to work many people who have spent a long time on incapacity benefits.

We also know that many people on incapacity benefits want to get back to work. Because of the success of the economy under this Government, many employers want to get hold of the skills that disabled people have to offer and want to employ them. We have created 700,000 jobs since the general election and we have the lowest rate of unemployment for 20 years and a million job vacancies. That is why employers want to employ disabled people. Therefore, we are actively considering what help could be provided on a national basis under the new deal.

Age-related Benefits

7. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What progress has been made in the last six months in persuading those of pensionable age to take up the minimum income guarantee and other age–related benefits in the north–west region of England. [111835]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We are committed to taking action to find more effective ways of encouraging eligible pensioners to claim their entitlement to the minimum income guarantee. That is why we have been incredibly busy in recent weeks developing a programme to encourage pensioners to take up their benefit entitlement. We will announce our plans for implementation shortly.

Mr. Marsden: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that about 4,900 pensioners in my constituency currently claim the minimum income guarantee but, on the Department's own estimates, between 2,000 and 2,500 do not? I say "do not", but we do not have regionally broken down figures. Would it not be a good idea to provide such figures? My local newspaper, *The Evening Gazette* in Blackpool is running a campaign to make pensioners aware of their entitlements and Age Concern has a similar campaign coming forward. However, the original promise about entitlement was made in the middle of 1999. My right hon. Friend bows to no one in his forcefulness, so will he use some of that forcefulness to get his officials off their bottoms and on to the issues before us?

Mr. Rooker: I take my hon. Friend's point about the figures. The numbers that we use for the individuals who are not claiming come from information in the general household survey, so it is not possible to provide the detailed figures on the regional or local authority basis that he would like.

The campaign that we shall announce shortly involves, as I have said before, a mailshot in three tranches to a targeted 2 million households, a telephone helpline and

television advertising. It will be the biggest single operation by any Government to get more money to the poorest pensioners. If we rush and get it wrong, all that we will do is build up aspirations and hopes that will be shattered. We must get it right. I sincerely regret the delay—we had hoped to have made an announcement by now—but that announcement is imminent.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): How long will it be before we get the announcement? How short is shortly? How is the right hon. Gentleman planning to persuade people on low incomes in the north-west to save under stakeholder or state second pensions when the minimum income guarantee will give them more money in their pockets with council tax and housing benefits when they come to retire?

Mr. Rooker: I cannot go beyond the word "shortly". We are working as quickly as we can, but it is a multi-million pound Government operation. It is not a cheapskate scheme with just one press advertisement to do the job. We have got to get things right because we are dealing with hundreds of thousands of people.

I would have hoped that the hon. Lady had learned upstairs in Committee that it is wholly wrong and misleading to compare an individual's right to a pension—whether stakeholder, second or occupational pension—with a couple's right to a means-tested benefit, and that that erroneous comparison will cause people to lose their rights. The hon. Lady is wrong to make that assertion.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Does my right hon. Friend accept that there are many pensioners in the north-west and elsewhere who are quite poor but who are not entitled to the minimum income guarantee and other benefits because they have a small occupational pension or a small amount of savings in the bank? Those people feel that they are missing out because they have saved. What can be done to help such pensioners?

Mr. Rooker: The more quickly capital limits are reviewed, the better, and we are committed to doing that during this Parliament. We need to make the point that people can have up to £8,000 in savings; there is not a cut-off at £3,000, as some people think, although it is true that there is a sliding scale. The minimum income guarantee figures that we always quote are for a single person at retirement age, but the guarantee goes up at age 75 and again at 80, and can run about £6 or £7 a week ahead of the figure for the basic retirement pension. It is worth people's inquiring about the guarantee and applying for it even if they think that they may not be eligible, because they could be on the margin and hence eligible.

Benefit Fraud

8. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the Government's involvement with local authorities in the detection and prevention of benefit fraud. [111838]

10. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): If he will report on progress in tackling housing benefit fraud. [111841]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Fraud and error in housing benefit cost £800 million a year, so I am writing to local councils today to make it abundantly clear that where investigations by the benefit fraud inspectorate identify persistent failings, I will use my statutory powers to direct standards and time scales for improved performance. Too many councils are not providing the management information that we need to assess their performance, so I intend to use my powers to compel them to do so. Councils have been warned.

Dr. Lewis: I am puzzled by that response, because was not the key recommendation of the Scampion report into organised benefit fraud that the Government should set up a single agency to investigate it? As part of our common sense revolution, the Conservatives have accepted that recommendation, but the Government have not. Why not?

Mr. Darling: In 18 years, the last Government did absolutely nothing to stop more and more fraud creeping into the system. This Government have made every single improvement, such as making sure that money is paid securely into people's bank accounts, introducing tighter requirements on identification and on housing benefit, cross-checking DSS records, requiring local authorities to comply with Government directives and, if necessary, taking action against them if they do not. We are saving £1 billion in this Parliament alone. The hon. Gentleman's puzzlement should be directed towards his own party, which did absolutely nothing when it was in office.

Mr. Brooke: Despite declaring an interest in the successful prosecution for housing benefit fraud of a majority party councillor on Westminster city council after detection by the council, I ask the Government whether they are prepared to contemplate rewarding local authorities and providing as much incentive for successful prevention of fraud as for detection after the event.

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that earlier this year we agreed to reward councils for prosecuting or preparing housing benefit fraud cases for prosecution, and it is absolutely right to do that. The problem with the previous incentives system, which the Conservatives introduced, was that it rewarded councils for allowing fraud to enter the system. We are completely driving out fraud from the system, ensuring that we get payments right first time and ensuring that councils have the right incentives so that they are rewarded when they discover fraud and then prosecute.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the effective wave of prosecutions that there has been in Newcastle upon Tyne via the partnership of the local authority, the police and the Benefits Agency? Will he acknowledge also that one of the main conclusions to be drawn from prosecutions over the past five years is that there is a great problem with the direct payment of housing benefit to landlords? That often means that the landlord has no incentive to manage the property properly and the tenants

are not even those supposed to be in the property. Will he look at the potential for abuse associated with the direct payment of housing benefit to landlords?

Mr. Darling: Yes, we are looking at that. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are publishing a Green Paper on housing later this year. One thing that we are considering is the problem that can arise when housing benefit is paid directly into the hands of landlords. He mentioned the scheme in Newcastle, where the city council, the Benefits Agency and the police are working together. That is an excellent example of cross-agency co-operation leading to a reduction in fraud or its prevention in the first place. We want more of that throughout the country.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Is the Secretary of State aware that nobody is in favour of defrauding the housing benefit system? Will he ask his inspectors to look at the number of claimants who are, in effect, defrauded by the inefficiency of the housing benefit service delivered by many private contractors, who are so incompetent that thousands of people either lose out on housing benefit and consequently receive eviction or arrears notices from the local authority or, rather worse, are evicted by private landlords who cannot wait any longer for housing benefit rent to be paid? In his examination of the workings of the system, will my right hon. Friend ensure that legitimate claimants receive money quickly and on time so that they can maintain their tenancies?

Mr. Darling: I agree with my hon. Friend that anyone claiming housing benefit ought to have it calculated and paid as quickly as possible, but I must tell him that only a handful of local authorities use contractors to make such payments. I am sorry to say that there are as many mistakes in the public sector as there are in the private sector. Mistakes are not just the province of the private sector.

I am more interested in ensuring, first, that we have a system that is far easier to administer—it is in need of overhaul and the Government are overhauling it—and secondly, that local authorities or their agents become more efficient. That is why I am writing to local authorities today to warn them that, unless they increase their effort and improve their act, they will get a direction from me requiring them to take the necessary action to run the system properly.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Does the Secretary of State recall his Department's commitment on 22 February 1999 to publish the report of the housing benefit simplification and improvement project? His Department is now saying that it has no plans to publish that report. Why has he abandoned his commitment? Is it because the report would reveal the mess of housing benefit administration, and explain why there are 250,000 known cases of housing benefit fraud and 700 prosecutions?

Incidentally, I remind the Secretary of State that his Labour election manifesto stated that there was not £800 million of housing benefit fraud—the figure that he has just given—but £2 billion. That change is significant.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that this Government, unlike the Government of whom he was a member, are taking a number of steps not just to remove fraud from the system but to improve the administration of housing benefit. I readily agree—in fact, it is common ground across the House—that the housing benefit system needs to be improved and simplified. The Government will publish proposals later this year, so that they can be properly debated and implemented. Housing benefit should have been overhauled years ago. We are taking the decisions necessary to make it better and to cut out some of the fraud and difficulty—something that the hon. Gentleman's party never did in almost 20 years of government.

Pensioner Incomes

11. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will restore the link between retirement pensions and average earnings. [111842]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): No, we are committed to raising the basic state pension at least in line with prices. We have kept the basic state pension as the foundation of pensions and maintained its real value. In addition, we have acted to meet pensioners' needs through, for example, winter fuel payments, free eye tests and, of course, from this coming November, free television licences for those aged 75 and over.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Is the Minister aware of the genuine anger of many pensioners who voted Labour? Despite the specific assurance that all pensioners would be better off under Labour, they find that, even if they have saved money or made provision for their retirement, they are faced with the robbing of pension funds, the abolition of the married couples tax allowance, and the scrapping of home income plans and the widows bereavement allowance—instead of an increase.

Although I appreciate that the Government have made some provision for people on limited incomes, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the majority of pensioners represented by the National Pensioners Convention genuinely feel that they were blatantly misled at the general election and that, if they have done something to help themselves, they will receive no help from the new Government?

Mr. Rooker: They were not misled and they are better off under our Government—that is the plain, simple truth, as the hon. Gentleman should know. In my reply to the original question, I said that we had retained the basic state pension. I understand that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) is off to New York later this week to commit the Tories to getting rid of the basic state pension as the foundation of pensions policy in this country.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): When we do positive things for pensioners, such as introducing the winter fuel allowance and the minimum income guarantee, why do we undermine our position by restricting pensions increases to the rate of inflation during a period of low inflation—when there is an opportunity to enhance pensions—and thereby play into the hands of those who use

the same exaggerated arguments as the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor)? Our position is undermined by our not tying those actions together.

Mr. Rooker: I understand the reasons behind my hon. Friend's point, but he should not dismiss the extra things the Government have been able to do precisely because we have kept inflation low. He cannot dismiss extras such as the fivefold increase in the winter fuel allowance, free television licences and free eye tests, and complain that we have only kept pensions in line with prices. We are following the commitment in our manifesto, on which we were all elected.

Stakeholder Pensions

12. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): What the timetable will be for the introduction of the stakeholder pension. [111859]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): It is currently planned that stakeholder schemes will be available to the public from April next year and that schemes will be able to register from October this year.

Mr. Flight: Will the Minister assure the House that that timetable will not be delayed as a result of using NIRS2 for recording purposes and other problems with the new national insurance arrangements? May I point out that there have been no new final salary schemes since the Government announced their stakeholder arrangements; and that the number of personal pension schemes has fallen? In other words, since the Government have been dithering over their stakeholder proposals, new pension provision in this country has declined significantly.

Mr. Rooker: The answer to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question is yes. I gave an answer that, on current plans, the schemes will be available from April 2001—*[Interruption.]* I repeat, on current plans—on what else can I base my answer? Under current plans, we intend to introduce stakeholder schemes from April next year and company providers will be able to register from this October. As for the rest of his question, it does not apply to stakeholders; perhaps he will write to me about it.

Pensioner Incomes

13. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): What proposals he has to improve the income of the poorest pensioners. [111843]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The minimum income guarantee has already increased the incomes of our poorest pensioners. This year, it will increase in line with earnings, by £3.45 per week for a single pensioner and £5.35 per week for a couple. We have also given an undertaking that the minimum income guarantee will continue to rise annually in line with earnings throughout this Parliament.

Mr. Flynn: While I acknowledge the Government's beneficial actions to help pensioners, according to Government figures, 700,000 of the poorest pensioners are losing an average of £18 per week. Our main reason for not restoring the link between earnings and pensions was that we wanted to concentrate on the poorest pensioners. We promised to introduce the take-up scheme nearly a year ago, and it was promised again last month, in a debate in the House on 9 February. Will Ministers now give a guarantee that when we, belatedly, introduce the scheme, it will be backdated to cover those pensioners who are now losing an average £18 a week?

Mr. Bayley: I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in such matters. During the first three years of this Parliament, pensioners will have received more than £800 million more through winter fuel payments and the minimum income guarantee than they would have received had we merely restored the uprating link to earnings.

On the minimum income guarantee, we do not know the number of people who would be eligible but are not claiming. It is probably between 400,000 and 700,000. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that the very fact that there is a need to run a take-up campaign shows that take-up campaigns in the past have not succeeded. That is why we need to make sure that we have got it right, and that when we introduce our take-up campaign shortly, it works.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In supporting the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), may I suggest to the Minister that there is a particular problem for many of the poorest pensioners in rural areas? They have cultural problems that prevent them from seeking assistance, they have problems in gaining access to the advice that they should receive, and they are often isolated. Will he look particularly at ways of getting to those poor pensioners, so that they take up the benefits to which they are entitled?

Mr. Bayley: I acknowledge that there are special problems facing poor people in rural areas. They tend to live in smaller groups of poorer people, often side by side with people on higher incomes, which means that those responsible for politics in poorer areas have often overlooked their needs. I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that when we launch a take-up campaign, it will seek to address the needs of people who ought to be claiming a minimum income guarantee, wherever they live—in rural areas, just as in urban areas.

Benefit Fraud

14. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the Government's progress in tackling benefit fraud. [111844]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are determined to combat fraud and error in the social security system. We have a comprehensive strategy to safeguard the system from the first to the final payment. For example, we are insisting that claimants produce more evidence before income support is paid, which will

save more than £1 billion over this Parliament. This comprehensive strategy will help to strengthen public confidence, and thereby encourage the public's support.

Mr. Fabricant: How can we take that commitment seriously, when the Benefits Agency's own fraud investigation service ran out of money in September 1998, which resulted in less than half the usual number of convictions? Why have the Government abandoned the London organised fraud investigation team, when much fraud occurs in London? One is almost tempted to ask whether it was because the Government did not want the team to investigate the biggest fraud of all—Labour's selection of the London mayoral candidate.

Mr. Rooker: Buried deep in there were some serious questions about fraud and error in the system. Although they were not asked, I shall do my best to answer them. We do have a strategy, which in some respects will be uncomfortable for right hon. and hon. Members. One aspect of it is data-matching programmes. As a constituent said to me on Friday evening, "Mr. Rooker, the computers are kissing each other." Facts are being found out because computers dealing with one benefit are being data-matched against claims for other benefits. People are being discovered who have forgotten to tell the Government about their savings or their occupational pension, while claiming income support. That can be extremely uncomfortable. We handle it as sensitively as possible, but we are determined to root it out.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Can the Minister explain why his own study shows that the proportion of people claiming income support and jobseeker's allowance who are proven absolutely or on the balance of probabilities to have defrauded the system has risen under his Government? Is that because they are soft on fraud?

Mr. Rooker: The situation that we inherited from the right honourable character across the way was that two out of five income support claims were being paid without enough evidence. We have changed that.

State Second Pension

15. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): If he will make a statement on his proposals for a state second pension. [111846]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The state second pension will reform SERPS to give more help to those who need it most—low earners, carers and the long-term disabled. Those earning below £9,500 a year on this year's figures will be treated as if they had earned that amount. There will be considerable extra help for moderate earners. Anyone who works throughout their working life or has periods of caring or disability will retire on an income well above the level of the minimum income guarantee.

Mr. Luff: The Minister says that anyone who works throughout his entire working life will retire on an income above the level of the minimum income guarantee. How long will it take someone who earns less than £9,500 a year—the new figure that the Minister announced today—to obtain enough credits to attain that income?

Mr. Rooker: The system will assume that anyone who earns less than £9,500 is earning that sum. Much of the gain for low earners derives from that; they will obtain a low-earners boost. As long as they earn more than the lower earnings level of the national insurance system, which is around £3,500, it will be assumed that they earn £9,500. Two million carers, 2 million people with long-term disability, and between 10 and 14 million low and moderate earners will gain.

We are considering a pension, so the accruals will take time to build up. However, on the state second pension, people who work throughout their lives will retire on an income that is above the minimum income guarantee. As I said earlier, people will be treated as individuals. Income support and the minimum income guarantee are means-tested on the basis of couples' incomes. As everyone knows, income support and minimum income guarantee levels for a couple are not twice those for a single person.

Housing Benefit

16. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What plans he has to implement fundamental reform of housing benefit. [111847]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We intend to publish a Green Paper on housing policy later this year. It will consider housing as a whole, including the role of housing benefit.

Mr. Swayne: When implementing the working families tax credit, what lessons did the Government try to learn from housing benefit? What is the threshold number of claimants of the working families tax credit at which the Government will cease to congratulate themselves on the success of the benefit and start to panic?

Angela Eagle: The live case load for the working families tax credit, mixed with the remnants of family credit, is 1 million. We continue to accept claims; 1.5 million families will therefore ultimately be better off.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): How will the taxpayer be reassured by the hon. Lady's answer? A Green Paper later in the year on the general subject of housing and a letter-writing campaign by the Secretary of State about housing benefit fraud are hardly adequate measures when there were only 700 successful prosecutions for housing benefit fraud last year. That is underlined by the fact that the National Audit Office found that 25 per cent. of the councils that it visited were in on the act.

Angela Eagle: We have done a great deal to improve the administration of housing benefit. For example, we have introduced remote access terminals, which allow local authorities to examine Benefits Agency information; we are introducing the electronic transfer of data, which will mean that 20 million fewer paper notifications of benefit changes are made—they will be made

electronically instead; and we have changed the weekly benefit saving system for anti-fraud purposes. The latter will reward local authorities that undertake prevention and prosecution.

What did the Conservative party do? They landed us with the fragmented, complex system in the first place.

18. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on progress in tackling fraud in the social security system, with particular reference to housing benefit. [111849]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We have already demonstrated our tough stance on tackling housing benefit fraud through a more direct interventionist approach with local authorities than the previous Government ever envisaged.

We have targeted the benefit fraud inspectorate inspection regime where it will have most effect and made a substantial financial investment to get local authorities to operate tighter controls over the benefit system through rigorous checks on evidence and identity.

Sir Sydney Chapman: How can the Minister say that, when more than a third of all councils have never prosecuted any benefit fraudster, and when councils in 57 local authorities have refused to name councillors or council officials who have committed fraud? I respect and welcome the Secretary of State's belated announcement that he will get in touch with councils; but will the Minister assure us that measures will be backdated at the very least and that those councillors or council officials who have committed fraud will be prosecuted?

Angela Eagle: I can say what I said because it is true. Since we came to power we have been doing what the Conservatives should have done years ago.

Disability Living Allowance

19. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): What is his Department's estimate of the percentage of people who are entitled to disability living allowance but do not claim it. [111850]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Estimates based on the 1996–97 family resources survey suggested that take-up of disability living allowance by those entitled to it ranged from 30 to 70 per cent., depending on the component. Since then, the number of people receiving DLA has continued to grow and we are also taking steps to improve take-up through increased public confidence in decisions on entitlement.

Mr. Williams: Is it not disappointing that only about half those entitled are claiming DLA? Should not the Government consider introducing a publicity campaign, as they are for the minimum income guarantee for pensioners, to help these mainly elderly people to claim attendance allowance and the mobility and care components?

Mr. Bayley: We want to ensure that all those entitled to benefit receive that to which they are entitled, and credit is due to the Government for increasing the number of people who receive DLA. In the past year, we increased expenditure by £363 million, having identified an additional 62,000 people who were entitled to DLA but not receiving it. They now do.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. As the upholder of the privileges of the House, are you concerned that the Government are increasingly unable to distinguish between the House and the "Today" programme? Dawn was accompanied by another announcement of a massive Government U-turn—it concerned their decision not to take over responsibility for asylum seekers and their dispersal from 1 April—that has serious implications for local councils. I wonder whether I have misjudged them. Have they asked you whether they can make a statement on this important issue?

Madam Speaker: I listen to the "Today" programme, but as far as I am aware the Government are not seeking to make a statement on such an issue today. I made it my business to read the Order Paper and I believe that a number of questions tabled for written answer may give a good deal of information about the subject that the right hon. Lady has raised.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I take no further points of order once I have given a ruling.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will have heard the Secretary of State for International Development say in the House on Monday last week that money was not the issue in relation to aid for Mozambique. On Wednesday she said that co-operation between her Department and the Ministry of Defence was good. In view of the revelations of the past few days—it is clear that money was indeed the issue and that the two Departments were at loggerheads—is not it clear that her statements to the House fell well short of the standards of accuracy that you rightly demand? Are you therefore planning to summon her to the Chamber to clarify precisely what went wrong so that, above all, we may be reassured that future aid efforts will not be hampered by departmental in-fighting as this one so tragically has been?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman ought to be aware, if he is not, that the Speaker does not have the authority to summon any Secretary of State. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame!] It may be a shame. Although I have a lot of responsibility and authority, I cannot do that. He seeks a statement from the right hon. Lady. If one had been forthcoming, we would have known about it from the Annunciator by 12 o'clock.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You do not have the power of summons, but you have the power to inform the House. Did the Secretary of State for Defence ask to make a statement to the House in light of the fact that British troops have quite rightly been deployed to Mozambique, where no doubt they will show their customary skill and courage, but where they will inevitably put themselves at some risk and perhaps under some threat? He properly appeared on television yesterday to explain the circumstances and to advise the public that the troops had been deployed, but is not it incumbent on him or perhaps a junior Minister to explain to the House as soon as possible what gave rise to that deployment?

Madam Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks me to inform the House; that was the origin of his question. I can inform the House that I have not been informed that any Secretary of State seeks to make a statement on any issue today.

Orders of the Day

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

[Relevant documents: The Fourteenth Report of the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1998–99 on the draft Electronic Communications Bill, HC 862, insofar as it relates to Part III of that draft Bill, and the Government's response to that part of the Report, contained in HC 199, of Session 1999–2000.]

Order for Second Reading read.

3.35 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is an important Bill, and represents a significant step forward for the protection of human rights in this country. Human rights considerations have dominated its drafting. None of the law enforcement activities specified in the Bill is new. What is new is that, for the first time, the use of these techniques will be properly regulated by law and externally supervised. That will serve to ensure that law enforcement and other operations are consistent with the duties imposed on public authorities by the European convention on human rights and by the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Bill is one of a series of measures aimed at securing a better balance between law enforcement and individual rights as set out in the convention. Over the years, these measures have included the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, the Security Service Act 1989, the Intelligence Services Act 1994, the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996, and the Police Act 1997. In conjunction with existing legislation, the Bill will consolidate the law on the use of investigatory powers.

But there is one difference. Much of that previous legislation has been undertaken in response to rulings by the European Court of Human Rights. In one respect—and one only—the Bill follows that trend: that is in respect of the decision of the ECHR in the Halford case, with which the Bill seeks to deal. The rest of the Bill reflects a change in the United Kingdom's stance on human rights. We have sought in the Bill to put right our existing regime in advance, without the need for individuals to resort to the courts, and then for Parliament to correct matters retrospectively.

We are trying actively to ensure that our system protects individuals' convention rights, while recognising how vital such investigatory powers are to the protection of society as a whole. Striking the right balance in this area is an important responsibility of Government, and of the Home Office in particular. Throughout, this Bill reflects what I believe ought to be the correct balance, and we look forward to it being the subject of detailed scrutiny in Committee and during this debate.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): This is an important Bill, but does the right hon. Gentleman know that its scope is so wide that, when the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) is thrown out of the Labour party, it will be an offence, punishable by two years' imprisonment, for him to read a message on his pager that was not intended for him?

Mr. Straw: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's desire to jump on the Livingstone bandwagon, but I am not sure whether Conservative central office takes the same view. I do not begin to understand the gravamen of his question.

The Bill addresses the regulation of six investigatory powers, and it is narrow in scope and subject matter. Those powers are the interception of communications; the acquisition of communications data; intrusive surveillance; directed surveillance; the use of covert human intelligence sources; and demands for decryption. They are all powerful weapons in the armoury of law enforcement agencies. In 1998, 52 per cent. of all heroin seizures resulted directly from intelligence gained from interception. Throughout 1998, the total street value of drugs seized in that way was in excess of £185 million. That amounts to more than 10 per cent. of the estimated total spend on drugs in the UK each year. More details are included in the regulatory impact assessment that I have published alongside the Bill.

Drug trafficking is just one example. Some of the powers underpin vital national security operations. They are also key to tackling the serious and organised criminals involved in money laundering, human trafficking, paedophilia, tobacco smuggling and other serious offences. Precisely because those powers are so vital, they have the capacity to represent a potential threat to individual privacy, so we must ensure that regulation is tight.

The regime set out in the Bill will ensure that the regulation is compatible with the terms of the convention. Each of the six powers addressed in the Bill will set out, or will provide for subordinate legislation to set out, who—which agency—can use each technique described; for what purpose; who must authorise the use of each technique; what use can be made of certain of the material acquired; who will oversee proper use of each technique; and to which body aggrieved individuals may complain.

Law enforcement and other public authorities will benefit from clear guidance on the precise circumstances in which they can use particular techniques. Members of the public will benefit, because the circumstances in which the powers can be used will be clear to them. They will have access to an identifiable tribunal if they believe that the powers have been abused, and they will have the reassurance that the commissioners will publish their reports to the Prime Minister on the use of the powers every year.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Why should the House be content to allow a statutory instrument to prescribe which additional bodies should be given powers under clause 6 to intercept communications? Which body not specified in the Bill does the Home Secretary think might have such a power—the Child Support Agency, perhaps, or the Government Whips Office? The possibility of adding bodies is considerable; surely such powers should be granted in primary legislation.

Mr. Straw: Whichever body has power to seek an intercept warrant, the process for authorising the warrant will remain the same. The warrant must be authorised personally under the hand of the Secretary of State, who, in the case of domestic warrants, is almost always the Home Secretary. I did not properly understand this before I had my present job, but the process is also subject to extensive judicial scrutiny—albeit retrospectively, as I think the right hon. Gentleman has cause to know—by the interception commissioner, who, rightly, is very thorough in monitoring the issue of warrants and checking that they have been lawfully authorised, in terms of process but, above all, in terms of use of the powers.

I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point, which can be discussed in more detail in Committee, but the addition of bodies would be small, and would apply only to bodies with a law enforcement function.

Chapter I of part I deals with the interception of communications. We start from the regime established by the Interception of Communications Act 1985, and we have been faithful to many of its key tenets. Authorisation is to be at the same levels as now—in other words, by warrant of the Secretary of State. The purposes for which interception can be used will be tightly constrained, as they are now, and the safeguards relating to use of intercept material will be, if anything, even more tightly regulated and constrained than they are now.

There are, however, some significant changes. The criminal offence of unlawful interception is extended to private telephone and telecommunications networks. I hope that all hon. Members welcome that, because it is intended to take account of the judgment in United Kingdom *v.* Halford, in which the European Court of Human Rights found the existing regime in this country—where intereception of private networks is not regulated at all—to be deficient.

We have established a criminal offence, and have also created a civil liability in respect of interception by a network controller. I fully accept that there may be legitimate reasons for someone controlling a network to engage in what effectively amounts to interception, but the Bill will create a civil liability in respect of employers and others who overstep the mark.

As for the warrants themselves, we have had to make some changes to reflect the diverse nature of modern communications networks; but warrants will still specify the communications to be intercepted and the target, and will continue to be personally authorised by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Can the Secretary of State explain two matters relating to the central proposition in the Bill? First, why was the opportunity not taken to bring all the different authorities to intercept under a common procedure, so that, instead of having nine different sets of powers and sets of authorities, we could have just one? Secondly, why was the opportunity not taken to do what many democratic countries have done, and transfer the authority power from politicians or officials to a judicial authority in the first instance?

Mr. Straw: Let me say in answer to the first question that we are not dealing with matters that are exactly similar. There is a world of difference between the interception of someone's telephone or telecommunications system and, for example, the planting of a covert microphone, and the use of directed surveillance, which currently takes place all the time in an unregulated way. We need a regime or set of regimes for regulation that are appropriate to the sort of investigatory powers that are used. It would be absurd and impractical if, every time the police wished to use directed surveillance, they had to approach the Secretary of State or a judge for a warrant. Equally, it would be inappropriate—I do not think that it is the subject of any argument in the House—if warrants for telephone interceptions were authorised at a lower level than they are now. Therefore, we have produced bespoke authorisation procedures that are fitted to the particular powers in the Bill.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Straw: May I first answer the other point that was raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)? That was whether we should have taken the opportunity to remove from the Secretary of State the power to grant intercept warrants from all law-enforcement agencies. I assume that he is talking also about the powers to grant intrusive surveillance warrants in respect of the intelligence agencies. That has been a long-running debate. The powers that are exercised by the Secretary of State—certainly by me and, I believe, by every one of my predecessors—have been exercised very carefully.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Of course.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman says "Of course" but it is an important point to get on the record. There may not be an "of course" about it, but it happens to be the case. In addition—I greatly welcome it—the interception commissioner is someone of high judicial standing. Currently, the position is held by Lord Nolan. As I and my colleagues have witnessed, he properly scrutinises the warrants and is available for advice where there is an issue about whether an intercept application does, or does not, come within the Interception of Communications Act. I devote much time to checking applications and warrants before I sign them, and asking questions if I am not satisfied with the applications, so the system is judicially supervised. The initial decision is made by a Secretary of State.

It is a matter of practice and convenience, but not in any sense a diminution of people's human rights, that this country has that system. It works. There has been no overwhelming argument, or no substantial argument to change it.

If one looks at the practice in other countries, it does not necessarily follow that, just because a judicial warrant is required, there is a greater safeguard for the individual. Indeed, I suggest that, in quite a number of other countries, the fact that a judicial warrant is required lessens the protection that is offered to people because the judicial warrant acts as a fig leaf for people's human rights, and not as a serious safeguard.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: As my hon. Friend knows from previous experience, I defer to her always and the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has deferred to her, too, indicating that she should intervene first.

Mrs. Dunwoody: An unlikely story, but, as always, I am humbly aware of the kindness of my right hon. Friend in giving way. May I ask him about a point that concerns me? With the increasing use of computers as a means of alternative communications, is he certain not only that the present system will be extended in a way

[Mrs. Dunwoody]

that will maintain the proper procedures, but, equally, that the development of new electronic communications and their use in so many instances will be covered—or will surveillance increasingly be done using completely different methods and so be very difficult to check?

Mr. Straw: When it comes to humility, I always defer to my hon. Friend, as she knows only too well from the time we had almost adjoining rooms in Norman Shaw North. *[Interruption.]* Nothing happened apart from the fact that I used occasionally to clean her shoes. I reassure her that the Bill is partly designed to take account of the significant changes in technology in the 15 years since the 1985 Act was put on to the statute book. It is also designed to ensure that not only telephone calls, but—subject to proper procedures, when appropriate—data streams can be intercepted.

The fact is that—I shall deal with this in more detail when we discuss encryption—given the current vast scale of data traffic, which was unimagined even 15 years ago, the possibilities for law enforcement agencies to keep track of that traffic, except for very specific and targeted purposes, is very limited.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way. I am certainly not expecting him to clean my shoes, but I would appreciate an answer. How and when will he address the specific concerns about regulatory costs that have been expressed by the Alliance for Electronic Business? Given the fact, which he will not dispute, that the average British small business, employing fewer than 100 people, now faces an additional annual cost of £5,000 directly as a result of the Government's regulatory policies, to what figure will that increase rise as a result of the Bill?

Mr. Straw: I shall deal later in my speech with the burden. If the hon. Gentleman is not satisfied with the answer that I give, I shall be delighted to give way to him again.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I perhaps rewind the tape, and deal with my right hon. Friend's earlier comment on the diligence and time that he himself personally devotes to checking to ensure that the warranting system works? I believe that that comment should be an assurance to many members of the public who write to Members of Parliament on the subject, but do not understand how he goes about his functions in that sphere.

Mr. Straw: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. As a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, he has reason to know more about the subject than most right. hon. and hon. Members possibly could. I think that all Secretaries of State have taken the responsibility very seriously indeed—and so they should, as should I. Interception is a patent invasion of individuals' privacy, and it should occur only when it is properly justified within the law and in all the circumstances.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman will excuse me, I have to make some progress. If I have some time, I shall give way.

As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), part of the Bill is designed to ensure that the intercept regime takes proper account of technological developments. One of those developments is that people change their telephones with a frequency that is sometimes astonishing, whereas, 15 years ago, it was a simple matter of one person, one line. We have sought to take account of that fact in the Bill.

The target of an intercept warrant will still have to be authorised by the Secretary of State. Some changes in telephone numbers—which, as I know to my cost, can happen at any time of the day or night—will be open to be authorised by senior officials at the relevant Departments. We are taking the opportunity to rationalise the time scales for renewal of warrants.

On the issue of burdens on industry, currently, public telecommunications operators are required to ensure that their network contains a basic intercept capability. The requirement is similar to that which applies in other countries. However, the requirement does not extend to other providers of publicly available communications services, such as internet service providers or international simple resale operators. The Bill proposes that a level playing field should apply across all types of industry, and it enshrines in statute the existing principle that service providers should maintain a reasonable intercept facility.

We are—to answer the question of the hon. Member for Buckingham—keen to minimise any additional burden on United Kingdom industry and to avoid damaging its international competitiveness. The Home Office is already engaged in detailed discussions with industry about what might constitute a reasonable interception capability for them.

Cost apportionment between Government and industry will be addressed during detailed consultations. The starting point is the existing framework, in which responsibility for meeting the costs of reasonable intercept capability lies with the public telecommunications operators. However, the Bill recognises—there is such provision in the Bill—that it would be appropriate for the Government to make a contribution to costs that would otherwise be unreasonable for communications service providers to bear.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): The Federation of the Electronics Industry tells me that, at the moment, no one knows how to provide a reasonable intercept capability for the internet, and that it could be incredibly expensive. Has the Home Office found a way of permitting that to happen technically?

Mr. Straw: I accept that there are complications in the techniques, but it is not impossible and a great deal of work is going on. Some parts of internet communications can be intercepted at the moment. The problem is that, under existing legislation, responsibilities apply only to public telecommunications operators. We are trying to relieve the burden which has fallen, by chance, on the large public telecommunications operators and ensure that it is properly spread.

Mr. Bercow: Some of what the Home Secretary has said has been reassuring, but is he aware that businesses have complained frequently over the past three years that there is too little consultation and, too frequently, too little

notice of their requirement to implement new regulations? If the Home Secretary is serious about reassuring business, as I hope he is, will he guarantee that businesses will be consulted for at least three months on any proposed new regulations, and that they will be granted at least three months' notice of any legal requirement to implement new regulations?

Mr. Straw: The concerns of business about the burden of Government regulation go back beyond May 1997—they are timeless. I happen to believe that it is almost certain that a similar regime to that proposed by the Bill would have been put in place had the Conservative party been in power now. We have consulted widely on this Bill, and I published a consultation document last year. Discussions are continuing. I will not be pinned down to a specific time frame but, so far as possible, we want to reach a consensus—it is in our interest to do so.

What we have achieved until now in terms of making this country a safer one has been achieved significantly through the voluntary co-operation of the public telecommunications operators. We cannot sing about this too often—for obvious reasons—but the operators have performed a significant public service. On communications data—to which I shall refer in a moment—what we are doing will relieve a burden on telecommunications operators, and not increase it.

Clauses 16 and 17 replace section 9 of the 1985 Act. The provision rules out from legal proceedings the use of intercept material. The consultation exercise last summer asked for responses on this point, and more individual comments were received about it than any other. Of those who responded—this is never conclusive, but I give the information to the House—two thirds were in favour of retaining the provision. I have considered the matter long and hard, and our provision is unusual internationally. However, I believe that we should follow the balance of opinion. It is significant that section 9—which will become clauses 16 and 17—was recently approved by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of UK *v.* Jasper.

Chapter II of part I deals with the acquisition of communications data, which are normally provided to investigating bodies under a voluntary regime set up by the Telecommunications Act 1984 and the Data Protection Act 1998. This existing and loosely regulated regime is unacceptable in terms of human rights and because, in certain cases, it has led to unacceptably high demands on the public telecommunications operators.

The Bill sets out in statute precisely what hurdles law enforcement and other agencies must overcome before they can require the data from service providers. The Bill then puts an onus on service providers to provide the information, and allows for them to be compensated—a proper statutory regime which is much to their benefit. The House will recall that, in opposition, I undertook to make this change in a response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) during proceedings on the Police Act 1997.

Part II of the Bill covers the use of intrusive surveillance, directed surveillance and covert human intelligence sources. Those are not new powers, but the provisions in this part of the Bill will put their use on a statutory basis. Part II does not create any illegality in the use of part II techniques, but it will ensure that the use of the powers is properly regulated. Where such actions are authorised properly under the provisions of the Bill, that will be an answer to any subsequent assertion based on article 8 of the European convention that a person's privacy has been invaded without justification.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way on that point, because a constituent has raised it with me. Will there be any way after an interception, however long ago it was, for the person whose communication was intercepted to be informed of that fact, so that they could raise the issue and make a complaint if appropriate?

Mr. Straw: The short answer is no. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman's constituent, but I regularly have to write to individuals who face no prospect whatever of being the subject of interception laboriously to explain that fact. I also explain to constituents at my surgeries that, given the weight of the threat from international crime and terrorism, the prospect is remote that we would devote resources to intercepting their telephone calls. However, I then provide no reassurance when I say that I cannot tell them whether their telephone is the subject of intercept because otherwise others who might be the subject of intercept could come along on fishing expeditions. It is logically a difficult position to explain to individuals, and it is difficult for people to understand that they may make a complaint to the tribunal—I shall come on to the changes we shall make in respect of the tribunal—that they may be being intercepted even though it is not possible to tell them whether they are being intercepted. Because it is secret, people are bound to be suspicious, but—to repeat the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and as I believed before I became Home Secretary, and have fully understood since—the powers are operated in a strong ethical and legal framework. That is as it should be.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the Home Secretary clear up the concerns of serious investigative journalists and researchers that some of those regulations might hamper their ability to cover themselves when they are talking on the telephone with people whom they are investigating and wish to keep a record of the conversation? I do not mean the interception by a third party of conversations between two other parties, but the ability of researchers to cover their backs in the course of investigations.

Mr. Straw: I am not entirely clear what the hon. Gentleman is asking. If he is asking whether journalists are routinely the subject of intercept, the answer is no. The only people subject to intercept are those who come within the terms of the Interception of Communications Act or the Bill. If he is talking about a journalist routinely recording his own telephone conversations, that is not remotely covered by the Bill, although it is a courtesy—to say the least—that if a journalist, or anybody else, is recording a telephone conversation, they should tell the person at the other end.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): They are obliged to tell.

Mr. Straw: I believe that that is the case.

[Mr. Straw]

Decryption has aroused much interest. Part III of the Bill deals with demands to decrypt data. We consulted on similar provisions published as part of the draft Electronic Communications Bill last July. Encryption itself is vital to the success of the e-commerce revolution, and helps to prevent certain types of crime, such as fraud on the internet. However, encryption can also be used by criminals to frustrate law enforcement. That is happening already, and the problems will increase as the technology becomes more available.

The new decryption power is needed to maintain the effectiveness of existing statutory powers. The limit of what we propose is assisting law enforcement agencies in reading the contents of material they have already lawfully obtained. Where an investigating agency has reasonable grounds for believing that a key exists to decrypt lawfully acquired data, the Bill will introduce a power, with proper authorisation procedures and stringent safeguards, to allow them to require the decryption of that data.

The introduction of a new power was specifically recommended in last year's report on encryption and law enforcement by the performance and innovation unit of the Cabinet Office. The Select Committee on Trade and Industry report concluded that the power would be a useful addition to the law enforcement armoury.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): My right hon. Friend will know that several businesses expressed unease when the Electronic Communications Bill was published that the measure would deter inward investment and e-commerce in this country. How has he tackled that problem?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend will know that before the Bill was published, there was a suggestion, in this and other Governments, that the measure should make provision for key escrow, so that keys could be vested with safe third parties and could therefore be available.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Then the idea was dropped.

Mr. Straw: As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) says, from a sedentary position, the idea was dropped. There is no harm in discussing an issue and then taking a different view, according to the balance of the argument. We were persuaded that key escrow could have disrupted e-commerce in this country, especially if other countries did not adopt the arrangement. We were proposing a quasi-voluntary regime, whereas France—as one might expect—was proposing a wholly dirigiste regime that would have made it compulsory in all circumstances to vest keys with a safe third party. However, even France went off the boil with regard to that proposal, and the French Government are reconsidering the matter.

Secondly, the Government took account of almost everything that the Select Committee said, and we have strengthened the safeguards in the offences relating to a failure to comply with the notice for key disclosure under clause 48. Those measures are set out in clauses 49 and 50.

Mr. Fabricant: I fully support the concept that, where they exist, keys should be capable of access, for instance in relation to the transfer of funds using credit cards. However, what about when a key is not in the public domain, so to speak? The Home Secretary will know that drug dealers use their own encryption tools when they communicate with each other. What does he have to say about e-mails that are encrypted and decrypted by drug dealers? The internet service providers will not be aware of what is happening, as the messages will be only a data stream to them.

Mr. Straw: A person who does not have possession of the key cannot be guilty of the offence. By definition, the keys are a secret confined to the people who have control of them. One half of the key—the part used by the person communicating data to a recipient—is public; by definition, the other half is private, and that is the part that interests law enforcement agencies.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Is not the remaining significant complaint about the proposals that they could penalise people who lose their encryption keys? The Bill places on such people the burden of proving either that they never had such a key in the first place, or that they are innocent. However, it offers a relatively light penalty for people who intentionally claim that they cannot find their method of decryption. Clearly, major criminals would rather accept a six-month punishment than a much more severe penalty. Would not that seem to them to be a price worth paying?

Mr. Straw: It is worth bearing in mind that the product of interception resulting from the use of such keys cannot be adduced in evidence. People will not be able to deny material of evidential value in court, as the Bill—like the Interception of Communications Act—is based on the premise that neither prosecution nor defence can adduce the product of intercept as evidence in court. If there is concern in the House about the balance of the penalties, which can be discussed in detail in Committee, I am happy to take representations about it. As I have said before, I have never put a Bill before the House that has not been improved as a result of the parliamentary process, and I hope that I never will, because that is the essence of what Parliament is here for.

We have had discussions about people who have lost their key. I find it slightly eccentric, although it is not impossible, that someone can lose a key that he needs to access a large amount of data. Such things happen, of course, and the person has a perfect defence if he has lost it and then forgotten it. I do not believe that a court would convict people in those circumstances if it believed them. If it did not, however, that would be a different matter. Whether the case went before a magistrates court or a Crown court, we have very high standards of justice in this country.

I should like to deal briefly with international comparisons and the role of the commissioners and the tribunal. Law enforcement worldwide is worried about the criminal use of encryption. I have discussed this on a number of occasions with colleague Ministers of Justice and the Interior, including the United States Attorney-General, Janet Reno. The United Kingdom and the United States are both putting in place a package of measures to tackle the problem.

In European terms, we are ahead of the game in e-commerce and law enforcement legislation. Our goal is to make the United Kingdom the best and safest place in the world to do e-commerce. The industry, too, wants a secure environment in which to conduct business.

The scheme of the Bill is aimed at trying to keep up with the advance of technology as best we can. The gloomy prognosis, though, is that whatever is done, law enforcement will take a hit over encryption. That is partly my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich. Introducing the measures in part III is the least that we can do to minimise the effect of that hit. They form an important part of the package of measures that we are putting in place if we are to have any hope of dealing successfully with the threat from the criminal use of encryption.

Part IV is in many ways the most important part of the Bill. It sets out who is to scrutinise the use of the six powers and it establishes a tribunal, which will be accessible to all. The existing commissioners for interception, the security service, intelligence services and surveillance will continue with their present roles and will add to some of them the powers in the Bill. One role of the commissioners will be to reassure Parliament and the public that the powers are being used properly. In addition, a new tribunal is established to consider complaints.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey asked whether we could bring together all the separate regulation regimes. I did not think that that was appropriate, but I accept the argument that we should amalgamate the current plethora of tribunals and different avenues available for complaints. That is what we are doing in the Bill. We are abolishing the specific tribunals and establishing one all-embracing tribunal to replace those functions and any others that are relevant under the Bill. It will be a serious and powerful tribunal, and will be available as redress in respect of the use of a wide number of techniques by the investigating agencies.

The Bill sets out six conditions for the use of six law enforcement powers, used daily in the front line against some of the most serious threats to our society. We have previously regulated these powers on a piecemeal basis in response to judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. In this Bill, we are anticipating, on a comprehensive basis, the requirements of human rights legislation.

These are the principles. No doubt some of the more detailed provisions will lead to discussion here and in Committee. Meanwhile, I commend the Bill to the House.

4.14 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): This is an important Bill, dealing with very complex matters. Given the enormous advances in technology and the possibility of its lawful and unlawful use, we fully acknowledge that the time has come to look again at updating the Interception of Communications Act 1985. We are therefore broadly supportive of the principles behind the Bill. We will not be opposing Second Reading, but that does not mean that there are not areas of fairly serious concern that we will wish to examine in considerable detail during the Bill's passage.

The last time I told the Home Secretary that I did not oppose a Bill's Second Reading he evinced some displeasure when I chose to oppose it at further stages of its proceedings. The fact that we support Second Reading—or that, at any rate, we do not oppose it—should not be taken as indicative that, if our concerns are not met, we shall continue to support the Bill throughout its future stages. Perhaps, as I have put that on the record, the right hon. Gentleman will not be greatly disappointed later. However, I hope that it will not be necessary to oppose the Bill; I hope that he will allow us to improve it so as to meet our concerns.

We accept that the explosion in methods of communication has given rise to a similar explosion in new methods of committing crime. If we failed to update the legislation that we introduced in 1985, we should damage the capability of this country's law enforcement, security and intelligence services to do their job.

However, the Bill is like the curate's egg—it is good in parts. We accept the need both to widen the power of interception to cover modern communications methods and to regulate surveillance and covert human intelligence. However, it is important that the Bill should be effective and still strike a proper balance between the needs of the crime fighter, the legitimate concern of business to avoid overweening regulation and the interest of the citizen in respecting fundamental human rights.

In some ways, the Bill does not provide crime fighters with all that they need. For example, clause 6 deals with those persons who may apply for interception warrants. It lists the head of every major security service and provides for the Secretary of State to designate "any . . . other person", but one notable omission is any provision for a senior official responsible for the detection of serious benefit fraud to apply for an interception warrant. Given that such fraud is by far the most substantial crime by value committed in the United Kingdom, it seems a bit odd that no senior official at the Department of Social Security can apply for a warrant—even in the most serious cases of benefit fraud; for example, those involving international gangs.

The powers in the Bill need strengthening to ensure that law enforcement agencies can obtain the evidence they need when dealing with serious sex offenders, drug traffickers and those involved in organised and terrorist offences by intercepting their communications and being able to break the codes that are used. I shall deal with that matter more fully when I come to the use of encrypted communications.

One of the great successes of the past few years has been the UK's growing information technology industry. The industry realises that it is important that law enforcement agencies should be able to carry out their work and that there should be provision to allow the interception of communications.

Mr. Straw *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman now has the answer to my point about social security.

Mr. Straw: I was checking whether my recollection of the matter was correct. Recently, there was a large case in Lancashire. In most cases of serious social security fraud, the police are involved. There is no problem in the police making an application through the National

[Mr. Straw]

Criminal Intelligence Service—they do that through an intermediary. There would be no impediment to that system for applications in cases of serious benefit fraud.

Miss Widdecombe: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that attempt at elucidation, but the situation remains exactly as I described it. The head of social security cannot apply for an interception warrant. I invite the right hon. Gentleman to consider whether there are cases that might not necessarily be dealt with at one remove through the police and whether there might thus be some circumstances in which that individual should be able to apply for an interception warrant.

The Internet Services Providers Association believes that

in order to allow enforcement agencies to carry out their work, there should be provision to allow interception of communications.

The association is not against the Bill in principle. The Federation of the Electronics Industry has said:

FEI does not question the objectives or underlying reasons for the proposed legislative reforms.

The Alliance for Electronic Business has said that

the Alliance strongly supports the Government's objective in regulating the interception and monitoring of electronic communications.

Therefore, there appears to be general support for the principles, but that puts upon us an even greater responsibility to listen to what those bodies say about the improvements that are needed to the Bill.

Too many times during the Bill's consultation process, the views of industry have been overlooked. A balance has to be struck between allowing law enforcement to operate—as it must and the House would expect it to—allowing industry to deliver what the Bill asks of it and avoiding over-regulation.

Clause 12 will enable the Home Secretary to require communication services providers to have an interception capability and, by notice, to require certain technical steps to be taken to achieve that. The industry is concerned that the steps proposed by the Home Secretary may be either technically flawed or disproportionate. The technical difficulties involved should not be ignored.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the practical difficulties of interception. Is she aware that up to 100 million e-mails are sent every day and that the routes that they take are quite extraordinary? If I were to e-mail her, it is quite probable that the message would go via California or Australia. What are the practical difficulties in intercepting such communications?

Miss Widdecombe: It is precisely for that sort of highly complex operation that we need to examine carefully the provisions in the Bill.

Mr. Fabricant: And there is the cost.

Miss Widdecombe: My hon. Friend also refers to the cost and he is right to do so. Cost is a significant consideration and I shall come to it shortly.

It will not be good enough simply to have the ability to intercept data. We must have the technical capability to read it and, as the Home Secretary has acknowledged, that is something completely different. Messages on the internet are split and sent by different routes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) has just pointed out. It is also possible to hide messages in other signals. That raises technical issues about the nature and proportionality of what the Home Secretary can propose. There is a balance to be struck, therefore, between the possibility of substantial over-regulation and the practicalities of law enforcement. Through amendments that we shall table in Committee, we shall seek to try to redress that balance where we think that it has gone awry.

Clause 13 enables the Home Secretary to contribute to the cost of providing an interception capability, but it does not give us any clue as to what the Government's approach will be. It is important that the information technology industry has proportionate technical steps to take and that the costs are not so burdensome that they kill fledgling businesses at the cutting edge of technology. The Internet Services Providers Association has said:

if ISPs in the UK are made to carry the burden of the costs of interception, at best they will be at a disadvantage compared to their European and international competitors and at worst will be unable to operate. It does not seem that this position would help make the UK "the best place in the world for e-commerce".

I therefore want to ask the Government three questions. Are they committed to making payments to providers so as to obtain an interception capability? If so, on what basis will payments be made? Will they at least pledge that no communications services provider will be faced with such costs that it will simply be unable to continue?

There is also concern about over-regulation of communications data—for example, billing logs and other logs of communications traffic. Clause 21 will enable designated persons from security services, Customs and Excise and any other authority specified by the Home Secretary to obtain "communications data". Concern has been expressed by operators about the wide range of persons who will have access to that information and about the wide range of information involved.

Modern software enables a very detailed pattern of a person's communications to be obtained, detailing every aspect of life if sufficient communications data are made available. That is a massive invasion of privacy. Although that power could be justified in a serious case, it should be carefully restricted, and the Opposition will want to table amendments in Committee to make sure that it will be. We do not think that the power should be available simply to any public authority. To give an obvious example, it would not be justified to extend such a power to local authorities investigating council tax arrears.

There is also an important technical issue. Communications services providers could be required to build special software and hardware, and it is not at all clear what the extent or cost of that would be. Yet the penalty is a conviction for a criminal offence. The boundaries of what is proposed need to be clarified and they need to be proportionate.

There is a great deal of controversy surrounding clauses 46 to 49. Clause 46 enables authorities to require a person to provide either the key necessary to decode an encrypted message or the information in the message in an

intelligible form. Clause 49 creates the offence of failing to comply with such a notice. Yet the nature of the offence is such that the burden of proving an innocent explanation for failure to provide the key is laid at the door of the accused; in other words, people are presumed guilty unless they can prove that they are innocent.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Is my right hon. Friend aware that approximately half the calls to the parliamentary video and data network, which controls the computers in this place, are from people who have forgotten their password, and there is a routine to get people back into the system? Surely that is one of the practical problems associated with what the Home Secretary is trying to achieve.

Miss Widdecombe: That shows that people can forget, but I think that it is fair to imagine that where we are talking about highly complex encrypted messages, some care will have been taken to look after the key.

The crucial point is that people will be presumed guilty until they can prove themselves innocent. That is questionable justice. The Home Secretary shakes his head, but British justice relies on people being presumed innocent until proved guilty. To put it in terms that he might prefer, the provision is probably in breach of the European convention on human rights. He might take that point seriously, if he will not take seriously the point about British justice.

There is no defence allowed where someone might demonstrate to a court that they have shown due diligence in storing the key that is being requested via a section 46 notice. Immediately after the debate, we intend to table a new clause to replace clause 49 which would introduce such a defence.

The offence, as drafted, does not meet the needs even of law enforcement because the penalty is modest: a maximum of two years' imprisonment. Once tightened up to allow the innocent to defend themselves, that could substantially rise. If it does not rise, a serious offender would be likely to refuse the key to encrypted information and hope that he could establish that he had either lost or forgotten it. If he failed to establish that, the relatively modest sentence would be more acceptable to him than the likely outcome if the evidence of serious wrongdoing were uncovered and led to prosecution for a more substantive offence.

The burden of proof should be the normal one of presumed innocent until proved guilty, but the penalty should then be vastly greater, so that it does not pay to lose a key in the hope of escaping a much more serious penalty for a more serious offence.

The Home Secretary has said that he cannot imagine an innocent person discarding the key, but the provisions will apply to anything that has happened in the past, and he will be aware that a common practice of encryption is frequent changing of the keys. The key being sought might therefore have been discarded. Under the guilty until proved innocent proposals, a person who had discarded a key might be at risk of an unsafe conviction.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): When my right hon. Friend is carefully drafting amendments, will she consider one other point which I did not hear the Home Secretary specifically address? If the fear of penalties on businesses is such that they are concerned that they might start to lose their private key, it is likely that they will place such private keys in key escrow. If the key escrow system returns, it is possible that it will grow into one of trusted third parties and, therefore, the Home Office will be reintroducing by the back door what was abandoned in the Electronic Communications Bill. In his winding-up speech, will the Minister further assure the House that that is not the intention?

Miss Widdecombe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, although in fairness—I do not want to do the Minister's job for him—*[Interruption.]* Well, I do eventually, yes; but perhaps not at this very moment. There is a distinction to be drawn between compelling a business to deposit a copy of its key, which was the original proposal, and businesses voluntarily deciding to keep copies of their key with a trusted third party. Many—certainly some—already do so for the safety of the key. Perhaps the Minister will nevertheless be able to give the assurance sought: there is no intention, either now or later, as far as he can see, of reintroducing the requirement that has been dropped.

The draft offence needs to be amended and targeted specifically at known offenders with a background of previous wrongdoing. Evidence of previous wrongdoing should be admissible to prove guilty intention. If the burden of proving guilty knowledge were on the prosecution, miscarriages of justice would be unlikely, but if evidence of previous wrongdoing were admissible to prove guilty knowledge, the guilty would be less likely to go free. If the offence were amended on those lines, we could set a tougher maximum sentence, which would actively discourage criminals from refusing to co-operate. It will be along those lines that we shall be proposing amendments to improve that aspect. Our view is that tough justice is better than rough justice. *[Interruption.]* The Home Secretary has proposed rough justice and very light penalties. If that is how he wants to be known, that is fair enough.

In many ways, the Bill is over-bureaucratic. Part IV, which deals with scrutiny, proposes that the Prime Minister should be able to appoint two new commissioners to review the performance of the Home Secretary in exercising his functions. That would involve a new interception of communications commissioner and a new covert investigations commissioner. We already have a Security Service Act commissioner, an Intelligence Services Act commissioner, a chief surveillance commissioner and ordinary surveillance commissioners. None of those appears to have an independent investigatory team available to them. It seems that the Government believe that commissioning should be a growth industry. The question arises whether any of those important positions entail any real power, particularly as they lack a team of investigators to back up their role.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): Will the right hon. Lady refresh my memory by telling me under which Government the commissioners were established? I believe that one set was established in 1989 and the other in 1994—under a Conservative Government.

Miss Widdecombe: The point is whether we should be adding to the number, whether adding to them will make for any greater effectiveness or whether we should be finding another way of doing things.

[Miss Widdecombe]

The question also arises, therefore, of whether there are simply too many commissioners. We shall investigate in Committee whether it would be better to have one unified commission with a proper staff of investigators to provide real and effective scrutiny. I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman nodding. There we go; his conversion was very quick.

It is easy to forget that the information technology industry is one of the United Kingdom's great success stories. Many of the technologies that criminals use were developed for very good reasons. The encryption and other secure communications techniques were developed not to assist criminals in hiding their activities, but to provide a secure commercial environment in which proper confidentiality could be maintained. There are the highest public policy reasons for ensuring that that technology is not compromised by the Bill.

We live in a global marketplace and we should not forget that many of those working in the communications industry do not have to operate from the UK if they do not wish to do so. It is important that security services and regulators should not attempt to do more than is necessary in the interests of proper crime detection and prevention. This is the last area in which gold plating would be good idea. That brings us back to the balancing act that the Government must perform in relation to the Bill. The legislation must do what we all agree it needs to do, but it must not disadvantage the innocent or those caught in the crossfire.

Increased regulation under the current Government is already a cause of concern; it would have been made far worse by the Electronic Communications Bill, but for the efforts of the Opposition. As the House knows, the proposals contained in part III of the Bill were, in a different form, included in the original draft of the Electronic Communications Bill and were dropped only after the strongest representations from Opposition Members and from the industry. At this point, I pay tribute to the work of the Foundation for Information Policy Research. It is important that the Home Office recognises the important principle of not over-regulating or providing disincentives.

Many say that the Government are doomed to fail, that it will be impossible to detect the communications of serious criminals and that the innocent will be burdened with extra regulation. However, we are prepared to give the Government the benefit of the doubt: we shall try to improve the Bill in the belief that it can and will be made to work. Many involved in the communications industry have a choice of where they operate from, but it is strongly in the UK's interests that they remain here. The Government must keep that at the forefront of their mind when considering our amendments to their Bill.

4.37 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): The interception of communications has come a long way since my dad left school in 1935 and started work as a messenger boy at the Post Office. I hope that I do not get him in trouble by telling the following story. One of his jobs was to collect letters and take them by bicycle to a special building, where they were opened; later, he would collect them for delivery on his round. Interception of communications requires far more sophisticated techniques these days.

The Bill is necessary and overdue, but I, like hon. Members on both sides, am concerned that it may well become out of date very quickly. That is one of the problems of the technological changes that confront us. It does not mean that we should not legislate, but we must recognise that we may have to revisit this subject in two, three, five or 10 years' time, depending on how fast and how far these matters advance.

The use of interception of communications in combating drug trafficking has been mentioned, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred to heroin seizures. I wish to flag up one issue that should be taken into consideration: the way in which the criminal gangs involved in drugs smuggling are changing. A disturbing article, which appeared originally in the American magazine, *Mother Jones*, and was reprinted in *The Editor* section of *The Guardian* on 3 March, highlights the fact that

> Law enforcement officials in Europe have suspected for years that ties existed between Kosovar rebels and Balkan drug smugglers. But since Washington enthroned the Kosovo Liberation Army in that Yugoslav province, KLA-associated drug traffickers have cemented their influence and used their new status to increase heroin trafficking and forge links with nationalist rebel groups and drug cartels.

According to the article, German police say that Kosovar Albanians import 80 per cent. of Europe's heroin. We must take that seriously. An organised group is bringing heroin, which originates in Afghanistan, through various conduits from Asia into Europe and spreading it around the world. The article also points out the links between that group and the Colombian drug cartels.

As incidents in many countries have shown, such groups operate through sophisticated money-laundering techniques and international communications, and use the most advanced technologies. Our organised anti-criminal activities must be equally sophisticated in order to intercept their communications, find out what they are doing and stop them bringing death and destruction to so many people in this country and throughout the world.

Mr. White: Is my hon. Friend aware of the current debate in United States, where it is alleged that the CIA provided the keys and encryption to those groups and thereby prevented the Drug Enforcement Agency from taking action against them?

Mr. Gapes: I was not aware of that allegation. It is extremely serious and I hope that the relevant authorities will look into it.

Another aspect of the Bill concerns effective measures to combat terrorism. Some of us in the Chamber served on the Standing Committee that recently considered the Terrorism Bill. I shall not rerun the arguments, but I notice that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is present, and I expect that we may return to those issues.

Several international terrorist organisations clearly use sophisticated methods in their operations, with accountants, lawyers, newspapers and front organisations. They operate globally. They plan their crimes in one country, finance them in another, carry them out in a third country, and the perpetrators often live or seek refuge in a fourth country. We therefore need effective international measures to combat such organisations. I hope that the Bill

will go some way towards supporting the vital work already undertaken by the intelligence and security organisations, the police through Europol and other bodies.

Concern has been expressed about the Bill's impact on internet service providers. I understand the concern of those in the information technology industry when they see measures that could, in a worst case scenario, lead to increased regulation or potential costs. However, it is not right that society should not take action against criminal organisations, paedophile gangs, terrorist groups and drug smugglers who are operating using that technology.

We must get the balance right, but it is a counsel of despair to argue that, because the internet is global and we must be at the centre of it, we should do nothing about such abuses. Constituents of mine whose children are suffering as a result of drugs, and people who themselves or whose relatives have been maimed or killed because of terrorist action will not think kindly of legislators who fail to take action leading to effective steps against the perpetrators of those crimes.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. I have read the Bill carefully, and any sensible criminal can take simple measures to avoid being caught by it. Why should all the honest people have to spend literally billions of pounds—thus possibly making Britain the wrong place in which to establish businesses—simply because some criminals can use encryption?

Mr. Gapes: The hon. Gentleman is obviously an expert in criminal activity and avoiding the effects of legislation. Perhaps he will tell us how that can be done. I do not believe that it will be that easy. I suspect that people may try to avoid being caught by the measure, as they always do, because that is the nature of the criminal or terrorist mind. However, we must update our legislation.

One reason for updating legislation is to avoid the current position, in which all sorts of unregulated surveillance activities take place. If we do not regulate those activities, unauthorised, unregulated surveillance will occur because people regard it as necessary, but we shall lack the appropriate regulatory mechanism to bring people to account. That would be the worst of both worlds.

I want the Minister to clarify clause 6(j), which refers to

> a person who, for the purposes of any international mutual assistance agreement, is the competent authority of a country or territory outside the United Kingdom.

I interpret that to mean that it allows our Government to give authority to someone in another Government or international organisation to undertake the interception on our behalf. However, I would be grateful for some exact clarification of that phrase and of whether it has a wider application than the interpretation that I have just given.

The Bill refers to interception of non-public networks, such as office switchboards. We are considering a complicated matter. When we started work years ago, most people had one switchboard, a couple of phone lines, and no sophisticated internal networking took place. Nowadays, however, most people work in environments where they can have conference calls, messages left on voice mails, and where all sorts of complex interrelationships exist between technologies. We must be careful that people are not inadvertently caught by the impact of the Bill through no fault of their own but because they had been used as a conduit for information that was intercepted by someone else. I hope that the Minister will clarify the way in which the measures will work in practice in the commercial and non-public sector, as defined by the Bill.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman has made a valuable point. Will the Minister clarify that financial institutions, which make a point of recording transactions that take place over the phone—I refer especially to telephone banking—will not come within the Bill's orbit?

Mr. Gapes: That is a question for the Minister; I shall not respond to it.

The Home Secretary said that we needed to keep up with the advance of technology as best we can. The Bill is necessary and probably overdue. However, I suspect that, in a few years' time, it will be out of date. I hope that it will not be left for too long on the statute book—that has happened to other measures—before we review it and update it if necessary. During the Bill's remaining stages, I hope that we will be able to explore some of those matters in more detail. I hope that the House will support it this afternoon.

4.50 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): It is one of the little ironies of life that, on the day that one Labour Member decides to stand against another for the Labour leadership—*[Interruption.]*—all right, not quite the leadership, but they are both standing for mayor—in London, we are debating the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. Some Labour Members may now be tempted to make the Bill as tough as they might ever dream of making it to deal with the latest developments. As we have said previously, the Bill—although complex—covers big issues. It is perfectly appropriate to examine it carefully because it takes us into areas where legislation has never gone before.

The crucial question is: what should be the balance between the powers and rights of the state and the powers and liberties of the individual? The Home Secretary argued that the Bill would achieve a better balance, and my colleagues and I accept the proposition that if the state or state agencies are to investigate people, intercept communications and undertake surveillance, that should be regulated by law. It is accepted across the House that many activities are not currently regulated by law; they are either regulated by codes of practice or not regulated at all. As the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) said, technology is moving quickly. Mobile telephones, pagers and electronic mail have come upon us in the past few years and we need a regulatory regime. He was also right that in the next few years other forms of communication may arrive for which regulation will also be needed. It is clearly right to establish a framework of regulation and legislation and we must ensure that that which happens without legal justification is put into a context in which legal justification is required. There is no dissent around the House about that. Like the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who spoke for the Conservative party, we on the Liberal Democrat Benches will therefore vote for the Bill's Second Reading. We need a Bill and it is important that the legislation catches up with reality.

However, our view of the Bill as a whole is similar to that of the Conservatives: changes need to be made where, we believe, the Government have the balance wrong

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

between the individual and the state, and we shall seek to amend the Bill. I was encouraged that the Home Secretary showed his open-mindedness—the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), has done that in other contexts—by agreeing to consider reasonable propositions reasonably and I hope that we can make improvements as a result. However, even before I listened to the right hon. Lady's speech, I had in my notes words to the effect that we must make it clear that we may not be able to support Third Reading unless improvements are made. I want to flag that up and hope that it helps the Government to realise that not only are there concerns among those on their own Benches and outside the House, but that both Opposition parties want changes to be made. To get the Bill right, we are willing to work with the Minister and each other.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): And Ken Livingstone.

Mr. Hughes: The Minister tempts me. If the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) turned up at any of the debates on the Bill, no doubt we could work with him, too. Some of us did not stand for that particular election, not least because running a campaign out there and doing a job in the House seemed incompatible, but that is a separate debate.

I want to flag up a warning about the Bill's dangerous provisions, as those in which we think the Government are going too far in favour of the state and against the individual are part of a worrying trend. I occasionally crossed swords with the hon. Member for Ilford, South—who is not in his place, but was a moment ago—in Committee debates on the Terrorism Bill. The Minister was also a member of the Committee. Two of my complaints were that the definition of terrorism was too wide and that making the legislation permanent was not a good idea. There are the same underlying concerns about this Bill: that the definitions are too wide, that powers given to Ministers are too great—my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) referred to that and I shall come back to it later—and that the balance is wrong.

The House is also debating the Freedom of Information Bill, which does not give the citizen enough powers and does not take enough powers away from the Executive. Tomorrow, we shall discuss on the Floor of the House a Bill that will take more rights away from the individual and give more powers to the authorities. I must tell Ministers and Labour Members that the Government have got the balance wrong. They were not elected to take more and more rights away from individuals and to give them to the state, but they are doing just that. These measures may have a populist and popular short-term appeal, but if they continue down this road they will increasingly lose support not only in their heartlands, but in other places where people are concerned about these issues too.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He cannot say that the Bill will have to be updated in the light of new technologies, and then say that it is so broad that it encompasses all future technological possibilities.

Mr. Rogers: Of course the hon. Gentleman can have it both ways—he is a Liberal Democrat.

Mr. Hughes: Had I said that, the point made by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) may have been valid, but I did not say that. I said that we shall have to ensure that legislation encompasses the developments in technology, but the Bill is too broad because it gives the Secretary of State the power to designate, without coming back to Parliament with legislation, any body that has the right to intervene. Furthermore, definitions of the national interest in one form or another, that are not defined elsewhere in legislation, allow a wide interpretation. I did not suggest that the Bill was too wide in the way the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) implied.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and I are not persuaded by the argument for giving the Executive greater powers to interfere in the lives of individuals. The Secretary of State illustrated the point by saying that whenever he is asked whether someone has had his telephone tapped he is unable to give an answer. However, people would be less reassured to know that the decision is being made by a Minister, who is part of the Executive and in charge of the police or certain parts of the intelligence services, than they would be if it were taken by a member of the judiciary. The separation of powers is very important, not least because we do not have a written constitution.

I disagree with the Minister. I believe that the public would be more reassured if judges, who are not part of, and are free from, the Executive, made such decisions and not Ministers, however well they may carry out their responsibilities. Although Ministers have not been criticised for abusing their powers, that does not mean that they will not face temptation and will not give into it.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald properly argued that we must get right the difficult balance between regulation and a liberal trading and commercial society. That is not easy. We want to ensure that there is maximum opportunity for global commerce, but clearly the internet, e-mail and other forms of communication allow transmission of illegal material—pornography is a good example. Such material is much more accessible now than ever before. Parents raise such concerns with us all the time. That material needs to be regulated, because people do not want their kids to be able to download it in their front room. Kids often play a double bluff with parents to find out the password and to access such material.

The Secretary of State may tell us that he is advised that the Bill complies with the European convention on human rights. As of October this year, that will be able to be tested in the courts. Having engaged in a couple of seminars and discussions, I do not think that this country has begun to understand the impact that the human rights legislation will have on people's lives, or to realise how many court proceedings will take place in magistrates courts, county courts, Crown courts and the High Court to test that legislation. The two main issues here are the right to fair trial and the right to privacy, both of which are enshrined in the convention and tested in this Bill.

Let me make a more general point. We are living in an age in which we must ensure that the individual can resist the requests made to all of us to give information all the time, often unnecessarily. I can give a practical, not very exciting example. When someone telephones one of the statutory undertakings to pay a gas, electricity or water bill, that person is often asked for all sorts of information beyond his or her postcode. More and more information is required from those who want a loan or bank overdraft.

The danger is that, in our present society, the information held on us is growing, while the information that we have about who is holding it diminishes in relative terms. The ability to keep up with who controls the information is a real issue in respect of the rights of the individual, not just against the public state but against private corporate society, nationally and internationally.

The other day, I visited a prison and saw how it monitors prisoners' activities. Obviously, the issue is different in prisons, but I was struck by the detailed computerised tables enabling those in authority to track connections, conversations, links and meetings. They can listen in to telephone calls, and play back calls made a month or two earlier. The police do the same on a regular basis. I have examined some of their activities as well. They can trace telephone calls, and can tell where they are being made from and to.

There is a huge collection of information, not all of it lawfully and properly obtained. As the Home Secretary reasonably said, the Bill is not just about discovering what is being said by intercepting communications, but about discovering what communication is taking place—who telephones whom and when they telephone, who visits whom and when they visit. That is a different issue, involving a whole different set of information—even if those concerned do not actually hear what is being said by sitting in or bugging conversations.

I believe—as do others who have written to all of us, including the organisation Justice, and as does the data protection commissioner—that it would have been better to have two general regimes rather than nine to deal with the different kinds of intervention and interception. There are nine—arguably more, but certainly nine—regimes of control, some of which have Secretary of State authorisation: that applies to interception of communications under part I, intrusive surveillance in the context of bugging and burglary, and intelligence and armed forces surveillance. Other regimes have circuit judge authorisation, commissioner authorisation, designated persons authorisation or self-authorisation in the case of, for instance, the police.

Although we have one tribunal, which is a good thing, we might well do better as legislators, in the interests of the citizen who wants to know what is going on, if there were only two methods of giving authority and two methods of judging.

There are various specific questions about definition. I hope that we will look at the definition in clause 25, whereby surveillance is regarded as intrusive if it involves residential premises or private vehicles, but business places, for example, are not mentioned. The definition of what is covert in clause 25(8) has been criticised, because it does not depend on whether someone believes that a surveillance operation may be in progress. The data protection commissioner, among others, argues that it should. Clearly, there are issues of definition as to what is a private telecommunication system and what is a public one in relation to being able to control people in the workplace. Several definition issues like these need to be resolved.

Bigger than that are the great powers that the Bill leaves to the Secretary of State to designate other bodies to do the interception, or surveillance. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed gave an example, which comes up in clauses 6, 27 and 29. The Child Support Agency, a Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food inspector and all sorts of people could be designated. We should put those in the Bill and not allow as yet unknown, relatively lowly officials to be able to have what are very wide powers. It may be proper to allow an official in the middle of the night to authorise that telephone bugging can change from one number to another when someone changes their phone number, but it should not necessarily go wider than that.

A much more worrying issue is the definition of the purpose for which one can intercept communication. I hope that we shall look at two definitions again. One is the definition of serious crime. Wider and more worrying is the definition—it comes up, for example, in clause 5(c)—that says that

> a warrant is necessary on grounds falling within this subsection if it is necessary . . . for the purpose of safeguarding the economic well-being of the United Kingdom.

That is a very wide definition. As far as I am aware, it is unqualified elsewhere in the Bill. All sorts of things could be regarded as necessary to safeguard the economic well-being of the UK: ensuring that the stock exchange did not collapse, or that the pound was not affected. However, it could be much less significant than that.

Mr. Rogers: Surely the hon. Gentleman will accept that that definition is in the Security Service Act 1989 and the Intelligence Services Act 1994. It is simply an extension of that.

Mr. Hughes: I accept that. Like the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, the hon. Gentleman deals with these matters regularly. I still think that we should look at whether the definition is not too wide. As he knows, the Bill does two things: it replicates old legislation and adds new. I hope that he does not believe that, just because it is in the old Act, we should not review whether the definition is too wide.

There are also issues to do with the tribunal and how one deals with complaints. Of course, we are in a bizarre Alice in Wonderland situation: people do not know necessarily that they are having their communications intercepted, so how can they complain about it? None the less, people do complain about that fairly regularly. I think that, without exception, complaints have not been upheld so far; none has been upheld at all. I hope that that is because interceptions have all been done scrupulously and not just that we have presumed that they have been. I give the authorities the benefit of the doubt. It may not always remain the case.

Other countries and regimes—perfectly reasonable neighbour countries of ours—have a more open and accountable system for complaints and for registering what has happened, which allow decisions to have reasons attached to them and people to be able to see the reasons.

[Mr. Hughes]

I should like us to look again at how citizens can at least be informed better about any complaints that they have and the adjudication on them.

Another big point that was raised by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and that has been raised widely with us is to do with encryption and, to use shorthand—it came up in the Terrorism Bill—what is called the reversal of the burden of proof. Big-deal criminals may be more likely to remember the passwords, code or key than hon. Members, who may have more than one password at any one time. I certainly do. The password for my mobile phone is different from the one that I use to send e-mails. Indeed, we cannot help having to change our passwords because the House of Commons system changes them regularly anyway, as do other systems, to ensure that they are not kept the same for too long. Yesterday, I went to my office to deal with some correspondence and was told that my old password had expired and that I had to change it. Not surprisingly, some people forget their passwords, whereas others do not. We shall have to deal with the fact that some people, perfectly reasonably, may not be able to remember or gain access to their password or code.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I shall not, as other hon. Members wish to speak and the hon. Gentleman has already intervened.

We cannot place on the accused a burden of proof as severe as that proposed in the Bill. I hope that we shall change the provision, and create a much more reasonable system governing the interception of encrypted material and the application of the balance of proof.

We should also address some more minor issues in the legislation, such as the failure to provide for privileged material. There are also some practical difficulties, such as how the Bill distinguishes between monitoring material and monitoring the contents of material. Another problem is the Bill's provision that interception would be lawful if only one of two communicating parties consented to it. One party's consent should not be sufficient to constitute a valid interception.

For most of those for whom we legislate, the Bill, at least superficially, seems neither relevant nor interesting. However, it is as important as anything that we do in this place, and we must get it right. I hope that we shall be able to adjust the balance that is struck in the Bill in favour of the citizen and against the state. I also hope that, by collaborative effort, we shall be able to improve the Bill, because it certainly needs to be improved.

5.11 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I should like briefly to deal with chapter II, clauses 20 to 24, of the Bill. My objective is an assurance that the Bill will provide for proper safeguards for the privacy of individuals. I am concerned that, currently, the Bill seems to be deficient in providing for them.

The White Paper entitled "Interception of Communications in the United Kingdom", Command Paper 4368, was published in the summer of 1998. In Chapter 10, on the provision of communications data to other bodies, the Government state:

> the analysis of communications data can provide much information about the way in which people live their lives

and that access by the authorities to such data can provide valuable intelligence. However, the White Paper also recognises—and I agree—that

> there is a balance to be struck between the privacy of the individual and the needs of society as a whole to be protected from crime.

The White Paper adds that access to communications data—for example, which telephone numbers have been called, for how long, and when they were called—will be subject to a code of practice. However, I note that in clauses 62 and 63 of the Bill, on codes of practice, there is no mention of involving the data protection commissioner. Some observers who are less charitable than I am might therefore draw the conclusion that the Government's intention is not to refer the code to the official who is tasked to protect individual privacy.

Will the Minister give a commitment that the code of practice will be approved only after full consultation with the data protection commissioner and that the DPC's recommendations will be included in the code? Will he also give a commitment that when a recommendation is not included in the code, the Government will give a full explanation on each detailed point?

In the White Paper, the Government propose that access will be legitimised in dealing with

> the prevention or detection of crime; . . . the apprehension or prosecution of offenders; . . . the interests of national security; . . . the purpose of safeguarding the economic well-being of the United Kingdom; . . . the urgent prevention of injury or damage to health; and . . . the assessment or collection of any tax or duty or of any imposition of a similar nature.

Those factors of legitimation find expression in clause 21. I should like to focus on the last factor, on the collection of taxes.

In reply to a parliamentary question on the application of section 29 of the Data Protection Act 1998, I was told that

> the assessment or collection of any tax or duty or of any imposition of a similar nature

meant that the phrase is

> likely to include national insurance contributions and the council tax but not fines.—[*Official Report*, 8 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 262W.]

It therefore follows that the "balance to be struck" in the Bill includes the possibility of the disclosure of communications data, if properly authorised, for purposes such as collecting national insurance contributions or road traffic tax. Given that these taxes are, at most, a few pounds a week—less than the cost of a cappuccino per day—some might find this wide-ranging power to be a disproportionate use of state power. There seems to have been a loss of balance here, and I hope that the Minister will explain that.

Do the Government need to modify the non-disclosure provisions in the Data Protection Act? For example, suppose the police could obtain communications or personal data about an individual. Is it the Minister's intention that such personal data could be communicated to local authorities for the collection of council tax under section 29 of the Bill, should the police decide to volunteer such data—perhaps even if the police were asked to do so by council officials? I would like the Minister to consider this matter and, if appropriate,

write to me about it. I am not convinced that the collection of run-of-the-mill bills is a suitable justification for phone tapping, e-mail tapping and the general interception of communications. Again, I hope that the Minister will provide an explanation.

The major change proposed by the Bill is one of compulsion. Most disclosure categories identified in clause 21—for example, crime prevention—can already occur legitimately under the Data Protection Act without the need for new legislation. The only difference is that, under the Act, disclosures are legitimised on a case-by-case basis where the data controller—the telecommunications company—has to be satisfied with respect to the conditions. The controller always has the option to refuse to disclose.

Under the Bill, the data controller has no choice but to disclose if an official or officer claims that the demand for the personal data is justified under the criteria outlined in the Bill. In addition, it is not clear whether disclosures could be wider than the case-by-case disclosure of the Data Protection Act. For instance, instead of a disclosure relating to specific individuals, the provision could permit the disclosure of a database, so that the authorities could then select what might be useful.

Will the Minister state that requests will not relate to whole databases of information? Will requests be limited to case-by-case issues where the demand for information is limited to simple, precise circumstances? How will Minister stop these clauses being used for fishing expeditions, which would invariably breach privacy? I request clear answers to those questions before the Bill becomes law.

The Government have not yet presented evidence that the current voluntary arrangements under the Data Protection Act have failed, and that compulsion is therefore necessary. I ask the Minister a simple question—have some telecommunications operators not co-operated with the police and other authorities, if asked? Will the Minister provide the evidence that the current voluntary arrangements have failed and that compulsion is needed? If he cannot, why is this change being made?

On warrant signing, the latest report into the operation of the Interception of Communications Act 1985, Command Paper 4364, shows that, in the last full year of the previous Conservative Administration—under the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—1,073 intercept warrants were signed. By contrast, in the first year of this Government, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary presided over an increase of more than 50 per cent., and 1,646 warrants were signed. That is between six and seven a day. We need an explanation, if only to reassure hon. Members that my right hon. Friend is not suffering from repetitive strain injury.

We have an intelligence services commissioner, a security service commissioner, a parliamentary commissioner, a Police Complaints Authority and a data protection commissioner—the last two have expressed an interest in national security and policing issues. Now, two more commissioners are proposed by the Bill. In the House, national security issues are in the remit of the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Intelligence and Security Committee established by the House. However, are any of them performing a proper scrutiny role, or are they merely rubber stamps in approving the security services' activities?

Mr. Rogers: I wish to correct one point made by my hon. Friend. There will be only one extra commissioner under the Bill, because there is already an interception commissioner.

Mr. Cohen: That was not the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who referred directly to two commissioners. Perhaps the Minister will also clear up that point. In any case, there is still a proliferation of such commissioners and my point is whether any of them will perform a proper scrutiny role.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am sure that my hon. Friend has great confidence in Lord Nolan.

Mr. Cohen: It is not a matter of the individuals, but the powers that they have and the systems that are in place. I have much confidence in the members of the Intelligence and Security Committee—my hon. Friend is one—but I am still not especially happy with the outcome of their reports, which have not had the level of scrutiny that I would have liked to have seen from such a committee.

Mr. Heald: Is the hon. Gentleman's memory the same as mine—that the Intelligence and Security Committee has recently employed staff so that it can be more proactive? Does he agree that something along those lines for the commissioner would also be a good idea?

Mr. Cohen: That would be welcome.

I would like to see the whole system streamlined and given teeth and a degree of independence, so that it can give proper scrutiny. Does the system see only what the security services want it to see? Judging by the lack of critical reports, the security services seem to be perfect model organisations. We all know that that is not so. Until we get the scrutiny arrangements right, more legal powers for the security services to do what they like do not seem to be appropriate. Will any of the commissioners be given teeth for their powers of scrutiny?

The public want reassurance that the agencies that are given wide-ranging powers—which, I readily acknowledge, are often necessary—will not abuse those powers. However, the responsibilities of those who act as public watchdogs are spread thinly across an increasing number of organisations. Although the various commissioners probably try their hardest to wield their limited powers, the diverse regulatory structure weakens the protection afforded to individuals.

Will the Government ensure that the commissioners are at least under a statutory duty to communicate with each other to determine who has responsibility for investigating a complaint? I believe that much more fundamental change is necessary to ensure proper investigation of all complaints and to keep the short-cutting elements of the security services in check. I shall monitor the progress of the Bill in Committee and, if necessary, table suitable amendments on Report.

5.23 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I am grateful for the chance to speak in a Home Office debate. It is not something that I have done often, but it is obviously an enlivening experience that I shall wish to repeat. My reason for doing so is that there has been a deft transfer of parts of the Bill from the Department of Trade and Industry, in which I was once a Minister, to the Home Office. In fact, the transfer is probably appropriate.

In March 1997, I issued a consultation document on some of the issues relating to the problems of encryption, and how the security services and the police would get access to decrypted plain text. That created a furore which, at the time, I disputed, but—as I said in debate on the Electronic Communications Bill—I have since recanted. It was clearly not appropriate to adopt a statutory trusted third-party system, with a key escrow structure. The Government have been right to listen to industry's demands and introduce this Bill.

The difficulty acknowledged by several hon. Members so far is that the matter is hugely complicated. Although I do not agree with everything that he said, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) dealt perceptively with the human rights and individual liberty aspects of the Bill. I shall therefore focus on matters that I used to understand when I was a Minister.

The technology has progressed apace. There is now a proliferation of communications service providers, and they can communicate in a wide variety of ways. The old way used to be by fixed-link telephony. I hope that the Minister will tell the House whether some of the restrictions placed on the old BT-Mercury duopoly that operated until 1991 still apply. Is it still a requirement that the relevant companies' chairmen or chief executives must be British? I remember having to deal with the consequences of that requirement when there was a prospect of an American coming to take charge of Cable and Wireless. I had to ensure that the chairman remained British.

Those idiosyncrasies had a purpose at the time. The House understood that they were important, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), who chairs the Intelligence and Security Committee, will confirm. However, they have been well and truly bypassed. I recall signing 150 licences for international telecommunications, and hundreds of others for resale purposes. A multiplicity of companies have entered the sector. Some are small, some large, and some are subsidiaries of other companies. The result is that the old way of doing things, by gentleman's agreement almost, has long since gone.

I mentioned the wide variety of service delivery methods. As well as fixed-link telephony, wireless and mobile communications are also commonplace now. There will soon be fixed-link wireless telephony systems, and cable is increasingly taking over telephone and television transmission. It shows how long it takes to realise a good idea that today just happens to be the day of the auctions for the third-generation universal mobile telephone system, as I structured and devised that auction system in 1996. It is good to see one's baby born, but the process is elephantine.

Mr. White: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the former Conservative Front-Bench spokesman on trade and industry matters, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), claimed that the measure to which the hon. Gentleman referred should never have got past the civil servants, and that it was the worst piece of legislation that he had ever seen?

Mr. Taylor: I cannot claim always to have given birth to beautiful babies, but the parliamentary draftsman must have got in the way of a brilliant idea.

The process is exciting, but it has taken time because of the need to achieve international standards. I do not want to get sidetracked by the specifics of the technology, but the important point is that full multi-media access will be available to users of mobile phones. That will cause problems for the services that are required to carry out interception.

The industry is international. The Bill contains provisions to determine where telecommunications services are located, and whether a service is known to be delivered from outside this country. However, those technical points can be revisited in Committee if necessary, and I believe that some points at least are worthy of clarification.

The state has an interest in protecting its citizens from criminals and transactions that are designed to undermine the legal framework. These matters can also be extended to terrorism, where it is important that the Government have powers to intercept on clearly stated grounds. The Bill will need to be evaluated carefully in Committee, but the process of stating clearly the terms on which a particular interception can be made should be set out. That is right and proper.

Part III of the Bill deals with the investigation of electronic data protected by encryption. Bearing in mind that the companies involved in the industry are very varied, my concern is that the proportionality of the burden placed on them is openly discussed and understood. Unless it is, there will be considerable industry opposition. There is no doubt that companies that have moved into this sector have not taken this into account. They may not have budgeted for it, or understood some of the technological changes that must be taken on board if they are to conform to these provisions.

It will be important to deal in Committee with matters on which I am sure the Home Office has consulted, but to which I have heard reactions from the industry. With regard to previous drafts of the Electronic Communications Bill, there were concerns in the banking and financial communities, which operate in the global market, about who was being given the powers to request the disclosure of keys. This Bill refers to any person with appropriate permission. I am not a lawyer, and I am sure that lawyers will have a field day in considering these matters. It is essential that the companies that are subject to these laws understand who they will be giving their private keys to because of the need to protect their confidentiality and commercial-in-confidence criteria. Are those fully understood by the people who will be asking to have private keys and decryption provided? I would be happier if the Home Office were more explicit in expressing its understanding of these matters. Perhaps someone in the Department of Trade and Industry, as I was, understands the importance of subjects such as commercial-in-confidence. I would be grateful if the Minister were more open about it.

The Home Secretary had an interesting exchange earlier about whether he could tell anyone that his telephone was being tapped. I quite understand his answer. Nevertheless, when it comes to confidence in the world of global commerce, it is important to know whether encryption has been entered into and looked at, and whether the private key has been sourced. The inability to tamper with a system is vital, as is confidence that, once encrypted, it is safe and not likely to lead to any commercial loss of security. The integrity of private keys must not be unreasonably jeopardised. If they are, companies will have to consider factors such as the need for global key revocation and change, which will be costly. Those factors are in addition to the existing cost element.

The Home Office stated that it might contribute to the costs of interception, heavily underlining the word "might". I am not quoting exactly from the Bill, but I am sure that the Minister knows what I am saying. There is no obligation for the Government to pay up. If those matters are left unclear during further discussions on the Bill, some companies will decide to locate offshore under regimes with less intrusive security measures.

Other hon. Members have put questions about definitions. In clause 52, a definition of "key" is provided that may be a little too vague for comfort. It states that

"key", in relation to any electronic data, means any key, code, password, algorithm or other data the use of which—

and so on. That seems to be a pretty general definition, and unless it is tightened up it will cause considerable problems.

There are other problems of definition in the clause—for example, in subsection (4) reference is made to "intelligible" and to something

being put into an intelligible form.

That provision needs to be examined closely—although not necessarily redrafted—to test the full meaning so that people who may be subject to it know what they are being asked to do.

At the beginning of my speech, I should have mentioned that I have various technology interests outside the House, and they are declared in the Register of Members' Interests. Although I do not think that they are relevant to the debate, I should have taken the precaution of declaring them at the beginning. However, my interests do enable me to understand that Bills such as this need wide public discussion. We have visited the human rights difficulties on several occasions, in respect of terrorism legislation and many other matters. Such debates are in the normal realm of our proceedings in the Chamber. However, some of the technological problems will be difficult to grasp—for example, because of the way in which companies increasingly sift their own data through test marketing or the use of cookies in a system to find out which data are being used and how.

We must keep such matters separate from the Bill. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) made it clear that there are large distinctions between a private and a public telephone system. However, private telephone systems can now be global; they do not exist merely inside an organisation but within a building, where new technological breakthroughs such as Bluetooth mean that almost everything connects with everything else. Currently, it is virtually possible not only to communicate between one system and another within a building, but to do so globally through intranets and private network systems.

There will be problems if the Bill catches people who are doing things in a corporate environment that they had not realised would be subject to the scrutiny proposed by the Government. Industry needs to understand fully what the Government intend. As one would expect, the Government's intentions are fairly openly declared in the Bill. Nevertheless, the purpose behind them sometimes needs better explanation.

It is vital that the cost elements and the burdens on individuals are properly understood. When I intervened during the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), my purpose was to obtain reassurance from the Minister that the attempt to make the penalties as draconian as possible would not mean that almost every company would want to ensure that it placed its private keys with some trusted third party, so that are forced back to a key escrow system. I do not think that the Minister intends to do that, but I should like clarification on that point.

Such matters should be properly scrutinised in Committee. I wish the Bill well on Second Reading.

5.39 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The House is familiar with the considerable technical and ministerial experience that my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) has in this subject. He raised serious issues that our consideration of the Bill will need to address.

I am the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which the House charges with responsibility for the intelligence agencies. The Bill is of direct interest to the agencies and to the Committee because it deals with several matters that go to the heart of their activities. Other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), referred to the knowledge that I and members of my Committee have in this subject and the Committee suggested that I should intervene in the debate to make certain comments about the Bill. In doing that, I do not wish to frustrate other members of the Committee who wish to take part in it.

The Committee is familiar with the challenges that the intelligence agencies face with issues of national security. We are aware of the threats that we face from different terrorist organisations and the technological skills that are available to them. Some of those skills enable them to avoid more conventional methods of surveillance and interception, so the issues raised by the Bill are important.

The Committee would be the first to say that our familiarity with the gravity of the threats to our national security and from serious organised crime does not in any way breed contempt for the need to strike a proper balance. Human rights and the proper protection of the privacy of the individual are important considerations. It is a particular duty of members of the Committee to take account of that balance because we are privy to information on activities and threats that cannot be made available to hon. Members and to the wider public. Sometimes those threats are referred to in lurid and anecdotal terms by those who seek to justify legislation in one form or another, so the Committee has a particular responsibility to be sensitive to the need to protect human rights. We must examine seriously whether the balance is being maintained, how great the threats are and how far the Government and Parliament should go to ensure that proper protections exist.

[Mr. Tom King]

The word "balance" has been used in every speech in the debate. We must take account of that in the procedures that are adapted to the new and major challenges that we face. It is a time of massive technological change and questions have been asked whether interception, in its traditional form, is possible for the new means of communication that are available.

Private networks are often referred to as though they are head office or internal telephone systems. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton made the interesting point that such networks can operate globally. The development of so many systems and providers presents a major challenge in how we approach interception.

My hon. Friend pointed out—I did not know this—that the chairmen of British Telecommunications and of Cable and Wireless once had to be British citizens. I doubt whether anyone, even the Minister, knows the nationality of the chairmen of the various companies that now provide communications networks in this country. Perhaps between now and the wind-up speeches we should try to establish all their different nationalities.

If we are to have different providers, all of whom have to provide an intercept capability, there is not only a question about the cost of that provision, but a great sensitivity about the fact that interception is even taking place. From my experience in previous incarnations, I know of the serious concerns about the security of information, and from my time in Northern Ireland, I know of the sensitivity that exists about what interceptions are taking place.

We are to have a host of different providers of different nationalities. It is difficult to identify where some companies are based, where their head office is or what legislation they are covered by. Those issues will need to be examined carefully in Committee and we shall have to consider how workable the legislation is. We are no longer dealing only with good old BT. The establishment of Mercury seemed, at the time, a radical innovation, but now we have a host of other providers.

The second issue, which the Intelligence and Security Committee has considered and which the Home Secretary referred to, is whether we should have judicial or executive authority for warrants. The issue by a Secretary of State of warrants for interception or covert intrusion legalises illegal acts, because without a warrant such interception is illegal, as the Bill makes clear. This country has been under fire for a considerable time for not placing the issue of such warrants on a judicial basis.

I hope that this remark will not seem too offensive to some people, but I am conscious that in some countries it would be extremely difficult to operate the system for issuing warrants on a political basis. I can think of a number of countries, including even fellow members of our great union, in which certain members of the Government have been accused of organising the interception of communications to other members of the Government. I remember a Government that fell over that issue, when it was found that the Prime Minister had arranged with the Attorney-General to intercept communications to members of the Opposition. It is understandable that public sentiment in several countries is that there must be a judicial system for the issue of warrants.

I agree with the Home Secretary, however, that a judicial system is not always the best protection for the rights of the individual. I recall that in Northern Ireland we were attacked because we held people without charge for as long as seven days. That was considered a major breach of their human and legal rights, and we have reduced the maximum period to five days.

I have mentioned before in the House the Eksund, a ship that had come from Libya loaded with arms on their way to the IRA, which was intercepted by the French authorities. That was a very fortunate interception, as the armaments in the shipment would have caused huge suffering. The people who were arrested and held in France under the order of an examining magistrate—that made the order judicial—were held for two years without charge. That would be absolutely unthinkable under the British system, where we were criticised for holding people for seven days. We need to think more carefully before we move to a judicial system, which people say is bound to be fairer and to provide better protection for the rights of the individual.

I certainly endorse the present system, although doing so is, in a sense, special pleading because I had responsibility for such warrants. They were very carefully examined, and one was extremely conscious of the need to ensure that scrupulous attention was paid to them and of the fact that they would be examined—as they were by the predecessor to Lord Nolan, whose name I forget. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said that the tribunal never found in favour of a complainant, but I certainly rejected certain applications for warrants because I knew that I had a duty and could be held to account for their issue.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am following what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. Does either he or his Committee have a view on whether there would be a case for treating differently interception on the grounds of national security and of crime? The data protection commissioner argues that we could reasonably justify judicial control over crime and security matters while retaining administrative ministerial control over national security matters.

Mr. King: I can answer that very quickly: the Committee has not discussed that matter. I would need to reflect on it, but I am not instinctively attracted to such a suggestion. However, we have a problem; there is no doubt that the system is under fire. I happen to believe that our system of Executive action is absolutely justifiable and defensible. As an Opposition Member, I have confidence that the present Home Secretary will discharge such responsibilities fairly. Although the system is a perfectly good one, it will be very hard to sustain.

Mr. Rogers: Would it not be true to say that the three aspects with which the Committee is concerned—terrorism and criminal activity, national security and economic well being—often overlap and that we cannot separate terrorism from, for example, drug activity? In fact, one often funds the other, so it would not be easy to split up warranting in the simplistic way suggested by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

Mr. King: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is a very experienced member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. His point is valid and an important consideration.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: In simple language, is not the reality that we can remove politicians and Ministers, but we cannot really remove judges?

Mr. King: There is an obvious and initial attraction in referring to a judicial authority as apparently quite separate from Executive political action, but the tradition in this country of a non-political civil service serving Ministers who have statutory duties has stood the test of time. I am not aware of any allegation at any time of political motivation in the signing of a warrant, but I am afraid that the same cannot be said for certain other countries where different systems operate.

The Committee sees the merit in the unification of tribunals. The establishment of a single tribunal seems to be a sensible step. The effectiveness of tribunals is certainly not helped by there being different ones or by adding to confusion. A single one should be more helpful to people who are trying to identify their point of reference when making a complaint.

The Committee has not commented on—and has discussed only briefly—what might be seen as a proliferation of commissioners and whether it is necessary to have so many. On the point about their effectiveness, I am grateful for the alertness of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) in respect of having an investigative arm in support of commissioners. On the concern of the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen), we have indeed appointed an investigator. We have enhanced our capacity in that sense, which the Committee believes to be important. It will add to the effectiveness of the Committee's work.

I turn to encryption—a matter on which the Committee has taken evidence and has considered. The House will be familiar with its most recent report, in which it says in paragraph 73:

> The Home Office stated that 'It is, however, the potential use of encryption rather than its current application which gives rise to the greatest concern. Communications technologies are converging around common digital protocols in a way which will soon allow new encryption methods to be applied equally to voice as to internet data traffic. When that happens, if nothing were done, the valuable interception capability would be progressively lost to the law enforcement services and to the Agencies'.

Being mindful, and having some knowledge, of the importance of some of the interception that has taken place, the Committee concludes:

> We therefore welcome the Government's proposals under the Electronic Commerce Bill to include powers to issue orders for the production of keys held by any person where they are required in order to decrypt material which has been, or is being, lawfully acquired. We understand that this will include interceptions under the Interception of Communications Act 1985 which is currently also under review.

That comment was in anticipation of the production of this Bill.

I have seen outside comment on these matters, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) referred. The report of the Foundation for Information Policy Research was written by an extremely experienced civil servant who—I think—worked in the Ministry of Defence for 30 years and held a very senior position before recently leaving to become a consultant. He made three points.

First, is there really a need for such provision? I speak on behalf of the Committee when I say that there is a need for some such facility. Secondly, the foundation recommended that access and provision of keys should not at all times be required but that at least a transcript should be made available. In that connection—the point seems to be extremely relevant to the question of the key—how many people are we talking about? How many companies, providers and encryption service providers will have to be approached at one time or another? Who will be doing the transcribing of what might be extremely secret or sensitive information? What control will there be over that? Thirdly, if keys are to be provided, there must be proper protection of them, as they are extremely sensitive.

The author of the report said that, if we went by the cost to the Ministry of Defence and GCHQ, ensuring the security of such keys for some companies could cost hundreds of millions of pounds. That may be special pleading, although the figure is substantial regardless of whether we divide it by two, 10 or whatever. The Minister might like to comment on that, and hon. Members may want to discuss it in Committee.

In general, the Committee believes that this is a necessary and sensible Bill. It modernises the Interception of Communications Act 1985, moving it into the 21st century. It seeks to take account of some of the developments in this rapidly changing world. As the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) said, the speed with which the world is changing gives us the clearest guidance that it will continue to do so rapidly. If interception is to continue to be an effective aid to the protection of national security and the national interest, we shall have to discuss, in five or 10 years' time, things that have not yet been invented. Against that background, the need to modernise now is clear, but as that modernisation occurs and the challenges become greater, we must at all times bear in mind the proper protection of the citizen, his privacy and his rights.

Although the Bill's Second Reading is not likely to be opposed, major difficulties and challenges will be thrown up in Committee. However, on behalf of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I welcome the introduction of the Bill. I shall watch its passage with great interest.

6.1 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Given that my wife used to work at Bletchley Park, it is appropriate for me to contribute to the debate on the Bill. Before I commence, I should declare that Caspar Bowden, who is a director of the Foundation for Information Policy Research, is a researcher of mine. However, the comments and views he has advanced under the FIPR banner are his own and have nothing to do with me. I shall not detain the House long, but I want to raise a couple of points that cause me concern. In part, they echo points raised by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor). However, I should make it clear that I support the principle of the Bill.

The Bill started life as part III of the Electronic Communications Bill. At that time, I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary expressing my concern. Despite his reply to that letter and his response to my intervention earlier today, I still have doubts. My main concern about the Bill's construction is that it will be impractical because of technological change, and unfair because innocent parties who happen to operate the technology will be caught by it, not criminals. It has the

[Mr. Brian White]

potential to damage e-commerce in this country, although that is because of the perception it will create, not the reality. Finally, the Bill does not really address e-crime. However, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister shares my belief that amendments in Committee will alleviate my concerns and turn the Bill into a good one.

Mr. Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman accept the analysis by Caspar Bowden of the FIPR of clause 12, which deals with interception capability on the internet? He says that it will be extremely difficult to find a way to intercept communications sent using split-packet technology, which sends many messages in small parts in many different directions at once.

Mr. White: I would not say that it is impossible, but it will be extremely difficult. One of my concerns is that changing technology means that the armoury available to law enforcement agencies will not be up to the job.

Before addressing part III, I have one comment to make on part II. The data protection commissioner has regularly criticised blanket national security exemptions that preclude any inspection or enforcement. The Bill does not rectify that problem, as I hope Ministers have noted.

Under the Bill as currently constructed, an individual is presumed guilty if he is properly served with a notice with which he does not comply. I accept that some improvements have been made since similar proposals were made under the Electronic Communications Bill, but the basic problem remains. The Minister will say that there is a statutory defence, whereby that individual demonstrates that he does not have possession of the key. The difficulty is that, even among computer professionals, it is a frequent and almost inevitable occurrence that keys are lost, forgotten or destroyed, either inadvertently or deliberately.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary appears to think that loss of keys is rare, but I have lost count of the number of internet services to which I have subscribed but subsequently forgotten my password. I regularly visit Amazon.com, but the last time I did so, I found that I had forgotten my password, so I had to go through the rigmarole of re-establishing myself. How am I to convince a judge, who might not even have heard of a PC, let alone the newer technologies, that I am not lying—that I cannot remember my key and that I am not deliberately concealing it? A criminal who is prepared to risk a six-month jail sentence to conceal a key will be in a better position than an innocent person who is faced with having to try to prove a negative—that he has a sieve-like memory and that he is not deliberately concealing a key.

The Bill will change people's habits. Most people remember their keys by making them a word or a date that is easy for them to recall, but such keys are easy to crack. To make them harder to crack, people are advised to use random sets of numbers and letters, but such combinations are much easier to forget. I recently participated in an online discussion which included some sensitive material. I cannot now remember the password, although it is probably written down somewhere and I might be able to recover it. However, if the police start to investigate the matter, suspecting subversion, how am I to prove that I have a defective memory and that I am not deliberately withholding anything?

Mr. Ian Taylor: I do not want to get into a debate about whether the burden of proof is the wrong way around, but we should not lose sight of the fact that a sensible honest business will not lose its keys, which are the secret of its commercial success, and that the people who have "lost" their key might well be those who have something to hide.

Mr. White: My argument is about people's defence in such circumstances, but the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point: businesses will treat the key like they do a spare safe key and deposit it with a trusted third party.

That brings me to my main concern. If depositing a key with a trusted third party to avoid such problems becomes the norm, the Government will have effectively reintroduced voluntary key escrow by using subtle pressure and exploiting human nature. That subject was debated a year ago and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that voluntary key escrow—not mandatory key escrow, as the Conservatives had originally proposed—was wrong and that the Government would not return to it. If I were cynical, I would argue that that will be the outcome of the Bill being enacted. My hon. Friend the Minister has the chance tonight to state clearly that key escrow, whether voluntary or not, is not on the agenda; and that the fact that trusted third parties may be used to ensure compliance with the provisions of the Bill will not be exploited to reintroduce the concept.

The Confederation of British Industry parliamentary briefing states that the Bill will

> impose impractical and unacceptable burdens on business.

I do not necessarily accept that, but the CBI may be right. Those burdens can easily be alleviated by a company moving offshore—to Ireland, Holland or various other countries. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton spoke about global interconnections: a company need only relocate its communications headquarters to a different country. Such actions would be damaging to this country.

Along with other hon. Members now present, I am a member of EURIM—the European Informatics Market—which exists to provide advice to parliamentarians. It says in respect of part III:

> There are also real technical concerns that the intentions of this Part are not achievable in the real world. The user may enter a passphrase . . . to enable encryption . . . but that will not mean they have access to the actual keys. Possession of a key is itself a questionable concept—

especially where the nature of the communications technology used means that no record of the keys is kept. The password allows the individual to access the information, but the encryption key is never seen. EURIM advises that, often, it will be extremely difficult to recreate the technical environment in which the key was originally used, adding that

> Decryption may only be possible on the originating system, which may belong to an innocent party caught up in an investigation by the nature of the technology.

I am concerned that an understanding of the technologies that may be involved is not fully reflected in part III. I would appreciate the Minister giving that matter serious consideration in Committee.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Has the hon. Gentleman, like me, seen many spy films in which a single key is used to get into

the message and promptly burned? Surely anyone who wanted to avoid the possibility of the surveillance services taking the key would do that?

Mr. White: I am not sure that the best way to avoid the security services is to watch James Bond, but the point about one-off keys is a serious one, to which I shall return.

It is critical to achieve the right balance between privacy and investigation. We need the law to tackle criminals, not ordinary businesses. I am worried that the way in which the Bill is phrased will allow criminals to make use of the loophole which still permits encryption at source. Investigation will focus on the end of the process.

There is a case in the United States involving a guy called, I think, David Smith. If I have got the name wrong, I apologise. He sent pornographic material to the first 50 e-mail addresses on various servers. That material is for ever on the recipients' hard disks. If the matter were investigated, action would be taken against them, and not necessarily against the sender, who caused the problem. I understand that he is awaiting sentence. The example illustrates some of the problems of which we should be aware.

Liberty considers that the Bill

will enable serious infringements of privacy for no worthwhile gain.

That is a danger, and we need to demonstrate the gains that will be made through such infringement.

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 requires

disclosure of information to be supplied in a legible and usable form.

That does not preclude key disclosure, and would be a better way of alleviating my concern.

I am worried about the practicalities and the technology change. We run the risk of alienating companies that want to do business in the UK. I know of at least three banks that relocated their internet operations—one to Singapore, one to New York and one to Ireland—as a result of the original measure in the Electronic Communications Bill. That was done last summer, mainly from fear of the provision.

My hon. Friend the Minister may say that I am overreacting, that business is sanguine about the measure and that he has not received many complaints. If that is the case and I am wrong, I have made an idiot of myself, which does not matter. However, if I am right and there is a real danger, it is a serious matter, which I urge him to reconsider.

Improvements could be made to the Bill. We have heard reference to clause 49(1) and the burden of proof. The present wording should be changed to make it a requirement to take all practical steps to disclose a key or plaintext in a person's possession. Clause 50, dealing with the tipping-off offence, should be rewritten. I shall return to the matter.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) postulated a situation in which someone receives sensitive information which is then disclosed. The consequences can be severe, and the Bill should make provision for that.

The Government have underestimated the cost of protecting sensitive data, as is made clear in the report that was mentioned. The data may be commercially sensitive, or it may consist of intercepted discussions between freedom fighters or exiled politicians and people back home. Interception of such communications could endanger the lives of those people.

We are not dealing merely with a floppy disk in the Home Secretary's drawer or in a police station. I know how easy it is to hack into the files of the police and Customs. When I worked for Customs, a superb security system was installed, and every file was protected, except one. That was the security file, which someone had forgotten to password-protect, and all the codes were available.

I should hate to be part of an authority that had to ask the Home Secretary for extra money in its budget to put in extra protection for the commercial data in its systems, or a member of staff of the first authority to leak such information.

I spoke earlier of my concern that the Bill does not recognise the changing technologies. Embedded encryption will become the standard. The latest version of Microsoft addresses that key issue and has stronger security provisions than Microsoft has ever had.

We seem to be concentrating on cryptography, rather than on other security devices that may come on to the market. WAP—the wireless application protocol—technology used in third-generation mobile phones already has an encrypted message, although the user may not know where it comes from. Mobile phones are already changed frequently, and that will soon become common. By means of transitory encryption, the user does not know that a message has been encrypted, and the key is lost the moment the message is received. None of that is reflected in the Bill, and it is important for the Standing Committee to deal with it.

I said that I would return to clause 50 and the tipping-off provision. If someone knows that the security of his business has been breached, the first thing that he does is to change the password and the security system, yet the Bill prevents him from doing that. Perhaps I have misread the Bill, but the provision raises numerous concerns, particularly when we consider the global implications and whether or not we change the codes in this country, in accordance with the provisions of the Bill. The Bill can be altered to meet those concerns.

Shifting the balance of some of the clauses in part III would help to encourage e-commerce, rather than giving rise to the perception that a danger exists. I emphasise that it is a perception, rather than reality, but it could still drive business away.

It is widely recognised in other countries that a problem exists and that change is needed. As the right hon. Member for Bridgwater observed, if we do not change now, we will have to do so further down the line. Some countries are doing nothing, but that is not a valid option for us. There is a case for going along the route that we have chosen, with legislation that is way ahead of that in other countries.

Most other countries are adopting less onerous legislation. Germany will require disclosure of the information, rather than of the key itself. The United States is concentrating on international co-operation. Those are the approaches that we should consider. I am worried that in our efforts to get it right, we may shoot ourselves in the foot by creating unforeseen problems that damage our commercial interests, which should be at the heart of part III.

We are all aware of e-crime. I have raised with the Home Office the problem of companies being flooded with e-mail—so-called smurfing. It would be useful if the

[Mr. White]

Bill tackled e-crime, viruses and so on. That would enhance the protection available to companies that use e-commerce.

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill. Although I have highlighted my concerns, I support the thrust of its provisions, which are needed to update previous legislation. I hope that the Government will address those concerns and perceptions, to turn the Bill into a vehicle that will permit e-commerce to continue to flourish in the UK. From the discussions that I have already had with my hon. Friend the Minister, I know that he is well aware of those issues. The Bill will be improved by the amendments that will follow.

6.19 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I speak as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, but not on its behalf. The Bill has two roots. One is the need to comply with the European convention on human rights. That means that the Bill brings within its ambit many activities that are currently unregulated. Anyone who is interested in civil liberties is bound to welcome the Bill because, whatever its defects, it greatly broadens the scope of regulation. The Bill's second root is new technology and the ready commercial availability of the most sophisticated devices and systems, such as encryption and reusable mobile phones.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) referred to two general provisions, which reproduce those in previous legislation. Several hon. Members have questioned whether Executive approval for the powers that the Bill grants is the right method, or whether a judicial mechanism for approval would be preferable.

My instinct is for a judicial mechanism. I am not comfortable in leaving such a serious incursion into civil liberties in the hands of the Executive. I appreciate that there is a rigorous system, which is exercised with great care. However, under it, the Executive authorises Executive interference in the lives of individuals. I therefore support a move towards a good system of judicial approval. We made substantial strides in that direction when we insisted on the approvals that are required under the Police Act 1997. The previous Government introduced that Act, and Ministers may claim that it provides for judicial review of Executive approval, rather than judicial approval. However, it was a substantial and valuable step in the right direction.

The second general issue that we could reconsider, because the Bill covers it, is the justification or grounds for incursions into civil liberties. Clause 5(3) contains a familiar litany, which includes

> national security . . . preventing or detecting serious crime . . . safeguarding the economic well-being of the United Kingdom.

Those grounds are very broad, especially the third. Unlike other broad definitions, they are not refined by case law or a process of judicial review. Cases in which judges review whether definitions are appropriate and whether a reasonable man might make them do not come to court. We rely heavily on the willingness of Secretaries of State to exercise great restraint in using the powers. They exercise such restraint, but their view of what is justified might not always be shared by everyone else; their perception is not necessarily that of the public.

It is unfortunate that it is not always possible to expose matters to scrutiny. To reveal a specific purpose often makes it impossible to continue a line of investigation and would destroy the investigative process. There cannot therefore be public discussion of such matters. However, from time to time, we should reconsider the breadth of the definitions and the wide range of issues that they could theoretically cover.

I want to concentrate on matters that appear in a new form rather than the two examples that I have considered. A new and worrying aspect of the Bill is the Secretary of State's ability to add a range of other persons or bodies to those who already have the power to intercept communications. Clauses 6 and 29 provide that further bodies can be authorised to carry out covert investigations. That can be effected by negative resolution; the Secretary of State can simply make an order. We all know the total inadequacy of the House's procedures for challenging such processes. It is not right in principle that new bodies should be added to the list of those that engage in interception without primary legislation.

If the Government believe that the Child Support Agency should have the power to intercept communications, primary legislation should effect that. I mention the CSA, but, as I suggested earlier, all sorts of bodies could be legally defined under the Bill. They could include the rebuttal unit, the Government Whips Office, Mr. Alastair Campbell. Who knows who could be listed under the extraordinarily open-ended provisions?

I do not accept the Opposition Front Bench view that it would be appropriate to give Departments that have important responsibilities the duty of pursuing those who break the law under the Bill. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) suggested that the Department of Social Security should be a telephone intercepting body so that it could tackle benefit fraud. Large-scale, criminal benefit fraud is a job for the police, who have experience, discipline and accountability, and are engaged in such cases.

Mr. Heald: Does the right hon. Gentleman know that the benefit fraud investigation service has an organised fraud division, which deals with some large-scale benefit fraud cases? Why should that division have to make its applications at one remove?

Mr. Beith: The bodies that exercise rare and limited powers of intercepting telephone conversations should be limited. It should not be commonly assumed that every Department has the power or can apply for a warrant to tap one's telephone. Proper law enforcement bodies can apply for such a warrant to cover those who are engaged in criminal activity. The police are the obvious people to do that in the circumstances that we are considering.

Some bodies appear to cross the line, but are designated as law enforcement bodies. The most obvious is Customs and Excise, which applies for warrants. However, my instinct is not to extend the range of bodies that can intercept communications, but to leave the job to proper law enforcement bodies, to which Departments can turn.

I apply the case less strongly to covert surveillance, simply because it covers a wider range of activities. An almost identical provision allows Ministers to specify additional bodies in that case. Government briefing notes

suggest that a wider range of bodies, for example, local authorities, is envisaged. We are considering powers that can be used on public health grounds or to deal with the imposition of a tax.

I believe that we are considering activities that already take place and are being brought within the ambit of regulation. For example, a body that dealt with public health might have to undertake some covert surveillance to check whether assurances about a specific product were soundly based. A body that dealt with tax collection might have to make covert inquiries to establish whether someone was stashing money away. For that purpose, methods are used that people do not regard as public surveillance. For example, the officer who goes undercover to ascertain whether someone is carrying out an illegal money laundering activity would come within the Bill's ambit. However, the procedure for adding bodies to the list should be more stringent than that for which the Bill provides.

A body that does not need to be added to the list because it is already covered is the Ministry of Defence, which is specified as a new body for the purposes of interception of communications. I am slightly puzzled by its appearance in the Bill. I presume that it does not appear as a cover for Ministry of Defence police; the Bill provides for them elsewhere. Is it intended to extend the use of interception by services units? Is it assumed that the Ministry of Defence will regularly apply for warrants? The way in which the Ministry of Defence has been brought into the Bill's ambit needs clarification.

Two new powers have been added to regulation. They do not relate to activities that do not happen; they regulate those activities. The Bill assumes that the activities constitute a lower level of intrusion on the citizen. I understand that assumption. They are directed surveillance and communications data.

Directed surveillance includes using devices outside a building that are normally less effective than those that are used inside a building. The latter would count as intrusive surveillance and are more rigorously controlled.

Communications data cover the acquisition of information about telephone numbers that are being dialled from a specific telephone and the location from which a mobile telephone is being used. That is not the same as listening to the conversation on those phones. I can accept that that represents a lower level of intrusion and it has rightly been brought into the Bill's ambit to provide some protection and regulation. However, in Committee we must consider whether the lower levels of authorisation are adequate for citizen protection and, indeed, whether they meet the European convention on human rights requirement, which is the basis of much of the Bill. If not, we are wasting our time enacting them in this form.

I can accept the principle that there is a difference between intrusive surveillance and some of the other kinds that are mentioned as directed surveillance and that there is a difference between listening to telephone communications and establishing that a person has telephoned a particular number on many occasions or—through his use of a mobile phone—that he frequents a particular area where he is thought to associate with other criminals.

The computer enthusiasts will have a field day with part III and those of us who are less proficient will be a little quieter, but we are bound to ask whether it will work and whether it is right to put the burden of proof on the computer user, who must show that he or she has not lost the encryption. I regularly lose the passwords to which I have access and, although I am perhaps not a good example, that raises questions about the burden of proof. Perhaps more important is the question whether there is a better route by which to achieve that. Hon. Members have described how readily other aspects of the Bill could be undermined by the ease with which people can hack into systems and I wonder whether there is a bugging or hacking route that might be more effective than the Bill's cumbersome and very public requirement to produce a key. That will no doubt be considered at length in Committee.

Intrusive surveillance is necessary to protect our security and the integrity of public service and to combat serious crime, but we do not want a society that is characterised by state intrusiveness and we do not want a nosey parker state. We must therefore ensure that we have the most effective regulation of such powers and that they are confined to purposes for which they are essential and no reasonable alternatives are available. Intrusive surveillance should be limited and carried out by a limited range of accountable and well-disciplined bodies.

There must also be, within the restraints of secrecy, an appeal mechanism. The Bill extends that mechanism so that it applies much more widely than at present and, to an extent, tidies it up. That extension is welcome, but it has an inherent illogicality or perversity. The limited information that the tribunal can give an individual is the subject of much jest—he can be told only that nothing unlawful has occurred. However, there are, unfortunately, compelling security reasons for that as we must prevent mere fishing expeditions to elicit information useful to the criminal from the system of protection. Those protections are essential and it will be the duty of the Committee to make sure that they are effective.

6.33 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I support the Second Reading of the Bill, which represents a significant step forward for the protection of human rights. Much expertise has been shown today—although I must own up to not having expertise in many of the fields that have been covered—and as a relatively new Member, I think that we have had a fine debate that has done the House a service.

I welcome the closer regulation of covert surveillance and interception of communications by our law enforcement and security agencies. We must aim to create a robust and comprehensive framework for regulating the use of all the techniques. The Bill is timely and represents the up-to-date legislation that is needed in an age of rapid communications developments and because of the consequences of the Human Rights Act 1998. It must be sensitive and, as many other hon. Members have said, must strike a balance between the rights of the individual and the needs of the state. We have heard many measured contributions, which augurs well for the Committee. I trust that it will deliver good legislation that has all-party support. I strongly agreed with the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), save on one point. He said that the House would return to this subject in five or six years, but the pace of change in telecoms and other communications suggests that we might do so in six to 12 months.

[Mr. Keith Darvill]

The Bill contains no new law enforcement activities and covert surveillance by police and other law enforcement officers is not new. I recognise the overwhelming need to detect and prevent crime, particularly serious crime in respect of which such surveillance is most commonly used. One is always conscious of the dividing line between these sometimes conflicting issues, so I welcome the proper regulation by law and external supervision—for the first time—of covert surveillance and other techniques. Among other things, that will ensure that law enforcement operations are consistent with the duties imposed on public authorities by the ECHR and the 1998 Act.

The first interception legislation was the Interception of Communications Act 1985. In the comparatively short time since its enactment, the world of communications has changed beyond most people's belief. Parliament and the legislation that we enact must try to keep up with those changes, otherwise criminals will find ways to thwart law enforcement and serious criminals will have the advantage. That is a challenge for us all, but we must also protect the privacy of the individual and not overburden fledgling businesses.

The Bill goes a long way to achieving the balance that most Members of the House require. It is a fundamental reform that places police, law enforcement and intelligence and security agencies on a properly regulated statutory basis. Enacting such legislation is not a new departure and, in many ways, the Bill marks the completion of a 15 or 20-year reform programme that started with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. It was followed by the Security Service Act 1989, the Intelligence Services Act 1994 and the Police Act 1997, which introduced a code of practice on intrusive surveillance.

The Bill will supplement those measures and provide a statutory framework that will give individuals better protection and ensure that there will be no reduction in the ability to wage war on those who perpetrate terrorism or are involved in the narcotics trade. Interestingly, my research showed that 52 per cent. of all heroin seizures in 1998 resulted directly from intelligence interception and it is estimated that the total value of drugs seized in that way was more than £185 million. There is a clear need to ensure that interception and the fight against crime are not undermined. At the same time, protection of the individual must be uppermost in our minds. That is the challenge for the Committee, which I am sure will come to the right conclusions. I welcome the Bill.

6.38 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): The hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) is absolutely right: we have had an intelligent debate. As one who has little knowledge of intelligence operations, I shall be cautious and approach only one aspect of part III. Since the Bill's publication, I have been listening to a number of police inspectors and chief inspectors who will want to use its provisions, and they particularly like certain aspects of it. One recently gave me the example of a known paedophile with whom the police had been dealing. He was a member of a ring and the sort of gentleman who believes that there is nothing wrong in his activities. Most, if not all, the members of the ring were arrested and convicted, but this individual was not because he successfully protected all his electronic information so that neither the police nor the security forces were able to break the code or the key. That individual did not go to court, and has disappeared for the moment.

The police feel that this aspect of part III is desirable. They have asked for it, and they are looking forward to it. However, their difficulty is that, despite the promises, good words and good intentions of part III, it collapses when we come to clause 49(5), to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) referred, because the punishment does not fit the crime.

Lightheartedly, I should like to ask the Minister to put himself in the shoes of a well-known paedophile—perhaps we could call him Gary, and imagine a little more hair and some high-heeled shoes to add some character. As a paedophile, Gary believes that it is acceptable to have sex with children. He thinks that the bulk of society is completely out of step. He belongs to a group called the paedophile information exchange, and he and his disgusting friends use the internet to exchange data, ideas, names, photographs and even films related to their paedophile activities. That is all stored electronically, and protected by a sophisticated encryption system.

Our imaginary friend Gary is under investigation by the police for suspected paedophile activities. As part of the investigation, the police have collected our Gary, along with his computers, floppy disks, CD-ROMS and his full action DVDs. Gary is somewhat relaxed, because all his data are protected and the police have failed to get into his files in the past. He anticipates that he will be all right, until his solicitor explains that the Bill provides new powers that enable the police to insist that he produces the key to unlock the evidence.

Our imaginary paedophile Gary knows that if the police had access to that information they could arrest him and many of his paedophile colleagues. It is hoped that they could also locate and arrange help and protection for the many children that he and his friends have abused. He also realises that he will be charged and almost certainly convicted for a range of offences, starting with possession of indecent photographs and pseudo-photographs of children through to rape and buggery of children. He would face a sentence of 10 years or life for many of those offences.

Gary realises that there is ample evidence that he, and he alone, has regular access to much of this information. His solicitor advises him that, if he refuses to produce the key, on summary conviction he would face a term of six months and perhaps a fine, and on conviction on indictment he would face two years and a fine, of which he would probably serve a few months. His choice is obvious.

Obviously, I am not accusing the Minister of being a paedophile. But I am asking him to put himself in the shoes of someone accused of either paedophilia, theft with a maximum penalty of 10 years, obtaining property by deception with a maximum penalty of 10 years, false accounting with a maximum penalty of seven years, forgery and counterfeiting with a maximum penalty of 10 years, or robbery with a maximum penalty of life.

I hope that the Minister, when he winds up, will note the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald. Assuming that the first part of

that clause is satisfactory to the Committee, it would be right and proper to include an appropriate sentence. In the eyes of the policemen who will put this measure into action, it will not work unless the penalties are considerably stronger.

6.44 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) is to be congratulated on the excellence and brevity of his speech. Brevity is what we should all seek to achieve. However, I am afraid that I shall be a little longer than my hon. Friend, but I shall try to give as good value.

First, I must put on the record the fact that I am a professional adviser to the Telecommunications Managers Association, and I have a reasonable—certainly from my poor pocket's point of view—shareholding in Cable and Wireless and British Telecom. I am also the unpaid vice-chairman of the parliamentary information technology committee in the House, and the unpaid vice-chairman of the European informatics Market group.

I also want to boast a little, because I have had a good year in Bills—it has been far better than when I supported the Government. Being in opposition has something to be said for it. When the draft of the Electronic Communications Bill was first published, my hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench were kind enough to show me a copy. They and I felt that it contained some objectionable elements, especially on key escrow. We had detailed discussions with Ministers, and to their credit they decided not to go ahead with those objectionable parts of that Bill. The Department of Trade and Industry sensibly passed on those difficult issues to the Home Office, which was not quite so sanguine about doing away with those objectionable aspects.

I recently served on the Committee considering the Utilities Bill. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the Second Reading debate. Immediately I was put on the Committee, I spoke to DTI officials—my reaction to the inclusion in the Bill of the telecoms industry was to ask, why? The Government have a manifesto commitment to change the regulation of communications, and the White Paper that was published in the autumn proposed just that. In my first speech on that Committee, I told the Government that that part of the Bill was nonsense and should be changed. The Government said that there was no problem, but last week they decided to withdraw the telecommunications aspects—for which they gave a lame excuse—and the water provisions, but we still do not know why they did that.

Perhaps the Minister would be so kind as to take notice of what I am saying. My advice to my Front-Bench colleagues was that we should vote against this Bill. It is the most appalling legislation that I have ever seen. It could probably be amended in Committee, but it needs an enormous amount of amendment. The great advantage of terrible legislation is that it often never gets used. We stay up all night, put legislation on the statute book, but the courts and the police never use it. I am reminded of the Computer Misuse Act 1990, which gives various people powers to protect data. There has hardly been a successful prosecution under that Act. It was aimed at hackers, but has been more or less ignored.

When I first read the Bill, I was directed to the technical clauses, but I thought that if I was to understand it, I might as well start at the beginning. Clauses 1, 2 and 3 are extraordinary. If we let the Bill go through in its present state, what will be the position of those who have transferred from one party to another with their pagers intact? Having been told by the Whips that they are no longer authorised to receive messages, doing so will be a criminal offence punishable by two years in prison. That may seem a minor issue, but one ex-member of the Conservative party still uses his pager to the benefit of the Labour party. The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) may very soon leave the Labour party, and he no doubt still has his pager.

We are being told that the Bill is necessary to upgrade and modernise the regulation of the internet. However, it contains nothing that will assist people in getting information that is passed over by package switching, which uses many different routes. If that is to be done effectively, one has to put the tap on the end of the wire from which one is trying to get the information. That has always been done in exactly the same way. I shall go into more detail about how we could help the police to catch criminals.

What about temporary files? I discovered on the parliamentary data video network that our system captures temporary files when someone is using a remote access to this place. Someone who is authorised to use the system but not to see someone else's e-mails can access them. I printed some off to show that it can be done. I understand from my reading of the Bill that it is still possible to do that without being caught by the legislation. The only problem is that the Officers of the House who set up the system will be caught by it. We shall have only a few people working for us shortly, because they, too, will end up in prison for two years.

What about the interception of postal packages? When I am opening the hundreds of letters that I regularly receive, I often look at one and say to myself, "Hang on a minute, this is not for me; it is for my namesake, my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce)." I shove the letter back in its envelope, write on it "Sorry, Malcolm—opened in error", and send it to him. The Bill is so badly drafted, however, that under it I will have committed an offence that could put me in prison for two years. I will not just have read what is written on the envelope, which I am entitled to do to help the letter to reach its correct destination, but I have intercepted some postal system illegally. Hon. Members shake their heads, but I have read the Bill carefully, and I suspect that others should also be concerned.

Mr. Fabricant: Far be it from me to introduce division on the Conservative Benches, but surely that has always been the case under Post Office regulations.

Mr. Bruce: That may well be true, but I do not think that, if it is true, we should perpetuate the system. We should think carefully about exactly what could happen, especially in view of the penalties provided for in the Bill.

In any event, I am not sure that my hon. Friend is right because I have not read all the Acts involved. In general, we assume that, once the Post Office has delivered something, what happens to it is not subject to legislation. Let us assume that my wife decides to open my post. Under the Bill, if I have not authorised her to do so she, too, could end up in prison. What if post arrives for one's children and one thinks, "This looks important: I had

[Mr. Bruce]

better open it to find out what it is"? If the contents prove embarrassing to the children and they are over the age of consent, they may well have grounds for an action against their parents. Packages are often delivered to tenants who have done a flit, having not paid the bills. What if a landlord opens such a package, either to readdress it or to find out what has been going on?

As for the telecommunications aspect, I am a little worried about the implications of even answering the telephone in the event of a wrong number. I suspect that one could not be caught for doing that, but what if a "wrong number" telephone call was recorded on my answerphone, and was then available to me? I might well be committing an offence.

Under the Bill, an existing private system will become attached to a public system. Nowadays, almost every household contains a telephone extension; certainly, every business has extensions. The change in the law means that anyone listening to anyone else's conversation will be committing an offence punishable by two years in prison. Cordless telephones often pick up other people's conversations; again, someone listening might inadvertently commit an offence. I am not sure that the House wants to introduce such a provision, but the Bill introduces it.

I have received e-mail that was sent to me because someone had forgotten that the copies were being forwarded to the wrong people. Someone whom I threatened to sue wrote to a friend with copies of my e-mails, asking for an opinion. When the friend sent the e-mails back to that individual, I received copies of both the original correspondence that the guy had sent and the stuff sent to me. According to my interpretation, the Bill would make that an offence.

What about employers who record telephone conversations? That is done in most spheres of financial services. I hope that the Minister has worked out how it will be dealt with. People are often not told that conversations are being recorded, although it is normal practice in many businesses, so that there is no dispute about what was said by a customer or by someone involved in the business. Frequently, such recorded calls catch information from people who are engaging in personal conversations that are nothing to do with the business.

I had intended to talk only about the technical side, but what really worries me is the fact that we seem to be tying the hands and legs of our police officers. So complex are the arrangements for the issuing of warrants that I fear that the police will constantly fall foul of the rules. They will try to keep to the rules, but if they have got some detail wrong they may find that they have done something illegal under those rules, and that, as a result of their acting on criminal intelligence on that basis, the case is thrown out of court.

Someone may believe that the police are going to impose surveillance on a particular named person, only to discover after the issue of the warrant that a different person is involved. If the right information was not given to the magistrates in the first place, it will make no difference that a criminal was caught, and that there were good reasons for the method employed. The arrangements are too bureaucratic and involve too many people, and I do not think that that helps.

When I first read the Bill, I thought that I had misunderstood the way in which the European convention on human rights—which we have now incorporated into our law—will affect the way in which the police do their business. I am not talking about surveillance in the sense in which we all think of it—people planting bugs and so forth, for which warrants have always been issued; I am talking about the fact that a police officer who does not identify himself as a police officer, who is involved in following a criminal or getting into conversation with one, needs a warrant from a senior officer. The document that I have received from the Library refers to a superintendent; the Bill refers to a deputy chief constable. In any event, that officer needs a warrant to do what we all think happens all the time.

Let us suppose that a police officer is sitting in a public house. A guy walks up to him and offers him drugs, a radio or something of that nature. If the police officer arrested him immediately, saying, "I am a police officer", there would be no problem, but let us suppose that he strings the guy along. Let us suppose that he says, "I have some friends who would like this. Got any more?", or, "Go back and see whether you can get any more drugs from the other guy." Any covert operation of that kind would be caught by the Bill, which requires officers to go and find a warrant.

I commend the document from the House of Commons Library, especially pages 16, 17 and 18. It is interesting to read. It states:

> Plain clothes detectives who spot known criminals in the street will need written permission to summon other officers to monitor the suspects' behaviour, under new rules governed by the European Convention on Human Rights.
>
> If the regulations are not followed, any prosecution will automatically fail, even if the officers subsequently witness a blatant crime.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the shadow Home Secretary, said:

> This is absolutely potty . . . It shows that all fears about incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into British law have been proved right. Jack Straw should state immediately that these rules will not apply here. It is complete nonsense.

It is in the Bill, however. Warrants have to be obtained for people to conduct ordinary covert police operations. Either they must go around wearing badges saying "I am a police officer", or they must be in uniform, or else they must have warrants. Even if they are following up a known criminal, they must give sufficient evidence to obtain a warrant to allow them to engage in covert surveillance. That is bonkers.

Mr. Beith: I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman should quote words said by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) that she did not use in the debate. Perhaps she has subsequently concluded that the Bill does not work in quite the way that he suggests.

Mr. Bruce: That is a question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald will have to address, but it seems extraordinary that the House of Commons Library has interpreted the position in that

way—there are three pages; I will not read them out. I commend to every hon. Member what the paper says about what will happen if the Bill comes to pass.

Mr. Darvill: The hon. Gentleman has quoted the House of Commons Library paper, but that paper just sets out quotes from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), without commenting on them in detail. It is merely quoting.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is incorrect. The paper goes into the Association of Chief Police Officers code of practice, pointing out that the code is not legislative; it is the way that the police normally deal with things. The paper goes on to say on page 18:

> One force has summarised the rules by telling its detectives: "In the scenario where a known shoplifter is seen in shops and plain clothes officers are sent to keep observations, the Superintendent's authority must be sought."

It will be a deputy chief constable under the Bill.

> "In that case, where an officer in plain clothes sees a likely offender, and keeps observations, the authority is not needed"—

although I am not sure that that will be the case under the Bill—

> "however, if he calls other officers to the scene, a Superintendent's authority is required.
>
> These codes will become law in October. If any cases where these codes have been breached are heard after this time, the prosecution will fail".

The hon. Gentleman may know that my son is a police officer. We often have late-night conversations because we both do not finish work until all sorts of strange times. I have listened to his frustration as a police officer running around after criminals trying to secure proper prosecutions. This country has tied up the detection of criminals and securing a prosecution with more and more red tape, more and more regulation and more and more paperwork. The Bill does not help. It is probably the most backward step in that procedure that we have ever had. If we give a police officer a warrant—that is what he gets when he signs up—he should be able to go after criminals. By all means, if that officer has used some covert system to do that, that should be recorded, but to have to get, all the time, prior authorisation by a very senior officer seems completely potty. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald used that word; it is very apt.

Everyone thought I would talk about the encryption keys. I again commend to Members who will be on the Committee—I am already on the Committee that is considering the Utilities Bill and will not be able to serve on this Bill—the words of the Foundation for Information Policy Research, its director Caspar Bowden and the papers that have been produced by one his colleagues, Dr. Gladman. They are clear and easy to read. It is the sort of thing that we sad people do on a Sunday: actually read about what is happening.

I have tried to be analytical about the Bill. I am less unhappy about the encryption side than I thought I would be. It is clear that one does not have to give away keys, the private keys, as long as one is decrypting what the law enforcement people require. That is reasonable.

It is unreasonable to force someone to give away the key so that some other person can decrypt. Often, that private key is the private key to masses of data, which have nothing to do with the criminal investigation. Ministers need to look carefully at the matter and to ensure that all the codes, let us say, of a bank are not broken, and that all the accounts are not got at, simply to get at the one account that someone is trying to go after.

People hide information on their computers. They include not just criminals who send messages about where the drugs will be picked up, or whatever; often, it is apt for pornography. I want the Government to try to help the police to break that terrible crime and to help the victims, the children, who are exploited to get the pornography and the paedophilia that goes with it. One can take a better route to ensure that people can decrypt as much as possible.

What did surprise me in the Home Secretary's comments is that anything that is received by way of a warrant is not adduceable in evidence. Obviously, lawyers think that that is right. It seems bonkers to me. If we are going to go to the lengths of forcing people to provide information through decryption under a warrant, it should be available to the courts. There will be occasions when one does not want to say that there has been surveillance. The prosecutor should not be forced to use that evidence and to reveal that it has been acquired via a warrant, but it seems mad to disallow that as evidence, so I hope that Ministers will look at that matter.

We need to discuss whether a criminal can be caught by the legislation. If we are to put burdens on the rest of electronic commerce, it will be important to achieve the purpose, which is to catch criminals. If a criminal wants to ensure that, once he has read a message, he cannot be forced to give up the key, he will find a trustworthy person and say, "You see this key. Here is a light. I am burning it. I now have absolute proof that I no longer have the key." That seems to be the way in which someone will try to ensure that no one can get to the information after it has been read.

The Home Office should know that even though people are securing something within the memory of the computer, often, all the information that has been translated and put on to the screen has gone through a buffer and that buffer can be read by a competent computer technologist. Reading the hard disk to find out what had gone before is not that difficult.

Again, if someone wants to see what is happening on a screen, they could set up a covert camera to point at the screen—a simple surveillance technique—so that they could see exactly what is being decrypted. After all, that should be adduceable in evidence. For example, if someone who is looking at pornography is seen with the screen, one could prove that they have looked at the pornography, as well as possessed it.

When someone is putting things on to his screen, it is not that difficult technically to have a device in the computer—again, put in as a surveillance device—to send all information to the screen along a telephone line to a bug. In many ways, at the right level the old surveillance systems are perfectly adequate for dealing with these issues. That matter should be looked at carefully.

I have a worry about someone being given a warrant to obtain information. A police officer may walk in and give the managing director, or company secretary, of a company a warrant, saying that, as the persons responsible for the company, they must provide him with the key to the information. Under the law, they cannot go to the computer engineer and say, "How do I do this?" because

[Mr. Bruce]

information will be passed on, which is not allowed. They are allowed to talk only to a lawyer about the matter. That seems silly and impractical. The wording should be correct—it should ensure that people who have to provide the information will be able to do so.

Of course, it will be an impossible situation. The police may have been to a particular organisation and perhaps talked to one or two people there. Another guy may come up and say to those two guys, "Crumbs, what are you doing?" They will say, "We have been asked by the police to get the key to this. You can get five years in prison for doing that." Imagine the conversations that might ensue. One goes home to one's wife and says, "I'm sorry that I'm a bit late tonight, darling", to which she might well reply, "Where have you been?" "Well, it's a bit of a secret." "No, where have you been?" "Well, some police officers came in and asked me to get the cryptographic keys, so that we could decrypt something."

In the legislation, the husband in that dialogue, by divulging that information, would be guilty of an offence carrying a possible five-year sentence. Such a situation is nonsense. If someone releases information that gets back to the criminals, enabling them to get away with their crimes, that person should be prosecuted. However, people should not be liable to prosecution merely for telling someone that they have passed information to someone else. The innocent would be caught by such a provision, and that would be silly.

The Bill makes various provisions that could catch the innocent. It is also too prescriptive in dealing with police. We have to cut red tape away from the police, not bury them in it. The Bill is also too restrictive for new electronic companies and it could impose costs that serve no useful purpose. I do not believe that, in many technical spheres, the Bill will do much to catch criminals.

We already have some very sensible laws on investigatory powers. We want light-touch regulation; we want people to co-operate with the forces of law and order. I believe that, ultimately, law-abiding people should accept that, occasionally, they may come under surveillance to enable the forces of law to continue to protect them.

7.11 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I do not share all of the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), but I share some of them.

An interesting fact—just to set the scene—is that, in the United States, 44 per cent. of families have access to the internet, whereas, in the United Kingdom, only 18 per cent. of families are connected. However—with today's announcement that Alta Vista will provide free internet access for only £10 annually, which is a major improvement and very good news—the UK percentage is likely to grow.

At current levels of internet access in the United Kingdom, however, 100 million e-mails are being transmitted daily worldwide. That is a lot of e-mails to try to intercept. Nevertheless, the Bill aims rightly to deal with how best to intercept telecommunications between criminals. In 1993, only 1,005 telecommunications warrants were issued under the Interception of Communications Act 1985. In 1998, the number almost doubled, to 1,913 such warrants, compared with only 118 letter warrants. The number of telecommunications warrants issued is most likely to be even higher than the number recorded, as information on warrants issued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Northern Ireland Office was not published. We all understand why that information has not been published—it is far too sensitive.

It is interesting that the Bill is receiving its Second Reading today, when we have also had the "G3" auction of franchises for the third generation of mobile telephones, enabling mobile telephones to be used not only for voice communications, but for receiving very high-quality pictures and for internet access. If all goes well, that technology will be coming on stream in the next two or three years.

Currently, Virgin Net—to provide a little more information about the scale of developments—has over 100,000 passwords active in the United Kingdom. We are well aware of the type of problems that can arise from people using e-mails and the internet. Recently, Amazon and Yahoo were attacked, when, in one second, they received more e-mails than they would usually receive in a year. Although the Bill is aimed primarily at dealing with criminals who are concerned with making money from drugs or with terrorism, terrorism is inflicted also against the internet and the City. The attack on the World Trade Organisation meeting, in Seattle, and last summer's attack on the City were co-ordinated in e-mail messages between anarchists. I hope that the Bill will deal with that type of information.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset, I have various concerns about the Bill. I do not know why, for example, clause 25 does not cover tracking devices. The Minister is talking to the Whip, but I ask him to listen to my concerns—simply because I hope that he will deal with some of them in his reply.

Clause 25 states that tracking devices are not covered by the Bill. Why are they not covered? It is extraordinary that one should not be able to issue a warrant to track a vehicle being used by criminals, to determine where they are going and with whom they are meeting. It is an unusual provision to omit from the Bill.

Although clause 1 gives the power to demand access to encrypted data—an issue which has already been dealt with in detail by my right hon. and hon. Friends—it does not address the issue of how we are to deal with data that criminals themselves have encrypted. How will we be able to decrypt that information? I am quite sure that that type of information will be encrypted not by internet service providers, but by criminals themselves. They will use black boxes both to encode and to decode their e-mails.

How much information can be decrypted? Both the United Kingdom Government and the United States Government use Cray computers, but data exceeding 128 bits—or, nowadays, perhaps 256 bits—are difficult to decrypt. Although I appreciate that the Minister will not wish to deal with that matter in detail, I should like to be reassured that the issue will be addressed.

I am slightly concerned by clause 1(6), which deals with companies' right to snoop. As I said in an earlier intervention, I agree that it is right and proper for companies to record—providing that they announce it in advance; it is not right if they do not announce it in

advance—financial transactions made on the telephone, for example. I am sure that many hon. Members use telephone and internet banking services. It is quite right and proper that that type of conversation should be recorded.

It is wrong, however, for companies to monitor their employees' telephone conversations, to try to stop them using their telephones for personal conversations. That is going a little bit too far, and I ask the Minister to comment on that matter.

Clause 53 states that MI5, MI6, GCHQ, police, Customs and Excise and the Ministry of Defence will not be covered by the covert investigations commissioner. If those bodies will not be covered by the covert investigations commissioner, who will be? Who will be watching the watchers?

In replying to the Home Secretary's speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said that the Department of Social Security should be allowed to instigate investigations to counter benefit fraud. I agree with her, but I go even further on the issue. As we all know, criminal organisations try also to defraud the Inland Revenue. If Customs and Excise—particularly customs officers—is able to initiate warrants, why cannot the Inland Revenue, in its own right, initiate warrants in its attempts to fight serious crime?

The Home Secretary told my right hon. Friend that, if a crime is serious enough, a warrant could be initiated by police. As we all know, however, there are often delays in obtaining a warrant. Nevertheless, sometimes, a warrant has to be issued swiftly or a tap has to be installed quickly. It all takes time. Therefore, although I echo my right hon. Friend's call to give the Department of Social Security the right to initiate a wire tap or a warrant to examine mail, the right should be extended also to the Inland Revenue.

The Home Secretary said that he realises that telephone numbers can be changed rapidly, and he said that the Bill seeks to allow telephone numbers subject to surveillance also to be changed quickly, essentially to mirror telephone number changes made by criminals. Why not simplify the system, and include in warrants the name of a location or an individual? If we were to do that and an individual were to change his or her telephone number, a fresh warrant would not have to be issued. Warrants issued to cover a mobile telephone or an internet account would definitely have to include a named individual.

I should like, finally, to pick up on a comment made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who said that, although ever more information is being collected on the individual, ever less information is being collected on who holds that information. That must strike a chord with many hon. Members. We hear of people applying for mortgages or hire purchase who find that their credit limit is nil because of a bad credit rating. It is difficult to track down why that has happened and who has given out the information, and there is a duty of care.

I wholly support the intentions of the Bill to protect people from pornography, drugs, terrorism, and the other crimes about which we have heard today. However, there ought to be protection for the individual so that they know precisely who is holding information and why it is being gathered in the first place. Having quickly elucidated those concerns, I wish to say that this is a timely Bill which, in principle, has my support—although I have difficulties with some of its clauses.

7.20 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): This has been a good debate, with thoughtful speeches from both sides. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) referred to three principles which will govern our view of the Bill. The first was that those who fight the crimes that go to the heart of our security as a nation, often in difficult circumstances, should have our support and should have the modern means that they need to fight crime effectively and to protect our country effectively.

Secondly, the liberty of the subject cannot be ignored when powers of this sort are being dealt with. We must ensure that, so far as possible, the balance between the interests of those who fight crime and the interests of the subject who must be free are properly weighed. Thirdly, we should consider always the interests of those who do business for Britain and those who rely upon our commitment as a nation to free trade. They should not be over-regulated.

We have heard some good examples of the background to the debate. The hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) highlighted the problems caused by international drug traffickers and the way in which they use modern communications to ply their foul trade.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King)—speaking on behalf of the Intelligence and Security Committee—told us of how familiar the Committee is with the national security challenges that the country faces in terms of terrorism and organised crime. However, he made the point that if we are to protect this country, we must protect the human rights which make this country what it is. He mentioned the companies involved in e-commerce and the varied nature of e-commerce. That theme was taken up by many hon. Members. He explained that with hundreds of companies involved in electronic communications, the task of those who must intercept communications to defeat crime becomes that much more difficult.

Hon. Members set out the problems, and provided some details of how difficult it is to deal with modern communications while trying to retain some rights which crime fighters have had almost since time began. I think that the first warrant was given to intercept a postal communication in 1647, although I am ready to be corrected. I am sure that there was some interception of communications going on in the age of the caveman. This has always been a matter of importance to those fighting crime. In the modern age, achieving the simple aim of intercepting what one person has said to another has become difficult.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) referred to the difficulties of split-packet technology. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald mentioned, when messages are being sent via the internet, one whole message is not sent off to be received by someone at the other end. The message is broken down into tiny split packages and sent off by any number of routes. As has been pointed out, they can go via Australia and California before arriving. *[Interruption.]* It was my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) who pointed that out.

[Mr. Oliver Heald]

To try to intercept all of those tiny communications—a snowstorm of 100 million communications a day, all broken down into tiny particles—is not an easy task. Wills Stanford of the Federation of the Electronics Industry told me that although it may be technically feasible—no one is saying that it is not—no one has yet found a way of doing that. Will the Minister tell us whether such a method has been discovered? If so, fine. However, if something is that complicated, there are bound to be substantial costs involved.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater dismissed some of the huge figures suggested, such as hundreds of millions of pounds for each company. However, he made the point that the costs could be substantial. We are saying that it is all very well for the Government to take the power under clause 13 to make a reasonable contribution to the costs of industry. However, are the Government going to do it? On what basis will they do it? Will the Government pledge that it will be a sufficient contribution, so that no communications service provider is put out of business simply by the costs of providing the Government with the interception capability that they require for their purposes?

Technical issues were raised concerning clause 21 and communications data. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) said that communications data can be a wide range of items and can give a full picture of somebody's life style, going into matters which are private. That can be justified in some cases but, at the moment, the powers in the Bill seem broad. In Committee, this should be explored. Attempts should be made to ensure that such powers are used only in serious investigations.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) said that he would not be satisfied if the fact that someone had not paid their car tax provoked such an investigation. One imagines that a reasonable Home Secretary would not wish to see matters such as MOTs, car tax and council tax arrears causing the obtaining of vast amounts of communications data, and the Home Secretary himself said that he would like to concentrate on the real villains. Having said that, the powers are there—the key to any Bill—and they seem to be wide enough to allow for that. In Committee, we will tackle that issue to ensure that the law meets the laudable intentions of the Home Secretary.

Many hon. Members referred to clauses 46 to 49, concerning the giving of a notice to obtain the code to encrypted information or providing a plain text, and the offence that is created. That was a key part of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) who, as the Minister responsible, proposed a different system which he now accepts was flawed in many ways, but which was based on the idea of giving law enforcement agencies the powers that they need. My hon. Friend accepts that key escrow is not the correct approach, but he made the point that it is important, when considering the extent of the powers to issue a section 46 notice and the way in which keys are stored, not to impose key escrow on industry by the back door. The industry has spoken on the issue, and it is important that what is proposed meets the gravity of the situation without imposing mandatory key escrow.

There will be—as there is already—a role for voluntary safekeeping of codes and keys, and the Federation of Electronics Industries runs T-scheme, in which a key can be placed for safekeeping, albeit largely to ensure that it is not lost by the owner. It may become more common for companies and individuals voluntarily to secure their key in some way and I see no problem with that. However, the problem with the provisions at present is that the offence under clause 49 places the burden solidly on the individual to clear himself of wrongdoing, but the fear is—as expressed by several right hon. and hon. Members—that the real criminal would not mind too much being found guilty of failing to comply with a section 46 notice if the effect was to protect information that could be used to prosecute him and his partners in crime for serious offences.

For example, the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit's report in May 1999 cited a case in which two suspected paedophiles were arrested by the police on suspicion of distributing child pornography on the internet. The suspects' computer systems contained pornographic images of children, but the leading suspect's computer also contained a large amount of encrypted material. The indications were that the encrypted material included the communication of child pornography all around the world via e-mail, but the police investigation was hampered by the fact that it was not possible to decrypt that information. Although the paedophiles were found guilty, it may be that the full extent of their crimes will never be known, because encryption protected them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) gave the example of Gary the paedophile and made the point that the guilty could hide behind encryption and, if necessary, claim that they had lost their key. If they are found guilty and sentenced to up to two years imprisonment, they will be sanguine about that because they could have been found guilty of more serious offences and sentenced to 10 years or more. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats—

Mr. Straw: A new alliance.

Mr. Heald: I would not go that far. Both Opposition parties are concerned that the provisions should concentrate their fire on the guilty—those in cases where other evidence is found at the site, or those with previous criminal convictions—rather than the innocent person abroad who may have lost or forgotten their key.

The Home Secretary pooh-poohed the idea that people might lose their key, as if they would be proper fools. However, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East mentioned the Foundation for Information Policy Research, which states in its briefing:

> The central difficulty arises from the fact that it is an inevitable and frequent occurrence (even amongst computer professionals) that keys . . . are genuinely lost, forgotten or inadvertently or intentionally destroyed.

Therefore, there is some evidence that it is a real problem.

The Opposition will table amendments to ensure that the provisions are targeted on known offenders with evidence of previous wrongdoing admissible to prove a guilty intention. The burden of proving guilt should be on the prosecution, but it should be possible to use evidence of guilty intentions so that those who are genuinely guilty can be found guilty. If the provisions are amended along those lines, the Opposition believe that the Bill will be improved.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and others mentioned the proliferation of commissioners. Although the Intelligence and Security Committee has said that it supports one tribunal and has discussed the proliferation of commissioners, he was not able to say confidently that it was necessarily against the number of commissioners that will result from the Bill. However, the debate showed a mood to consider the idea of a unified commission that could employ investigative officers. My right hon. Friend was able to confirm that his committee has appointed an investigator so that it can be more proactive, and it may be that the commission will need staff to do its job properly. The Opposition will probe that issue in Committee and suggest that the commissioners should have more power and better staffing, and I hope that the Government will be prepared to listen.

The Bill is at the nexus of three important principles, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald said. The first is the principle that we should fight crime and do it effectively as part of the essential contract between the subject and the state. The second is that the liberty of the individual should be respected. The third is that we should have freedom of trade in this country. The Opposition believe that the Government do not, at the moment, have the balance right between those factors. However, the principle of the Bill—that we should give powers to the police and other authorities—is accepted.

We shall seek in Committee to improve the Bill, because it would be a tragedy if we were to impose such burdens on business that the information technology industry, which has been such a success for this country recently, is hampered. We must remember that such companies have a choice. The Opposition will support the Government tonight, but in the remaining stages, we will seek to amend the Bill and we will return to the subject if we do not get satisfaction.

7.37 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate for its good quality and good naturedness. It has been a good debate, and a wide variety of good points have been raised. I also appreciate the general support for the Bill that has been expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House, albeit with qualifications on particular aspects, and the fact that—with one exception—the fundamental need for the Bill has been universally recognised. A wide range of issues of detail, principle and definition has been raised and I do not pretend that I shall be able to respond to all the points in detail this evening. I shall try to respond to as many as I can.

As the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) has just said, the Bill must address difficult questions of balance between a range of competing principles. It is legitimate for different parties and individuals to reach different views about the precise balance that is finally settled on. However, consensus has been reached on some important principles at the outset. The first is that investigatory powers are necessary. That is a distasteful fact that none of us enjoy thinking about, and those right hon. Members who have had to exercise those powers know that they raise hard questions. However, given the crimes that we are trying to combat and the interests of national security that we have to address, investigatory powers are necessary: we cannot say otherwise.

Many examples have been given, but I shall cite only one or two. On drugs, for example, page 1 of the regulatory impact assessment presented for consideration by the House explicitly states:

> The risk is . . . difficult to quantify but, as an illustration, and at the top end of the scale, lawful interception of communications played a part—often the crucial part—in operations by police and HM Customs during 1996 and 1997, which led to 1,200 arrests . . . the seizure of drugs with a street value of over £600 million . . . the seizure of over 450 firearms.
>
> These successes would have been in jeopardy had the criminals used networks which fall outside the scope of the current Act's warranty regime . . .

That is a serious degree of crime, involving drugs and firearms, which the Bill is tackling.

Several hon. Members mentioned money laundering. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) raised the subject of terrorism, as did the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) mentioned paedophilia, and although I did not entirely appreciate the way in which he phrased his remarks, he raised a very real question as a serious point of debate.

Investigatory powers are necessary, but proper statutory regulation of those powers is also needed, as I think the House accepts. The Government decided to enshrine in law the European convention on human rights in the Human Rights Act 1998, the relevant provisions of which take effect in October. That legislation places the regulatory principle at the core of the range of activities that have been undertaken, in different forms, for some time.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): My hon. Friend referred to a certain consensus of support in the House for the proposals. Is he also aware that the organisation Justice, which has suggested some changes to the Bill, broadly welcomes the provisions overall? The organisation is unhappy with the present legislative framework, or lack thereof, and strongly believes that the Human Rights Act 1998 should be incorporated in this legislation.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I was delighted with the stance taken by Justice. I do not agree with all the details of its position, but its fundamental support for the Bill, which my hon. Friend has explained, is welcome. We need to ensure that the investigatory powers that are granted comply with the European convention on human rights, and the Human Rights Act 1998.

Regulation is also necessary because of changes in technology, and it has to be updated to keep up with those changes. That question has been addressed by a number of hon. Members this evening, and I shall return to it in a second.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the Minister describe how a police officer in plain clothes will be required to act when covertly following a suspect? When will a warrant be required for that?

Mr. Clarke: I shall come to that in the course of my remarks. I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's

[Mr. Clarke]

speech, and a number of the assertions that he made were wrong. He seemed to have misread the Bill in various ways. I shall write to him in detail about several of the points that he made. He made his assertions—such as that about the pager systems—in a jokey style, but I want to place it on record that they were complete nonsense.

The Bill is a major step forward, as my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) suggested. I was pleased when the right hon. Member for Bridgwater described the Bill as necessary and sensible. That is the correct approach to the matters that have been discussed.

Several hon. Members raised the co-operation with industry that is at the core of the proposals. They were right to do so, for reasons of general competition, and because investigatory practices have always in the past been based on co-operation with the industry involved. The Home Office has worked very closely with the Department of Trade and Industry, and I hope that the good dialogue that we have had will improve further. We have established an industry forum, which is debating the issues, and my officials in the Home Office have held a close dialogue with the industry about how we should proceed.

One of the consequences of the decision to devote part III to measures originally proposed in the Electronic Communications Bill has been that a much more direct form of communication has been established between industry and the Home Office. That necessary change has been welcomed on all sides.

A number of points were raised in connection with industry. I cannot help the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) about the nationality of the chairmen and chief executives of BT and other organisations in the sector. I shall try and write to him on the matter of whether there is any requirement of the kind that he described, but I was thinking as he spoke of the fact that Rupert Murdoch used to switch his nationality for his own convenience, and it is possible that others could do the same.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton also asked about key escrow, and I can give him the assurances that he sought. Let me make it clear that key escrow is off the agenda. We have ruled it out of the Electronic Communications Bill, for the reasons that have been stated. Clause 13 of that Bill explicitly rules out its reintroduction, and nothing in this Bill would bring it back. Of course, no one can second-guess the omnicompetence of Parliament, which is one of our parliamentary doctrines, but we have been as clear as it is possible to be that key escrow will not be introduced.

I should make it clear also that the back-door method of reintroducing key escrow—by putting sanctions in place or exerting pressure, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) described—is not part of our intention. It, too, is off the agenda. We understand the argument put forward by the industry, which the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire set out in his speech, that it would be undesirable to have a form of legislation in this country that did not operate along those lines. We have accepted that argument, and I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurances that he sought.

The Bill does not mandate the use of any particular encryption product. People and businesses are free to use any system that they like. That is the deliberate intention behind the Bill, for the reasons that have been set out. I hope that that goes some way to meet the concerns that have been expressed in the debate.

The general issue of burdens has focused on the question of costs. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is not in his place at the moment, but he raised a more generally rhetorical series of issues of the kind with which the House will be familiar. However, the question of costs is very serious, and I shall concentrate on that.

It was perfectly proper for the House to raise the important matter of costs, but we must retain a sense of proportion. The regulatory impact assessment report on part I of the Bill emphasised that the total compliance costs are not expected to exceed the measure of significance—£20 million—used in the regulatory impact assessment. We agree, but clauses 13 and 48 make it clear that we are prepared to contribute to those costs, where they arise.

We have not stated the precise basis on which we shall make available that cash support, as we are in active discussion with the industry on the issues involved, and how much money might be needed. Various different estimates are flying around, but costs will be different for different companies. That is why it is difficult to determine the amounts of money that might be needed, but we are actively discussing the matter. We have asked for estimates from each of the companies involved, and we are considering those estimates very seriously. We are considering how to deal with the matter, and the Bill gives us the power to make cash contributions to ensure that it is dealt with properly.

Mr. Heald: We shall come to issues such as clause 13 in Committee, but will it be possible for the Government to give us a clearer idea before then of the level of costs that are envisaged? That would enable us to debate the issues with a little more knowledge.

Mr. Clarke: I agree that the debate thus far has been characterised by a series of figures flying around in different directions on a basis that is not exactly scientific, although I do not want to impugn the motives of anybody providing them. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it would be helpful to have the maximum possible information for the debate in Committee, and I shall try and ensure that it is available. A difficulty is that some of the figures are commercial-in-confidence for individual companies. That is one reason why we have not had a very open paper on the matter. I acknowledge that we need to conduct the debate in a more informed way, with as much information as possible.

Our general stance has been to deal with the issue on the basis of marginal costs rather than the average cost of any changes that arise. There is a lot of debate on that, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that in Committee we will seek to provide as much information as we can about the costs involved.

We are discussing industry self-regulation in many of these areas. That would be far preferable to a regulated and bureaucratic system, for precisely the reasons that we gave earlier.

I now turn to the various issues regarding interception. I begin by reminding right hon. and hon. Members of the scope of the interception. Clause 5(3) states:

> Subject to the following provisions of this section, a warrant is necessary on grounds falling within this subsection if it is necessary—
>
> (a) in the interests of national security;
>
> (b) for the purpose of preventing or detecting serious crime;
>
> (c) for the purpose of safeguarding the economic well-being of the United Kingdom; or
>
> (d) for the purpose, in circumstances appearing to the Secretary of State to be equivalent to those in which he would issue a warrant by virtue of paragraph (b), of giving effect to the provisions of any international mutual assistance agreement.

I quote that because a number of suppositions have been flying around, both in the Chamber and outside, about a range of very extreme circumstances in which the powers might be used. In fact, their use is limited by the scope of the clause. There is plenty of room for argument, and some right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the precise meaning of phrases such as

> the economic well-being of the United Kingdom . . .

It is necessary to emphasise that we are talking not about some global power that has no trammels, but about a tight series of definitions which is open to discussion in Committee. That is where we start, and I think it an important point.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Can the Minister confirm that there is no statutory definition of

> economic well-being of the United Kingdom

in the Bill or applied to the Bill? If so, one could, for example, say that someone might be justified, at least in theory, in intervening for the purpose of protecting jobs or commercial contracts because it would be in Britain's interests.

Mr. Clarke: I have been entertained in a number of environments by the flights of fancy that the hon. Gentleman is prepared to follow on some hypothetical trail. As was indicated in the debate, the phrase is used because it was used in previous legislation and is thought to be tightly enough defined for our purposes. I am happy to look at possible alternative wording, but I believe that the phrase in the Bill has stood the test of time, and we intend to stick with it. I do not intend to respond to the hon. Gentleman's hypothetical questions about what it might or might not cover in certain circumstances.

Mr. Fabricant: The Minister may or may not be aware—I suspect that he may well be—that a near neighbour of ours, and certainly of the United States, does intelligence gathering to ensure the economic well-being of its industries and businesses. I hope that we would still be able to do the same and would not be constrained by the Bill.

Mr. Clarke: As always, the hon. Gentleman illuminates the debate by his comments. However, I will say no more than I did to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

Particular points were raised to which I want to respond. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) referred to the number of warrants that have been signed by the Secretary of State. That is a perfectly fair question. There are two factors here—the first was alluded to earlier by my right hon. Friend when he said that as the technology has advanced and the number of phones and phone numbers have increased, there has been an expansion in the number of warrants for each of those phones and in those circumstances. Secondly, the unfortunate truth is that the extent of international serious crime on drugs and other business has also been expanding over the relevant period, so the importance of interception as a weapon for law enforcement and security has become increasingly significant.

Mr. Cohen: The massive change in recent years has been in the growth of mobile phones. Is that what the Secretary of State is indicating?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend has the point exactly. An individual may have not only a number of land-based telephones but mobile and other phones which he or she can change rapidly. The number of warrants increases for that reason alone.

A further point that was raised by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), among others, concerned the other agencies that may be empowered to intercept communications. The arguments come from a variety of corners. Some say that the Department of Social Security should have the right to do so, some that the Inland Revenue should, and some that the provision is too widely drawn. Clause 6(1)(k) shows that the power is there, but I emphasise that we have no plans to use that power to extend the power to intercept beyond what is set out in the Bill. We have intentions on the other aspects of surveillance covered in the Bill, and I shall come to that shortly, but we have no plans to use that clause to widen the application of interception. I hope that that clarifies the situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead also asked whether communications could be intercepted for the purpose of gathering council tax or road tax. The answer to that is no, because, as I said earlier, the scope of clause 5 does not permit the gathering of council tax or road tax to be the purpose of these communications. They are not issues of national security, although some might argue that they are.

Mr. Heald: The Department of Social Security deals with the largest area of crime by value in the country. The Benefits Agency's organised crime division deals with crimes involving huge amounts of money. Why does it have to go to the National Criminal Intelligence Service or some other law enforcement body to obtain an interception warrant?

Mr. Clarke: All police services in the country have to go to NCIS as well. I repeat that clause 5(3)(b) states that a warrant is necessary

> for the purpose of preventing or detecting serious crime . . .

I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's point that benefit fraud and Inland Revenue fraud are areas of serious criminal activity. The police will naturally and correctly be involved with those activities, and they will have the power to address them.

Mr. Heald: When I was the Minister with responsibility for benefit fraud, I used to deal with this a lot.

Mr. Clarke: Then the hon. Gentleman went up to being an Opposition Home Affairs spokesman.

Mr. Heald: Well, there we are. It is true that there are successful combined operations with the police—the Home Secretary mentioned one. However, there are also operations conducted by the Benefits Agency organised fraud branch on its own which involve large amounts of money. Why can it not apply for an interception warrant?

Mr. Clarke: The reason is as I have said. The Bill contains a series of different powers of surveillance and investigation, and I shall come in a moment to the type of investigation that might arise in other areas. However, interception is a significant intrusion into individuals' liberties and we consider that it should be used only by a narrow and tight range of agencies. That is what is set out in the Bill. The argument, for example, that the social services benefits fraud agency was investigating serious organised crime but not involving the police in any way and needed separate powers to do it does not stack up. They can carry out precisely the joint operations described by the hon. Gentleman, and that will continue.

Mr. Tom King: Is not the very strong defence that the Minister is making of the need not to have any extension of these powers a powerful argument for what the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) said? It is not sufficient for the Government to say that they have no plans in that regard, then to let through legislation that could expand those powers and leave the Secretary of State the chance to do just that. I am not sure whether the Minister is coming to this point or whether he thinks that he has met it by saying that the Government have no plans in that regard. I do not think that that would meet the situation.

Mr. Clarke: I shall consider the points that have been raised. I understand the force of the right hon. Gentleman's comments. As we have said, there is a balance of judgment to be made between the various issues. I was trying to suggest—although I realise that it is not palatable to Members on the Opposition Front Bench—that when it comes to the use of that extremely important, powerful and intrusive interception technique, it should not simply be given to the Department of Social Security or the Inland Revenue as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) proposed. The power would take effect only in cases of serious crime, which would thus involve police co-operation. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater asks whether we should not rule it out altogether and, in effect, delete clause 6(1)(k)—the element that widens the measure beyond current powers. I understand that point; no doubt we shall consider it in Committee. However, I thought that it was important to set out our thinking on the matter.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) asked why the Ministry of Defence was listed as an intercepting agency. The reason is so that an interception that is carried out to protect UK troops serving abroad, and which might involve an intrusion into a person's privacy, can be undertaken in accordance with the law.

The hon. Member for Lichfield asked why clause 25 does not cover tracking devices. It was a legitimate question—I was listening at the time. The reason is that interference with property to install a tracking device—when that is necessary—needs authorisation under part III of the Police Act 1997, or a property warrant. That authorisation is needed at present; that is why it is not mentioned in clause 25.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South asked about subsection (2)(j) of clause 6. The reason for that provision, which deals with mutual legal assistance, is that it allows an application for an interception warrant to be made in accordance with an international mutual assistance agreement. The request would have to satisfy the law of the requesting country as well as UK interception law.

I have tried to deal with the practical points that were made about interception. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead, there will be a public consultation exercise on the proposed codes of practice, but it will be the interception commissioner who oversees that, not the data protection commissioner.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) asked about the number of extra commissioners. I want to put her straight on that point, as perhaps it was not clear in the Bill. She asked if there would be two extra commissioners. There will be only one. The interception commissioner named in the Bill replaces the existing one. I hope that clarifies that matter.

Several Members have made powerful points about the overall number of commissioners—not merely in relation to the Bill. The reason why we did not reduce the range of commissioners so that there was a single one for this process—although we did establish a single tribunal—was that we felt that it was important not to throw the existing processes in different institutions too much into the air. I have taken note of the views expressed in the debate; we shall discuss the matter in Committee and we are prepared directly to consider the position.

I emphasise that the commissioners are not merely rubber stamps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead suggested. They take their duties extremely seriously. The Government acknowledge the seriousness with which they do their work; there is no suggestion that they take it lightly.

I had intended to cover the general question of intrusive techniques in some detail, but, because of the hour, I shall not do so. We are considering the listing by order of other authorities to carry out direct surveillance and the use of covert human intelligence sources. The Department of Health is one such; the Medical Devices Agency observes business premises suspected of being involved in supplying counterfeit devices. MOT certificates set out when there can be intrusive investigation by the vehicle inspectorate of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

The Department of Trade and Industry has powers in such matters—as does the Health and Safety Executive. The Inland Revenue has important powers, which have been mentioned. We have already referred to the immigration service of the Home Office and to the DSS. Extraordinarily, the sea fisheries inspectorate of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food uses surveillance to determine whether vessels are keeping to their quotas and are using the correct size of nets.

We are addressing the powers of many bodies. It is an important step forward for democracy that we are introducing a Bill that puts all those forms of surveillance under a regulated system. That has not been so in the past. Most Members will welcome that change—it takes us in the right direction.

Many points were made about the role of the judiciary versus that of the Executive. I shall not repeat the familiar comments on that matter, except to say that it is right for the Executive to take such key decisions. My right hon. Friend has signed the certificate on the front of the Bill, stating that we believe that it complies with the European convention on human rights—he did that advisedly.

We take seriously the points made about penalties in relation to clause 49—especially those made by the hon. Members for Mole Valley and for North-East Hertfordshire. They are good points and we shall consider them. I realise that they are an attempt to improve the legislation and we shall examine them in Committee as positively as we can.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) asked about information on whether a person had been bugged. It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which we could ever say to someone, "You have been bugged. These techniques have been used against you." The reasons were set out by my right hon. Friend earlier. It is critical that we have knowledge of the situation if we are to beat major criminals and to counter threats to national security. We must maintain the powers to investigate that are set out in the measure.

Mr. Beith: Surely, there is now a circumstance in which somebody is in effect told that he has been bugged, because although that has never happened, the commissioner could say that something unlawful took place.

Mr. Clarke: That is true. It has not happened, but it could happen.

Serious points were made about encryption. Several misconceptions have arisen, both in comments when the Bill was published and in the debate. First, there have been accusations that the decryption provisions reverse the burden of proof to such an extent that it is incompatible with the presumption of innocence enshrined in article 6 of the European convention. There must be reasonable grounds for believing that a person served with a decryption notice has a key in their possession before use of the decryption power can be authorised in the first place. That is set out in clause 46.

The offence of not complying with the notice is set out in clause 49. In that case, the burden falls on the prosecution to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the accused is, or has been, in possession of a key and that he or she failed to comply with the notice. The Bill outlines several statutory defences.

Clause 49(2) creates a defence for an individual who has forgotten or mislaid a key or password. It is true that he or she must prove the defence, but they need to do that only on the balance of probabilities. In other words, he or she must explain what has happened. It will be for the court to decide whether, on balance, the person is telling the truth. That seems to be an entirely reasonable burden to impose on an accused person. There are comparable provisions in plenty of other statutes.

The Crown Prosecution Service would, of course, need to be satisfied that it was in the public interest to pursue a prosecution in a particular case. Innocent people will not suffer under the provisions. As I pointed out, we believe that the Bill is ECHR compatible. My right hon. Friend signed a statement to that effect. It is not a frivolous undertaking.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The hon. Gentleman assured me that he would deal with my question as to when a police officer would have to get in touch with a more senior officer to obtain a special warrant simply to undertake plain-clothes activities.

Mr. Clarke: As I pointed out, the code of practice will set that out clearly. I shall consider seriously all the hon. Gentleman's points. However, I think that in his fears about the Bill he is tilting at windmills—those fears were expressed in his interventions throughout the debate.

The second concern that has been expressed about the Bill relates to key escrow through intimidation. That matter was also raised in the debate. I make it clear to hon. Members and to people outside the House that we shall not force anyone to use a particular technology. Individuals and businesses remain free to utilise any type of encryption, provided they choose the one that best suits their needs.

The third point raised was about the secure handling of keys. It was suggested that the Bill will leave seized keys vulnerable. I assure the House that the Government are sensitive to the need to protect material obtained under all the powers in the Bill. The level of security to be deployed is not largely a matter for primary legislation. As the House knows, we have already announced the establishment of a dedicated resource—the Government technical assistance centre—to help law enforcement on encryption. The centre will handle the keys that are obtained. Deploying the highest level of protection for such keys and other sensitive information will be a specific objective of the technical project to establish the centre. Work on that is going on at the moment.

I wish to emphasise one important point. We envisage that the disclosure of the plain text of protected material, rather than a key, will be sufficient in almost all cases responding to a decryption notice and I expect there to be very few cases where disclosure of the keys themselves will be required. We hope that plain text will be offered, but we believe that the security for the keys that we will offer through the Government technical assistance centre will provide the assurances that hon. Members seek.

I come to the more general concerns that have been raised. I accept that technology is moving very fast. That makes it much more difficult to decide how we operate, and future legislation may be necessary. However, I do not accept the philosophy of despair that has been suggested by some Members. Crime is damaging society in a wide variety of ways. Therefore, we believe strongly that we need such powers as we can achieve to contest drug, terrorist, paedophilia and money-laundering crimes. We intend to do what we can to combat them.

We also acknowledge that international co-operation is necessary. It is exceptionally important and that is one reason why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary played such a leading role at the Tampere summit in trying to secure such co-operation. The idea that there is

[Mr. Clarke]

nothing we can do as events move forward is wrong. We are determined to do what we can. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State for or in connection with the carrying out of his functions under the Act;

(b) any expenditure attributable to arrangements made by the Secretary of State under the Act for the making of contributions towards the costs incurred by persons in complying with requirements under the Act to obtain or disclose any communications data;

(c) any expenditure attributable to arrangements made by the Secretary of State under the Act for the making of contributions towards the costs incurred by persons in complying with notices given under the Act for the disclosure of keys to protected information;

(d) any allowances payable under the Act to the Interception of Communications Commissioner or the Covert Investigations Commissioner; and

(e) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which are payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Earlier this afternoon, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) raised the issue of asylum seekers. Can I ask for your considered view on what has happened since then and, if appropriate, for a ruling from Madam Speaker?

A report suggested that today there would be a parliamentary answer from the Home Office on asylum seekers. At 6.54 pm, the Home Office faxed to my office an answer by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), to a question that was first answered on 6 December in reply to a question from the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). I understand that the Home Office told the Table Office that it had supplied an answer today because the original answer was inaccurate and had had to be corrected. It was not inaccurate; at the time, it was entirely accurate.

What has happened is that the Government have changed their policy and, under the cover of an earlier question and an earlier answer, they have sought to put out an answer with no notice to the House in the normal way. I happen to know that that is because the Home Office failed on Friday to arrange for a question to be tabled which it could answer. Because it did not manage to do that—to use a phrase that has become common to describe business as usual—there was another cock up in the Home Office, and it has had to find a subterfuge.

There is one other matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Let me deal with the first matter before I deal with the other one.

Mr. Hughes: It is linked.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Let me deal with the first matter, because I might be able to help the hon. Gentleman. The Home Secretary is present and will therefore have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks. I do not wish him to respond at the moment; it is an issue for another occasion. I have no doubt that Madam Speaker will note the hon. Gentleman's words and that the matter will be looked into. I can give him that assurance.

Mr. Hughes: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The other matter that arises is that the Home Office has provided a long parliamentary answer. However, it is bizarre in various respects, not least because, in the middle, it turns from being an answer and becomes a press release. It suddenly gives no factual information but starts giving what—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hughes: Will you bear with me, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot bear with the hon. Gentleman. He is now beginning to express an opinion on these matters. He must relate his point of order to the Chair.

These matters will be considered. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly welcome to approach the Home Secretary—perhaps after these proceedings—and he can lay a complaint before Madam Speaker. That is the best that I can do at the moment. I must get on with the business before us, which the House, and not me, has decided.

Mr. Hughes: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The point that I would like you or Madam Speaker to consider for a ruling is whether the answer provided is an appropriate parliamentary answer. It moves from reporting facts to describing what is or is not a sensible policy. If you could rule on that, I would be very grateful.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for me. I have given the hon. Gentleman a strong hint as to what route he can take.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When I raised the issue earlier, I asked Madam Speaker whether she had received a request for a statement because a major U-turn on Government policy was announced in the media this morning. Madam Speaker responded to me that there were a number of questions on the Order Paper that could be answered. I think that it is fair to say that we took that to mean that they were new questions and not

an old one that was about to be re-answered. Could I ask Madam Speaker through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether she will reconsider the procedures to see whether she finds them satisfactory?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Madam Speaker will note what the right hon. Lady has said.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

HUMANITARIAN AID AND EXTERNAL CO-OPERATION

That this House takes note of European Union Document Nos. 10705/99, the Commission's Annual Report on humanitarian aid 1998, 10497/99, the Commission's Annual Report on TACIS 1998, 11203/99, Commission staff working paper: Report for 1998 on the evaluation of external co-operation, and un-numbered Explanatory Memorandum from the Department for International Development dated 5th November 1999 on a Commission Communication on the assessment and future of Community humanitarian activities; and supports the Government's policy of working in partnership with the European Community to improve the management, organisation and effectiveness of development assistance administered by the European Community institutions.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

CARERS AND DISABLED CHILDREN BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Carers and Disabled Children Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which are payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

Sickle Cell Anaemia

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

8.17 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate on the important and worrying subject of sickle cell anaemia. The House will know that it is a genetically inherited condition and that it cannot be caught or contracted. The person suffering from it will always be anaemic, but, at times, there may be a crisis in the condition which leads to very severe pain.

The pain is caused by the red blood cells in the affected person becoming sickle shaped—hence the condition's name—and therefore unable to carry sufficient oxygen. One side effect of the condition is that the person suffering from it is immune to malaria because malaria mosquitos cannot attack the sickle-shaped cells. The main causes of the condition going into crisis are many, but they include strenuous exercise and any trauma to the body, such as the contraction of a severe virus, being subject to general anaesthetic, suffering from a fever or pregnancy. The cause of the crisis in sickle cell anaemia that may arise as a result of pregnancy is not fully understood, but it is not uncommon.

Sickle cell trait, which may or may not involve anaemia, is found in about 10 per cent. of people of Afro-Caribbean origin and more frequently in those of Nigerian origin.

Sickle cell C trait, in which people may well have no health problems at all but will pass the trait on to their children, is found in about 2 per cent. of people of Afro-Caribbean origin, and more often in people of Ghanaian origin. Thalassaemia trait, which is related and can cause a sickle cell condition, is found also in about 2 per cent. of people of Afro-Caribbean origin, and more frequently among people of Mediterranean origin.

In all our communities, therefore, it is necessary to understand that the condition is present from birth and often seriously affects children. One of its key symptoms is severe, disabling pain that onsets suddenly. Awareness of the condition is needed among health professionals. Although midwives' handbooks have considerable information about anaemia in general, as it is very common in pregnancy, they have little information specifically about sickle cell anaemia, yet that condition often goes into crisis in women in early pregnancy. No one knows why.

Evidence also shows that, in recent years, when people have visited their doctor or gone to hospital suffering from symptoms relating to sickle cell anaemia, they have been asked, "How long have you had sickle cell condition?" That indicates that not all doctors even know that it is an inherited condition that cannot be contracted. I had an e-mail on that subject today from a woman who said that her partner, a sickle cell sufferer, had been asked that question very recently.

Awareness of sickle cell is badly needed also among education and other professionals. Children who regularly suffer pain and illness are likely to have to miss school and their behaviour may well be affected. Sickle cell can also cause kidney problems, which involve many visits to the lavatory, and teachers can be less than tolerant of that if they are not fully aware of the reason for it. There is a

[Jane Griffiths]

worryingly high incidence of exclusion from school among Afro-Caribbean boys, some of whom may well have sickle cell condition. They may not want to talk to teachers or anybody else about it, but it can cause problems throughout their education.

Teachers these days are routinely made aware of, and told how to deal with, asthma attacks, nut allergies and other severe allergies, which are suffered by an increasing number of primary school pupils. However, they are not routinely made aware of, and told how to understand and deal with, people with sickle cell anaemia, even in areas where the Afro-Caribbean population is high. This is therefore a public health issue that should concern us.

Awareness is needed also among the population at large and those in authority. I had a visit from a constituent whose daughter died when her sickle cell anaemia went into crisis early in her pregnancy. I shall not ask the Minister to look into the case of a particular constituent at this time, but I mention it because it is relevant to the wider issue. My constituent's daughter died from complications of pregnancy brought on, it seems, by sickle cell condition. The insurance company refused to pay out on her policy because, it said, she had a life-threatening condition which she had failed to declare.

I discussed this rather complicated issue, on which the insurance profession does not seem to have a clear policy, with a number of people in the industry. There is a worryingly lack of awareness—I shall not use the word "ignorance"—of the condition. One person working in insurance, but not for the company with which the young woman who died had a policy, said, "I am not surprised that people in the insurance industry do not know about sickle cell because it mostly affects Afro-Caribbean people and not many of them buy houses." That ignorant statement staggered me.

My constituent's daughter did not die from sickle cell anaemia; she had sickle cell. Many people live to a great age with the condition, but have episodes of ill health throughout their life.

Will the Minister look seriously at how we can ensure that all professionals, especially those who work with children and pregnant women, are fully aware of the symptoms and dangers of sickle cell? Constituents and others have told me that professionals do not care and that, because the condition affects mainly ethnic minorities, people do not think that it matters. I know that my hon. Friend will agree that it does matter. In general, health professionals take the condition seriously. The problem is more that those who work with children and pregnant women may not be fully aware of it.

Many older people in ethnic minority communities who have sickle cell were, in the past, heavily prescribed pain-killing drugs for the bouts of pain that come with the condition and, sadly, have become addicted to those drugs. I am reliably informed that doctors no longer prescribe pain-killing drugs in that way, but there are people in their middle years living with addiction to painkillers and the extra problems that it brings on top of their sickle cell condition.

Will the Minister consider those issues seriously and explore ways to ensure that education, health and other professionals are clear about the implications of sickle cell condition for the health of the people with whom they are dealing? They should realise that the condition can be managed and that the people who have it need understanding and help.

8.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on choosing to discuss such an important subject in her Adjournment debate. The raising of these issues is particularly timely given the questions that the Department is considering at the moment, which I shall try to cover in my response.

I agree with my hon. Friend that it is completely unacceptable to argue that sickle cell anaemia should be taken less seriously, or should be less well understood, simply because it is a problem faced by people from black or ethnic minority communities. That is wholly unacceptable to the Government. We are committed to tackling health inequalities, including those faced by black and ethnic minority communities, which include sickle cell anaemia.

My hon. Friend has raised some very important issues. She is right to say that sickle cell anaemia is an inherited blood disorder affecting haemoglobin, which enables red blood cells to carry oxygen around the body. In sickle cell anaemia, the red blood cells tend to change from the normal flexible round shape to a rigid half-moon or sickle shape, causing a blockage in the blood vessels and preventing the circulation of oxygen. That can lead to tissue damage in, for example, the eyes, the lungs, the spleen and the hips.

As my hon. Friend said, the pain of such a crisis can be intense, and usually lasts a few days. Patients with severe crises may require hospital admission for treatment with painkillers and rehydration. People with sickle cell disorders are also vulnerable to infections such as pneumonia and meningitis.

Sickle cell anaemia primarily affects people of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, although it is also found in those from Mediterranean, middle eastern and Asian backgrounds. There are more than 6,000 people with sickle cell disorders in the UK. In addition, around 120,000 people carry the trait for sickle cell anaemia, which means that they may pass on a gene for the disorder to their children. Carriers usually remain healthy, but it is important that their trait is recognised as they may require more oxygen in certain situations such as undergoing a general anaesthetic or participating in activities such as scuba diving or high altitude sports.

Generally, the disorder is managed at home: children may take antibiotics throughout childhood, and mild crises can be treated at home with painkillers. My hon. Friend is right to raise the question of education. Education is needed for those with the disorder, and their families and carers, to minimise risk factors that can trigger a crisis, such as sudden temperature change or dehydration. The prognosis for a child who is diagnosed with the disorder today continues to improve.

In 1994, the Standing Medical Advisory Committee set up a working party which produced a report on sickle cell, thalassaemia and other haemoglobinopathies. The report was widely distributed and provided information to enable the national health service to achieve the best possible care.

It gave a focus for further debate, development and collaboration. Several initiatives have followed from the report.

Following wide consultation, the cards that are carried by patients who have been tested for sickle cell anaemia and other haemoglobinopathies have been redesigned and simplified. In December last year, the Department of Health issued a multi-purpose single card to replace the three previously used, as recommended in the SMAC report. The card provides the result of the test. Copies are available free of charge to haematology departments for issue to patients.

The card speeds up the process for patients presenting at the accident and emergency department in a crisis, as it provides details of their disorder and treatment. It is also helpful to other health care workers in identifying people with sickle cell disorder or those who carry the trait. For example, midwives should find the card valuable in directing genetic counselling for those at risk and dentists will want to consider the need for additional oxygen.

The SMAC report also raised issues about counselling and screening. It is important, for example, that prospective parents understand the risk of their children being affected. If both parents have the condition, their children will inherit it. If one parent has the disorder and the other carries the trait, the probability is that half their children will inherit the disorder and half will carry the trait. Preconceptual and antenatal counselling aim to allow parents from high-risk groups to make properly informed choices.

Promoting the well-being of children and young people with sickle cell anaemia extends beyond the NHS and social services. Joint working with the Department for Education and Employment is absolutely essential. We recognise that ensuring access to effective education is a vital part of looking after the long-term health of any child with a chronic medical disorder. Our two Departments have clear joint guidance on supporting pupils with medical needs in schools.

Support also includes fostering a spirit of inclusion by improving the awareness of teachers and other pupils. One key tool, which we have only just begun to introduce, is the healthy schools programme. It has a family of websites, known collectively as "Wired for Health", which provides online access to health information. Through the Health Education Authority, we have been working with the Sickle Cell Society to provide accurate and appropriate information targeted at different groups in the education setting.

"Mind, Body and Soul", the website aimed at 14 to 16-year-olds, includes information prepared by the society. It is now developing text for the new site for 11 to 13-year-olds, which will go live at the end of this month. After that, we expect to put information geared specifically to the needs of teachers on the main teacher website, "Wired for Health". My hon. Friend is right to identify the serious issues that may arise if teachers or other pupils do not sufficiently understand the problems faced by those with sickle cell anaemia.

The healthy schools programme has also established the national healthy schools standard: an accreditation process for the local education and health partnerships. The whole-school approach promoted by the standard includes provision of support for pupils' health conditions. That complements guidance on supporting pupils with medical needs.

Unfortunately, we know that children and young people with sickle cell anaemia will sometimes miss school because of their health problems. We are reviewing, with the DFEE, our guidance on the education of sick children. We aim to issue draft guidance for consultation later this year. I shall ensure that my hon. Friend's points are taken into account.

The main subject that my hon. Friend raises is education about the disorder. Education is an essential factor in the effective management and treatment of sickle cell anaemia. It is vital that we provide at-risk communities, patients, their families and health care professionals at all levels with proper information about sickle cell anaemia, the risks and the consequences for those who suffer from it.

We have been working with the haemoglobinopathy societies to draw up proposals for an awareness campaign targeted at areas with high densities of people at risk of haemoglobinopathies. The proposals are under consideration in my Department. Possible developments include a major mass media exercise directed at Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, through specialist media catering for black and minority ethnic groups and the general media.

The campaign proposals involve voluntary organisations working in the field, four of which are concerned with sickle cell anaemia and research, as well bodies such as schools, probation services and employers, accident and emergency departments and primary care teams. We need to promote awareness of haemoglobinopathy disorders and the options for screening, prevention and treatment. That means developing resource materials for health professionals to inform future good practice. It also means raising awareness of the disorder among statutory bodies and policy makers.

The partnership element of this campaign is extremely important, with co-operative working by voluntary bodies and feedback from patients and communities helping to shape future services. The expert patient concept is especially suitable for a condition such as sickle cell anaemia and will be invaluable in improving management of the disorder and outcomes for patients and their families.

My hon. Friend is right to say that it is important that health care professionals are well informed about the disorder so that they can give appropriate treatment. Notification about the new haemoglobinopathy cards was directed to all GPs and to haematology units, maternity, accident and emergency and dental departments, health visitors, dental officers and counsellors.

The training of doctors is designed to equip them to deal with the problems they might encounter both in hospital and in general practice. Learning must be life long and cannot cease at the end of formal training. To provide the best possible service to their patients, doctors should keep up to date with advances in patient care and continually review and improve their knowledge, skills and abilities. The English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting approves a post registration study programme on the care and management of adults and children with sickle cell,

[Yvette Cooper]

thalassaemia and related disorders. It is designed to increase the knowledge and skills of nurses to enable them to meet the health care needs of those with sickle cell and their families.

Hospital trusts serving communities with a high incidence of haemoglobinopathies often have specific protocols for their staff to ensure that they can recognise sickle cell anaemia and are able to help patients quickly, especially with pain relief. We need to ensure that best practice is extended to all trusts that deal with patients who suffer from sickle cell anaemia. The haemoglobinopathy societies have informed us that the facilities for treatment and counselling are often under-utilised. We need to make sure that people are able to make use of the services provided.

I would like to take this opportunity to say that voluntary organisations play an absolutely vital role in this field. We are very grateful for their help with the proposed health awareness campaign currently being discussed, and for the Sickle Cell Society's work for "Wired for Health". Those organisations provide information, advice and support for those affected by sickle cell anaemia—patients and their families—and carry out research into the disorder. My Department recognises their success in spreading knowledge and understanding of the disorder, and we provide practical support, including financial assistance, to help them to continue their work.

Sickle cell anaemia is a condition that we take extremely seriously. My hon. Friend's points about raising awareness were well made and are well taken. I hope that I have assured her that these issues are under active consideration. I will ensure that her views are taken into account when final decisions are made shortly about possible campaign proposals for raising awareness of sickle cell anaemia.

Improving treatment and advice is critical for the people involved, and for tackling the health inequalities faced by black and minority ethnic communities, which we in the Department take extremely seriously. I thank my hon. Friend for providing the opportunity for a useful and informative debate on an important subject.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty minutes to Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 14 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tenant Participation Compacts

1. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): If he will make a statement on the implementation of tenant participation compacts. [112172]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Bringing tenants into the heart of decisions affecting their homes is a vital part of our agenda to improve local services, increase local democracy and strengthen local communities. Tenant participation compacts, which are being introduced by councils from April, will set out how tenants can be involved in local housing decisions in ways that meet their needs and priorities. The Government will make £12 million available to councils over the next two years to help with the extra costs of setting up compacts. Parallel assistance for tenants of housing associations has been made available through the Housing Corporation.

Helen Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply, and it is welcome to hear how much money will be made available to councils to implement the compacts. What steps will he take to ensure that councils involve the widest possible number of tenants in compacts and spread their net to involve a wide variety of people, not simply a self-selected few?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes a fair point about the importance of ensuring that good practice extends throughout the local authority world. We are keen to monitor progress, to highlight the achievements of those authorities that are doing best in tenant involvement and to encourage good practice to spread more widely.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): While tenant participation compacts can, and probably will, be helpful in developing a superior housing service in the future, what does the Minister intend to do now about the scandal across the country of empty council housing that is predominantly the responsibility of left-wing authorities that are providing rotten services at rip-off prices?

Mr. Raynsford: The Government attach the most serious importance to the problem of empty properties, and they occur in all sectors. There are too many properties empty in the local authority sector and there are too many privately owned empty properties. The Government are taking steps across the board to encourage bringing properties back into use. In particular, we are encouraging local authorities to develop local empty properties strategies to identify those homes that are empty, to take action to bring them into use and to put in place supportive measures with other bodies, such as registered social landlords, that can help in that process.

Regional Policy

2. **Mr. David Taylor** (North–West Leicestershire): If he will make a statement on his proposals to strengthen regional policy. [112173]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The launch of the regional development agencies last year demonstrated our commitment to maximising the potential of the English regions. We now look forward to seeing their implementation plans for the regional strategies that the Government welcomed in January this year.

We have also secured the establishment of voluntary regional chambers in all the English regions outside London. Together with the RDAs, those bodies are helping to build up the voice of the regions and to enhance regional identities.

Mr. Taylor: Is my right hon. Friend happy that our regional policy adequately addresses the very serious state of the textile, clothing and footwear industry, which employs a third of a million people, a quarter of whom are in the east midlands? The industry is bigger than farming, car manufacturing or the chemical industry. Does he agree that it is as important to defend the interests of poorly paid women in east midlands textile factories as it is to defend the interests of well-paid men in the London-based financial services?

Mr. Prescott: The House is aware of the difficulties that the textile industry and its workers have been facing for some time. I am glad to say that the regional development agency in the east midlands is working closely with the East Midlands Clothing and Textiles Partnership, which is exactly what regional bodies should be doing. It has brought together all the interests in the industry and examined how they may develop and sharpen its competitiveness. That is why the RDAs are so

important for reducing the disparities between and within the regions, which would be made worse now that the Tories are preparing to abolish them.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): Does the Deputy Prime Minister remember saying in December 1996:

as we have made clear in our Manifesto we are committed to moving, with the consent of local people, to directly elected regional government in England?

Can he clarify how that pledge squares with a statement made by the Minister for Local Government and the Regions who said, when asked whether she would introduce elected assemblies in the next Parliament, that she had "no idea"? Will "no idea" be the Deputy Prime Minister's chapter in the next manifesto and is not the real truth that Downing street and the rest of the Government have backed off that pledge and left him hanging out to dry?

Mr. Prescott: I am glad that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) has decided to intervene on these occasions and that he has started off by quoting our manifesto. Our position now is precisely as it was then. We are developing the new manifesto—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] We are a party that implements its manifesto. We have already implemented 80 per cent. of the manifesto that we put before the country and we are planning the new one because we have no doubt that we will be the party in power next time. The reason for that is that our policies are relevant to people. For example, the regional development agencies have already done much—and will do more—to reduce the economic disparities between regions. However, the hon. Gentleman proposes to abolish them. Perhaps he should pay some attention to that.

Mr. Norman: It is hard to tell whether the Government remain committed to elected assemblies. If they do, why cannot the House now be told when they will be introduced? What will happen to the county councils as a result? Will the Deputy Prime Minister clarify why he has described elected assemblies as being very important, whereas the Minister for Local Government and the Regions described them as a diversion? Perhaps both are really saying the same thing, for once—that they are an important diversion.

More importantly, will the Deputy Prime Minister clarify who is responsible for this area of Government policy? First, he had transport taken away from him and given to Lord Macdonald, then responsibility for the countryside was transferred to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and now we understand that the Committee for the Regions is to be chaired by Lord Falconer. Whenever the Government have an expensive failure on their hands, do they not always call for the Minister for the dome? Is not the truth that the Government are moving away from elected regional assemblies because they have learned that the only way to rig elections successfully is to make sure that everyone involved is appointed?

Mr. Prescott: That is really cutting stuff. The Government's regional policy is implemented by me and my Department. I certainly retain responsibility for transport: others may say that I do not, but I notice that they are always asking me to make the statements to the House.

The hon. Gentleman referred to regional assemblies. They have already been established, include 100 Tory councillors, and are supported by the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress. Will he say whether he will persist with his intention to abolish them?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Whatever my right hon. Friend does with regional government, he must not have it quoted on the stock market. If he did, would not educated Archie over there buy it, and sell it off to Wal-Mart?

Mr. Prescott: I have no doubt that the experience to which my hon. Friend refers will be best utilised in the next statement to be made to the House.

Road Noise

3. **Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks): How much will be spent on motorway and A-road noise mitigation in 2000–01. [112174]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): The Highways Agency has undertaken to spend £5 million on noise mitigation measures in 2000-01 at high-priority locations on trunk roads, which include motorways and major A-road links. This is in addition to the expenditure on providing quieter road surfaces during the course of normal maintenance.

Mr. Fallon: My constituency includes a triangle of busy motorways that increasingly is to the detriment of the parishes of Kemsing, Otford and Chevening. The ring-fenced funding is very welcome, but when will modern asphalt and better screening be used to give a better quality of life for those who live in those tunnels of noise?

Mr. Meacher: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's point. He is referring, I think, to the triangle created where the M25 and M26 connect with the M20. We recognise that excessive noise is a major concern to people who live near busy roads. He will know that we set out the sift criteria for dealing with that problem in a parliamentary answer on 22 March last year. A composite list of all roads meeting those criteria was published on 11 November. The Highways Agency is developing the programme of priorities within that list. Some of those studies were completed by the end of last year, and I am sure that the others will be completed soon. The Highways Agency expects that 1,200 lane-km of trunk-road network will be resurfaced in 2000-01, at a cost of about £20 million. Perhaps some will be in the hon. Gentleman's area.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I thank my right hon. Friend for the information about what the Government are doing to reduce noise from motorways. However, will he investigate a problem in my constituency that involves properties near motorways? When we approached the Highways Agency about the matter, it quoted the previous Government's decision not to make available expenditure

for reducing the noise suffered by people who live in properties built near motorways. Will he investigate the situation with a view to rectifying it? Under the Tories, motorways were built near properties, yet the people living in them are being denied insulation to reduce the noise.

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. As we all know, under the previous Government, the cheapest measure was often that which was implemented. We do not believe that that is necessarily right. "A New deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" published in July 1998 recognised the problem. The roads review that we implemented at that time said:

> Quieter road surfaces will be specified routinely in all future contracts for resurfacing. The most appropriate noise reduction measures will be used when noise is of the greatest concern.

We believe that that is right, and it is very different from what happened under the previous Government.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Is the Minister not ashamed that the Government are spending only £5 million on the important topic of noise reduction? Is he aware that of the 174,000 miles of road network, that money will allow noise reduction measures to be carried out on only 60 miles a year? Is this not a case of the Government failing to deliver on the promises that the Deputy Prime Minister made in "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone"? Is this not just another Government failure on roads?

Mr. Meacher: I must say that the hon. Gentleman has a brass neck to accuse us of spending only £5 million when his Government not only did not spend £5 million, but built the noisy roads in the first place. He is also wrong to say that that amount is necessarily limited to 60 miles of road. I have already indicated that operational requirements in terms of maintenance and roadway improvement will lead to resurfacing with a quieter surface as a routine measure. In addition, we will be providing noise mitigation measures over a much greater length of motorway or of other trunk roads by the use of noise barriers and other measures.

Rough Sleepers

4. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): What progress has been made in reducing the number of rough sleepers. [112175]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): In December 1999, we published our national strategy on rough sleeping "Coming in from the Cold" and announced that the number of people sleeping rough across England had already fallen by more than 10 per cent. between June 1998 and June 1999. More recent street counts have shown that the number of people sleeping rough in central London has fallen by one third over the past year.

Mr. Beard: I thank the Minister for that welcome reply. What support services are being provided to encourage former rough sleepers to stay in permanent accommodation rather than take to the streets again?

Ms Armstrong: That is an important part of the strategy. "Coming in from the Cold" refers not just to coming into a building but to coming into a supportive framework. People will be tracked, given support when they eventually move from hostel accommodation into more permanent accommodation and given support while they are there. We are encouraging voluntary organisations to work with us in a new way to ensure that people who are rehoused have the support to continue to maintain their independent living.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): As Ms Casey has indicated that the solution to the problem of rough sleeping in Westminster is at the heart of the problem in central London, will the Minister pay tribute to the network of voluntary agencies, the police and the local authority that Ms Casey has inherited?

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted to pay tribute to the work that is going on in Westminster and the co-operation between the local authority, the Government, the police and the voluntary sector. Significant changes are taking place, and the number of rough sleepers in Westminster is an important part of tackling the problem overall. I am encouraged that co-operative working across the board and new ways of working are already showing real results.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the welcome progress being made in reducing the number of rough sleepers. However, will she consider the effect of the case of my constituent Ruth Wyner, who has been jailed under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, on charity workers and others in the homelessness sector who might be afraid of a similar occurrence?

Ms Armstrong: I know that there has been much concern about that case, although I cannot comment on it because it is under appeal. I can reassure my hon. Friend and the charity world that the case should have no impact on how people work. Those who run hostels or work with rough sleepers have a clear responsibility to take every care with the most vulnerable people, including those who are drug-dependent. However, they should have nothing to do with drug dealing, which is, and has long been, illegal. For many years, charities have ensured that they worked with that fact. My understanding is that the case makes no difference—

Madam Speaker: Order. The case is sub judice, and the right hon. Lady should not discuss it in that way.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Does the Minister agree that rough sleepers should be directly involved in designing schemes intended to help them? Given her answer about empty homes, is she aware that there are across the country—including in central London—significantly more empty homes than registered homeless households? Would she be prepared to consider extending the powers of local councils to allow them to take tougher action to bring those empty homes back into use?

Ms Armstrong: I expect rough sleepers and the homeless to be involved in developing any strategy. Outside London, local authorities are in control of strategy. I remind the hon. Gentleman that homelessness is rarely simply a matter of not having housing. Our responsibility is to ensure that we tackle coherently across

Government and Departments the real tragedy of rough sleeping, and we are determined to do that. We believe that we can further reduce the number of people sleeping rough, and that we can tackle the overall problem. That requires everyone—including local authorities—to play their parts.

Regional Assemblies (Social Exclusion)

5. **Ms Hazel Blears** (Salford): If he will make a statement on the potential role of regional assemblies in tackling social exclusion. [112176]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): The eight regional assemblies and chambers are already starting to identify social exclusion issues in their regions and will have an important role in setting the regional context for tackling social exclusion. That will include, for instance, neighbourhood renewal, on which the Government's social exclusion unit is in the process of drawing up a national strategy.

Ms Blears: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Now that we are all comfortable with the fact that there are real disparities in economic performance between and within regions, can she confirm that she will encourage regional development agencies and assemblies to develop policies to tackle unemployment, skill shortages and all the issues that contribute to social exclusion? In particular, will she encourage the sharing of regional good practice on social exclusion, such as the unique Salford school for social entrepreneurs, which is setting up community businesses and giving people real opportunities for the future?

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted to hear of the work taking place in Salford to tackle social exclusion. I shall certainly encourage regional assemblies and RDAs to pick up good practice and spread it. They have a prime responsibility to tackle disadvantage wherever it arises, and to develop and implement strategies to do that. Unless they take account of social exclusion, they will not succeed in uplifting the economic performance of their regions.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): Can the Minister explain why she thinks that the regional assemblies, whose administrative costs alone will be more than £205 million a year, are better placed to tackle the worsening problems of social exclusion than elected and accountable local authorities? Her own Department was condemned by the Government's performance and innovation unit for failing to deliver co-ordination between Departments, for poor cross-cutting and for making unnecessary obstacles in dealing with social exclusion. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has warned that, despite 100 spin-doctored policy announcements about tackling poverty and social exclusion, the problems continue unabated. How long will it be before the Secretary of State loses responsibility for this flagship issue too? The Secretary of State is all talk and no trousers and has all but lost his briefs.

Ms Armstrong: I am sure that the country will be weary of the Tory Opposition failing once again to admit to their responsibilities. The reason we had to set up the RDAs and the reason why regional assemblies were formed—they arose in the regions; the Government did not set them up—was the failure of the previous Administration to address regional imbalances and to understand the yearning in the English regions that their problems should be tackled. The previous Government did nothing; we are developing a coherent regional policy and a strategy to address the problems. People out there know the problems need to be addressed; it is a pity that the Opposition do not.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the regional assemblies and the RDAs are already showing that they are better able to tackle social exclusion and economic problems in their areas? Does she think that, in the long run, they should also be given powers to deal with the problems of education and housing in the regions? They will ensure that we have better answers for local problems and better use of Government resources.

Ms Armstrong: I agree with my hon. Friend that regional assemblies and RDAs already make a significant impact in the regions. It is a pity that the Opposition have not picked up that fact. Perhaps when they do so, we shall see another U-turn. The work that is being done in the regions will be developed over time. We shall work with people in the regions to make sure that the agencies work on what they want locally in a way that produces a real difference.

A10

7. **Mr. James Paice** (South–East Cambridgeshire): When he plans to de–trunk the A10. [112178]

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): No firm date has been fixed for de-trunking the A10. However, the hon. Gentleman may be pleased to know that, during the next financial year, the Highways Agency proposes to install traffic lights at the junction with Butt lane, which I know has been of concern to him.

Mr. Paice: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the courtesy of contacting me to find out what I wanted to raise. However, that does not excuse the fact that, when the Government announced the de-trunking of the A10, they abandoned the two bypasses that were planned north of Cambridge going towards Ely—the Landbeach and the Stretham bypasses. Will he assure me and my constituents that, when the A10 is de-trunked, Cambridgeshire county council—the highways authority—will have the necessary resources to carry out the improvements that his Government abandoned?

Mr. Mullin: I find that extraordinary. The Tories cut road maintenance by 9 per cent. over four years; we have increased it by 10 per cent. In the short time that we have been in office, we have reversed the £200 million cut in local authority maintenance funding. After de-trunking, there will be a transitional funding arrangement; in due

course, it will be integrated into the local transport plans. Funding will be available; it will be rather more generous than that provided by the Conservative Government.

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk): My hon. Friend will know that the A10 is the road from London to my constituency. We also anticipate the de-trunking of the A17, leaving only one trunk road—the A47—through North-West Norfolk. Does he therefore understand that my constituents are impatient for work to be done on improving the last remaining trunk road? They want not only work to be carried out in studies, but to see some progress in dualling the A47.

Mr. Mullin: I share my hon. Friend's concern, but he will know that we have a long backlog of repairs and new projects on which to engage. We have already started 37 of them, including 19 bypasses, and no doubt we shall get round to the one in his constituency in due course.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Why will the Minister not answer the question asked by the hon. Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner)? When will the A47 be dualled? The Government have cut the roads programme and that has left the hon. Gentleman complaining from the Back Benches. When will we have another roads review to reflect other issues, such as the U-turn in the Government's policy for 44-tonne lorries? How is transport better integrated by off-loading trunk roads on to local authorities? Unless all the bypass programmes are restored, how can the Minister possibly come to the House with a policy that will allow 44-tonne lorries to trundle through our towns and villages?

Mr. Mullin: One thing that we shall certainly not return to is the wish list that the previous Government drew up. It did not produce any new roads; it just produced a lot of talk. We have a programme that covers 37 new roads, including 19 bypasses. We always listen with interest to the demands from those on the Tory Front Bench for more public spending. At least, my hon. Friends on the Back Benches have the advantage of being consistent, which is more than can be said for Tory Members.

Social Exclusion

8. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster** (Hastings and Rye): What steps the Government are taking to encourage local authorities to develop services for young people at risk of social exclusion. [112180]

11. **Mr. John Cryer** (Hornchurch): What steps the Government are taking to encourage local authorities to develop services for young people at risk of social exclusion. [112183]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): Reports by the social exclusion unit and others have highlighted the need to develop services for young people and children at risk of social exclusion. We are taking action across government, and a number of Departments are working with local authorities to deliver programmes such as sure start and new deal for communities. In addition, best value will drive up the standard of local authority services, and statutory guidance will encourage authorities to develop cross-cutting approaches to service delivery that focus on the needs of socially excluded sections of society and not on traditional service boundaries.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. The Xtrax centre in Hastings deals with a wide range of issues affecting the excluded young people in that town. However, the withdrawal of lottery and European social funding means that existing projects are often in jeopardy. Will her Department's invest-to-save schemes be available to pick up the shortfall when the other schemes come to an end?

Ms Armstrong: The invest-to-save programmes are very much targeted at how we can, through public investment, make sure that we improve service delivery and enable services to develop in a local area. The recent round of invest-to-save programmes has provided £23 million of funding for local authority-led projects to develop joint working in the delivery of services. Some of those projects, such as those in Milton Keynes and Worcestershire, were specifically targeted at work with young people. I cannot promise my hon. Friend today that his authority will be successful in terms of the next invest-to-save round, but I assure him that we will work with it to find ways in which good practice can be extended and developed.

Mr. Cryer: I acknowledge what my right hon. Friend says and I thank her for her answer. However, will she bear it in mind that even in comparatively affluent and prosperous areas, such as the one that I represent, there are pockets of deprivation and unemployment? The bottom line is that areas such as Havering need more resources—however they are brought to bear—to tackle social exclusion and youth disorder, which is closely associated with it.

Ms Armstrong: I have not yet encountered a local authority that does not say that there are pockets of deprivation in its area. We have been seeking ways to make sure that we measure and recognise those areas more effectively. We are determined to tackle problems wherever they arise, whether or not they are in so-called affluent areas. We are determined also to work with local councils and the local voluntary sector to ensure that our children and young people have the opportunities that they deserve and need if they are to grow up to be the contributing citizens that we all want them to be.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): In all her answers the Minister has missed the point. Would not a more effective and efficient way to help people in danger of social exclusion be to give taxpayers' money to the social services departments that so badly need it—instead of wasting it on more politicians and bureaucrats in unnecessary regional assemblies?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Lady has forgotten that in the last three years of the previous Administration, the money given to local authorities by central Government was reduced in real terms by 4.3 per cent. In the first three years of this Administration, we have increased that sum

by 7.8 per cent. in real terms. We are funding local government so that it can tackle problems that the hon. Lady's Government created.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): When will the Minister recognise that she is speaking a lot of twaddle? Local authorities are strapped for cash. They want to do a lot more for the socially excluded, but they see over £1 billion of their money being drained away into useless regional assemblies and the cost of extra government. Is it not about time that the Government returned that money to local authorities so that they can better help people in need?

Ms Armstrong: Clearly, the hon. Gentleman had worked out that question before I gave my previous answer. The Government have substantially increased, in real terms, the amount going to local government. The hon. Gentleman does not seem to have understood that regional assemblies are not created by the Government or funded by the Government; they are established locally and funded locally.

Coastal Towns

9. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What his strategy is for the regeneration of coastal towns. [112181]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): We are already addressing the needs of coastal towns through the single regeneration budget, the assisted areas map and European structural funds, and regenerating seaside resorts is a high priority in our tourism strategy. Our rural and urban White Papers, to be published later this year, will set out our policies on regeneration for towns, cities and rural areas in England, including coastal towns.

Mr. Blizzard: Much has been made of the so-called north-south divide, but do not the league table of unemployment in travel-to-work areas—which shows that most of the top 20 are coastal towns—and new indices of deprivation that highlight poverty in coastal towns point to a coastal-inland divide? Does my right hon. Friend recognise that poor transport links to coastal towns make them even more peripheral? Does she accept that improved road links to Lowestoft in my constituency are needed to integrate it into the transport system and successfully regenerate the economy?

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend makes the point well and reinforces the Government's policy of governing for the whole country, north and south, east and west and coast to coast. That means that we take seriously the problems in coastal towns, and we seek to ensure that we co-ordinate policies across the board, so that the community as a whole will benefit. That of course includes a determined, robust integrated transport strategy.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am glad that the right hon. Lady mentioned the integrated transport strategy, and I certainly agree that the issues faced by coastal areas are very similar to those faced by inland areas. Will she nudge the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), thank him for agreeing to come to Weymouth in my constituency in June or July to see the brown route and mention to him how important good roads are to visitors to a seaside town and to the general population? I hope that the right hon. Lady will tell us that the Government will stop dragging their feet on giving funding for the brown route.

Ms Armstrong: I have every confidence in the ability of my right hon. and hon. Friends to deal with these issues as they have undertaken to the House that they will do.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I regret to tell the Minister that my constituents and I have no great faith in the Government's strategy for regenerating coastal towns, in the light of the announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister that the Oban coastguard station is to close. That means the loss of 21 jobs and, more important, the loss of local knowledge in that area, which we hope to build up to attract tourism, with increasing maritime activity. I hope that the Minister will persuade the Deputy Prime Minister, who gave us considerable support before the election for the retention of the coastguard stations, to look again at the recommendations of the Transport Sub-Committee and at all the representations that were received, and to reconsider that extremely damaging decision.

Ms Armstrong: I understand the hon. Lady's concern in respect of her constituency, but she knows that the decision arose from a commissioned report from Lord Justice Donaldson. The Government implemented his recommendation.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I draw the Minister's attention to the fine detail in the recent Cabinet Office report on social exclusion, which points out that many coastal towns in west Wales, such as Borth and Cardigan in my constituency, have a level of deprivation equivalent to that in inner cities. How will she ensure that such areas can get the maximum benefit from objective 1 funding in the comprehensive spending review? Will she fight for additionality for coastal towns along the west Wales coast?

Ms Armstrong: Hon. Members are being very inventive in their questions today.

We have addressed the needs of coastal towns, whereas the previous Administration simply ignored them. We are determined that coastal towns will share in the country's increasing prosperity. We shall do what we can to tackle social exclusion. With regard to objective 1, the hon. Gentleman knows that we are working with the authorities and bodies concerned to ensure that the system is fair to the whole country and that local authorities in Wales can play their part in the objective 1 project.

National Walking Forum

10. **Mr. Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton, North): When he plans to establish the national walking forum to implement the national walking strategy. [112182]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): We have already published guidance to local authorities on providing for walking in their local transport plans, and more guidance will be published shortly. That will provide practical advice to planners and practitioners in making it easier, safer and more convenient for people to walk, which we hope will add to the quality of life, especially in our urban areas. We are considering arrangements for continuing consultation with interested parties.

Mr. Hopkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. I am sure that, like me, he is astonished by the statistic that about half of all the traffic on the road between 8.30 am and 9 am is the school run—parents taking their children to school. That creates a serious traffic problem, as well as a health problem. Will my hon. Friend refer the problem to the walking forum when it is established, so that it can propose successful measures to bring the numbers down?

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I should point out to him that a separate body, the schools travel advisory group, already exists. It has already reported on these matters and made a number of helpful recommendations to the Government about ways in which we can encourage families to prise their children out of cars and encourage them to cycle, walk or bus to school, as a healthier alternative to the school run.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Deputy Prime Minister said in the White Paper that too many of us are using a car for a short distance instead of walking. Will the Minister undertake that next year, the Deputy Prime Minister will leave the two Jags at home when he goes to party conference and walk between the conference centre and the hotel?

Mr. Hill: This really is becoming rather tedious. I shall treat the hon. Lady's intervention with the contumely that it deserves.

Forth Rail Bridge

12. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If he will make a statement on the results of his inquiry into the safety and maintenance of the Forth rail bridge. [112184]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I understand that inspectors from the Health and Safety Executive meet regularly with Railtrack to monitor progress against the agreed maintenance plan. The Health and Safety Executive has also undertaken targeted inspections as part of its routine maintenance programme. Railtrack is working to the plan that it produced to comply with the HSE's improvement notice issued in 1996. The HSE's report of its inspection concluded that the bridge was safe; it has no evidence to suggest that the bridge has deteriorated since its inspection. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) yesterday on the matter, and I shall write to the Scottish Executive shortly.

Mr. Dalyell: But deterioration continues. Given that Wilkie-Hooke, the subcontractor for 13 years, has been forced into receivership—blamelessly, in the opinion of its bank chairman, George Younger—and its experienced, skilful and brave employees have been thrown into unemployment by a puerile row between Railtrack and Rigblast, who will carry out the maintenance and painting of the greatest engineering monument to the experience of the 19th century anywhere in Europe, let alone make it safe for rail services north of the border?

Mr. Hill: I understand my hon. Friend's proper anxiety, but the termination of the maintenance contract for the bridge is a commercial matter for Railtrack and its contractor Rigblast, as is the relationship between Rigblast and its subcontractor, Wilkie-Hooke. They are not matters for Ministers' intervention. The key point is that the bridge is safe and that Railtrack is actively planning a programme of work to complete refurbishment of the bridge.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): As someone who uses it regularly, may I say that the condition of the Forth rail bridge is a national disgrace? Is it not time that somebody told Railtrack to show more expedition than it has demonstrated in the years since the matter was first brought up? Surely it is ultimately up to Ministers to do that.

Mr. Hill: The nation knows that the bridge is an epic structure, which needs to be protected, and that it provides an essential route to the highlands. However, let me try to reassure the hon. Gentleman by saying that, to date, Railtrack has invested £25 million in refurbishing the bridge, on recoating, new floodlighting and repairs to the steel structure. It will shortly appoint a new contractor to complete the work on the walkways, carry out minor steelwork repairs and enable the bridge to be painted.

Housing Investment

13. **Mr. Ivor Caplin** (Hove): If he will make a statement on housing investment. [112185]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): The Government have provided a massive boost—around £5 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament—in resources for housing investment that deliver real improvements in the quality of life and well-being of many low-income households. As a result, local authority housing investment programmes have been increased by no less than 48 per cent. in the coming year. That is part of a comprehensive range of measures to tackle the major housing problems inherited from the previous Government.

Mr. Caplin: I welcome the Government's new investment in an important part of the United Kingdom's infrastructure. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the new

investment that the Government propose will be used effectively to tackle the important social housing needs that exist in many constituencies such as mine?

Mr. Raynsford: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. We are not only providing resources to enable local authorities to tackle the backlog but putting in place proper provision through the best value regime to ensure that authorities achieve real value for money and continually improve the quality of the services that they offer. That is part of the Government's commitment not only to reversing the investment shortfall that we inherited, but to creating a proper climate for efficient delivery of public services to people in need.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The figure has gone up 48 per cent. compared with last year's, which was lamentably low. Does the Minister accept that the figures are £27 billion invested by us in four years in the previous Parliament, compared with £24.1 billion projected through to the fourth year of this Government—a fall of some £3 billion? If he denies that, will he tell me and the House straightforwardly whether the figures for homeless acceptances—which, after all, must be the litmus test of whether the Government are investing in housing—have gone up or down?

Mr. Raynsford: I remind the hon. Gentleman that, by the end of this Parliament, capital investment by local authorities and registered social landlords together will be double that which we inherited from the Conservative Government. That is the truth and I can assure him that we are ensuring that the needs of the homeless are met. As he will know only too well, the numbers have been high because housing provision is not made overnight and recovery is taking time after years of neglect and under-investment by the Conservative Government. However, we are addressing those needs and providing the homes, unlike his party, which has spent most of today trying to make cheap political points at the expense of the homeless by saying, "Don't build any houses in the south of England."

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend and his colleagues on the record housing investment and the change to resource accounting, which are in the sharpest possible contrast with the devastation of house building and housing investment over the past two decades. However, is he aware that my constituency in the inner area of Luton has an acute need for larger refurbished homes? Will he redouble his efforts in discussions with the Chancellor to encourage my right hon. Friend to amend the rules on VAT on refurbishment, thereby making best use of housing investment moneys?

Mr. Raynsford: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are very keen to ensure that we achieve the best possible use of resources. Of course, matters relating to taxation are entirely for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. However, I stress that the Government are not afraid of meeting their responsibilities. We recognise the extent of poverty and deprivation and the wide range of housing needs which have not been adequately met as a result of the previous Government's lamentable failure. We are putting that right and, over this Parliament and the next, following a successful general election, we shall ensure that the whole country properly provides for the needs of all its population.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): A great many houses—several million of which are more than 100 years old and received improvement grants 30 years ago—are sick and need money spending on them. Does the Minister recognise that unless the Government are prepared to invest, and unless we have a housing programme that includes several hundred million pounds to enable local authorities to make greater use of discretionary awards, we shall return to the days of the bulldozer and slum clearance and have an even worse housing problem?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point about the backlog of poor-condition properties—many of them in the private sector—in need of renovation. He will want to know that our forthcoming housing Green Paper will set out a number of important new proposals to attack the problem of disrepair in all sectors, including the private sector, with new and imaginative approaches. I obviously cannot give him the details, but I can assure him that when the Green Paper is published, which will be in the reasonably near future, he will welcome many of its proposals.

Eurostar

14. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): Under what circumstances he would make available public subsidy to support Eurostar services north of London. [112186]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): The British Railways Board has a statutory duty to prepare a plan for international through-services. It can consider whether such services should receive subsidy. The board is reviewing its plan for international through-services, which I understand it expects to complete in the summer. Subject to the passage of the Transport Bill, the Strategic Rail Authority will have a duty to produce a strategy for rail services from various parts of Great Britain using the channel tunnel. It will also have powers to subsidise any such service if it decides that is appropriate.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my hon. Friend for that rather subdued answer.

North of London, many strong views are expressed about the positive contribution that Eurostar services would make to economic activity and new jobs. How firm is the Government's commitment to the establishment of Eurostar services north of London?

Mr. Hill: We have made clear our belief that those living beyond London should have convenient and effective access to channel tunnel rail services. As the matter is subject to a BRB review, however, it would be wrong for Ministers to prejudice that review and its outcome at this stage.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Is not the Minister really just trying to disguise a rowing back of what the Government have previously said? It was apparent that the plan was for Eurostar services to run out of a newly

redeveloped terminal at King's Cross and St. Pancras. Does the Minister accept that, if such services are not introduced in due course, people in the north and the midlands will rightly blame the Government?

Mr. Hill: We are fully aware of the strength of feeling about this matter. That is why we commissioned the A.D. Little review, which has reported. The BRB is reviewing that report, and we anxiously await the results of its review, which is to be published in the summer.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Has Richard Branson's Virgin Trains made any offer to run Eurostar north of London? I have no objection to that, but I think that many people throughout the country would object if the company were given the east coast franchise. That would mean no competition from north to south; fares would go sky-high, and we would receive a much poorer service in Cumbria.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend, who is a great expert on all matters relating to the west coast main line, will know that we asked A.D. Little to consider the Virgin group's proposals as part of its review. He also knows that Virgin subsequently withdrew its proposals. All the rail franchises are clearly due to be considered in the near future, and again I think it would be inappropriate at this point for the Government to make any public pronouncement on the desirability or otherwise of potential bidders and operators of those franchises.

Regional Government

15. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will make a statement on his plans for regional government. [112187]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): We are committed to moving to directly elected regional government in England where there is a demand for it expressed in a referendum.

Mr. Brady: Now that the Government's initiative for regional government in London has descended into utter farce, is it not time for them to abandon their other experiments in regional government, realising that they are expensive and unwanted? Would not the proper way of giving the regions a strong voice be for Members to speak out for the interests of their regions, rather than wasting hundreds of millions of pounds on unnecessary bureaucracy?

Ms Armstrong: The true centralising features of the Opposition are coming out. We know that there are significant differences between regions, and that regions express their differences in very different ways. Far from regional government being hugely unpopular, many Conservative councillors and normally Conservative-supporting business people are involved in both regional development agencies and regional assemblies. If the hon. Gentleman is not aware of that, perhaps he would like to meet some of those people, and try to explain the Tory centralising policy of abolishing RDAs and abandoning the regions yet again.

South Downs National Park

16. **Dr. Desmond Turner** (Brighton, Kemptown): If he will make a statement on the progress towards the establishment of a national park in the south downs. [112188]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): Following my request last September, the Countryside Agency has reviewed the interpretation of the statutory criteria for designation of national parks, taking into account modern needs for open-air recreation close to where people live. Following that review, the agency board is expected to decide at its April meeting how to proceed in respect of a national park in the south downs.

Dr. Turner: As I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware, there are those who have still not accepted the principle of the protection of national park status for areas in the south downs. The area to be circumscribed by the new national park is therefore critically important, and the intention of establishing such a park will be entirely subverted if too many—or, indeed, any—significant areas are excluded from the existing area of outstanding natural beauty. Does my right hon. Friend accept that, to protect an area and to defend it against pressures, whatever they are—there are many on the south downs—protection should start at the margins?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend is right to identify the two particular issues that have to be determined by the Countryside Agency. The first is the identification of the boundary. The agency is starting with the south downs and with the east Hampshire AONBs, but, as I have said, it has reviewed the criteria and will have to decide on the boundaries that are appropriate in accordance with the new criteria. The other issues that remain to be determined are planning and financial arrangements. I also expect the agency to deal with those as a matter of priority.

Planning

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): With permission, I should like to make a statement about national planning guidance for housing and my regional planning guidance for the south-east.

Over the weekend, hon. Members will have seen press reports relating to the statement. Much of what was reported had already been announced to the House in earlier statements, but I regret and denounce the leaks, as I have said before in the House, and I am doing all that I can to prevent them.

Today I am putting in place policies that will radically alter the way in which we build new homes in this country. I want an end to the wasteful, badly located and poorly designed house building that has gone on for the past 20 years. New housing developments can be well-designed, attractive, well-located and in sustainable places to live. They do not have to take up endless acres of our beautiful countryside.

In February 1998, I set out clear principles in my statement to the House on "Planning for the Communities of the Future". Let me remind the House of them. Everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home. We want to see thriving communities in our towns and cities—what Lord Rogers called an urban renaissance. Our housing plans should support sustainable economic growth in all regions. There is a need to use land efficiently. Land is a finite and precious resource which we must conserve wherever possible.

We must have greater respect for our countryside. That is why we have set a national target that 60 per cent. of new homes should use recycled land or buildings. That compares with the previous Government's target of 50 per cent. Finally, we must seek to reduce car dependence by facilitating more walking and cycling, and improve access between housing, jobs, local services and local amenities by planning for mixed use.

I am today publishing our new planning policy guidance note 3 on housing and our response to the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs on the draft guidance note.

Today's new planning guidance for England is not just for individuals, but for thriving communities. Important changes in life styles are taking place in England and throughout Europe, which are leading to an increase in households greater than the population growth. No one is asking members of the public to change their existing home, but new homes for additional households must provide the variety and choice to meet the needs of the future. I emphasise that 70 per cent. of new households over the next 20 years will be single person households.

Some will be youngsters setting up home. Some will be people living independently of their families. Some will be elderly people living longer. They will not all want, or be able to afford, executive houses in the countryside. Many will need well-designed, well-located homes for rent or to buy that are affordable and that give them a range of choice and a better quality of life. We must therefore plan for those changes.

First, the new sequential approach that is central to our new guidance means that planning authorities must in future give preference to recycling previously developed sites and empty properties—brownfield first, greenfield last.

Secondly, if we are to preserve our countryside and make the best use of spare capacity in our towns, we must make more efficient use of land.

Thirdly, housing must be more affordable. Too many developments make no provision for people on modest incomes. We shall enable local authorities to secure a proportion of affordable housing in larger housing developments, both in urban and in rural areas. That will benefit many single people, low-income families and key workers, such as nurses, teachers and others.

Finally, we must promote mixed-use developments, which integrate housing with shops, local services, transport and jobs. We need sustainable communities, not simply bricks and mortar.

These policies will apply across all the regions of England. Regional planning guidance will put them into practice. The first regional planning guidance will be for the south-east of England, but others will follow in due course.

The south-east is relatively well off, but it lags behind the most prosperous European regions. Moreover, just as in other regions, there are significant areas of unemployment and deprivation within London and the south-east itself. This Government, unlike the previous one, are determined to see fairer sharing in the benefits of growth both between and within regions. One of the reasons why we have established regional development agencies in England's regions is to tackle such disparities.

As I am on that subject, may I just lay to rest one myth perpetuated by the Opposition today, and repeated by the BBC? Let there be no doubt that demand for additional housing in the south-east is not the result of massive north-south migration, but mainly the result of migration within the south-east, particularly from London to surrounding towns and villages.

In deciding how many additional homes need to be provided, I have had to weigh very carefully the different views presented to me. Local authorities in the south-east—known collectively as Serplan, the south-east regional planning committee—proposed that, over 20 years, there should be up to 718,000 additional homes outside London. The proposals were examined in public by a panel led by Professor Stephen Crow, which concluded that provision should be made for 1.1 million additional homes outside London.

All Governments have to make judgments on such strategic issues. Serplan was understandably concerned about the number of new homes to be built in the south-east. However, it failed to take account of future housing needs; did not make provision for affordable housing or account for the growth of single person households; and assumed that there would be the same wasteful use of land as there has been in the recent past.

The Crow panel, for its part, applied a rigid predict and provide approach, and it did not pay sufficient attention to the capacity of London and the south-east to absorb and plan for growth sustainably.

I believe that we must take a different approach. I shall consult local authorities in the south-east on the basis that they should plan, monitor and manage housing provision in their region.

Local authorities should plan to provide 43,000 additional dwellings a year outside London, subject to regular review not less than every five years. It is clear that, using the old 20-year predict and provide system, 43,000 homes annually would add up to 860,000 new homes in total. However, we have moved away from a 20-year plan to our new approach of plan, monitor and manage. No one can with certainty predict how many extra households will exist in 20 years. Our benchmark of 43,000 homes annually is approximately 10 per cent. more than the current rate of construction in the south-east. Professor Crow's recommendations implied a 40 per cent. increase.

Based on the advice of the London Planning Advisory Committee, London should plan to provide 23,000 new homes a year, the vast majority of which will be on brownfield sites. That is a 22 per cent. increase on current build rates and is accepted both by me and, I believe, by all parties. Local authorities should, therefore, plan for that amount of building.

Planning authorities should monitor against a series of indicators, such as house prices and changes in housing stock and vacancies. They should manage and, if necessary, adjust the rate of development in the light of such monitoring.

Additionally, I propose that 60 per cent. of all new homes in the south-east should be provided on brownfield sites. I am determined that we should take as little greenfield land as is necessary to provide the new homes that will be needed. Our proposals will save 42 square miles of countryside compared with Professor Crow's—enough to build a city the size of Manchester.

Our proposals will provide homes for more people, but because of our policies for less land take, they will use no more land than the Serplan proposals. Our new guidance makes it clear that the Thames gateway will remain a focus for development. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) for his vision of a thriving Thames gateway. Under our plans, which will include an extension of the Thames gateway area and new delivery mechanisms, the area will become a hub for development and regeneration, with fast links to London and Europe.

After brownfield development, the most sustainable greenfield option is to build town extensions. In the south-east I propose that we should investigate the potential for high-quality, well-planned development in two main areas: Milton Keynes and Ashford in Kent. They will all be subject to further studies, which will be taken into account in the next review of planning guidance. For the longer term, consideration will also be given to the possibility of growth in the M11 corridor, including Stansted.

My statement strikes the right balance between competing demands. We are proposing the most radical changes since Labour's Town and Country Planning Act 1947. The old predict and provide approach to housing, which under the Tories gave us urban sprawl, out-of-town shopping and pepper-pot development, is dead. We have adopted a new, more flexible approach that will conserve greenfield land and improve the quality and design of housing developments. It provides for good-quality housing, good design and a range of choice that meets people's needs. I commend the proposals to the House.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's statement and I thank him for the advance copy, which I received just before Question Time. We have come to learn that when he has bad news to announce, it is briefed to the newspapers first and to the House last. It is therefore no surprise that we have already read what the Government would like us to believe in Saturday's and Sunday's papers. The Deputy Prime Minister says that he regrets the leaks, but the Minister for Housing and Planning was on the airwaves on Sunday and this morning briefing with the gist of the statement.

The statement will be greeted with dismay across the south-east. No matter how hard the Deputy Prime Minister tries to scramble the arithmetic, nothing can disguise the volume of housing being imposed against the wishes of local authorities on towns, villages and countryside in the most congested part of the country.

Of course we welcome the changes in planning guidance designed to encourage building on brownfield sites—although we do not believe that the proposals go far enough—and to give local authorities greater control over the type and character of the housing built locally.

I must however remind the House of the facts that lie behind the announcement. In response to pressure from the Government, Serplan recommended a total of 668,000 houses—not the figure that the Deputy Prime Minister has just quoted—to be built over 20 years. That is the equivalent of 33,000 a year. Professor Crow—the inspector appointed by the Deputy Prime Minister—then produced an alternative report recommending a total of 1.1 million houses, which is the equivalent of 54,000 a year. Will the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that, although he talks about 43,000 houses a year and a five-year time horizon, the reality is that over 20 years that will add up to 900,000 houses—equivalent to the building of eight towns the size of Slough? That is substantially ahead of Serplan and will absorb green fields all over the south-east.

Is it not an inevitable consequence of building on such a scale that a large proportion of green fields will be lost for ever? How does the Deputy Prime Minister conclude that no extra green fields will be used up when he is planning to build 200,000 more houses than Serplan recommended? As housing is one issue that remains his direct area of responsibility, I have some specific questions for him.

Since the right hon. Gentleman states that emigration from London is one of the problems that he is trying to address, can he explain how much emigration from London and the town centres in the south-east is implied by his new target? What evidence does he have for his incredible claim that there is no implied migration at all from the cities of the north?

What are the implications of the right hon. Gentleman's projections for congestion in the south-east? In particular, how many extra miles of road will be needed? How many extra school places will be needed? How will the cost of that infrastructure be met? Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell us—since it was leaked to *The Observer* on Sunday—what representations he has made to the Treasury regarding the possibility of lowering the rate of VAT on brownfield conversions, or is this yet another issue where he has been rolled over by the Treasury?

[Mr. Archie Norman]

What advice does the Deputy Prime Minister have for local authorities which are now preparing local plans that will have an effect far beyond the five-year period, or is this five-year review a gimmick to avoid focusing on the real target of 900,000 houses over 20 years?

What proportion of the new housing will be suitable for single people and elderly people living alone? Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that the majority of houses will be multi-occupational, and that virtually all the houses built on greenfield sites will be multi-occupational? Is that not totally at odds with the Government's own household projections, resulting in the wrong houses in the wrong places?

Does the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledge that, with this announcement, he has given the lie to his own statement to this House on 23 February 1998, when he said in relation to housing that

Decentralisation is an essential aim of the Government?—[*Official Report*, 23 February 1998; Vol. 307, c. 22.]

Is not the fact that he has come down from his castle in Hull to tell people in Sussex, Kent and Surrey exactly how many houses will be built, despite the wishes of local councils, a vivid illustration that the system is actually more centralised than ever?

Is it not the truth that this is a black day for the south-east, a disaster for the countryside and a disaster for the inner cities? Is not the real truth that, with this announcement, the Deputy Prime Minister is forcing local authorities in the south-east of England to build the wrong houses in the wrong places against the wishes of almost all local authorities? Is not this truly the end of the Deputy Prime Minister's claim that this Government are the greenest ever?

Mr. Prescott: That is clearly pathetic. Also, the hon. Gentleman has taken no account of the statement I made, in which most of his questions were answered.

The hon. Gentleman seems to doubt that we can achieve the target figure and use less land or the same amount of land as in the Serplan report. It is an argument of density. In the south-east, there are approximately 24 houses per hectare. We are saying clearly that density can be increased to between 30 or 50 houses in urban areas where people want to live. We want to encourage people to live in better-quality communities in better-designed houses, and in urban areas and brownfield, rather than greenfield, sites. It is a simple calculation that the hon. Gentleman will have made in business, where he made most of his money. However, he needs to do it now in the political sense.

It is a bit much for the hon. Gentleman to criticise me and the Government on greenfield sites. We have increased the amount of greenfield and greenbelt land in this country since we came to power. He was a director of a company involved in the encouragement by the previous Administration of the growth of out-of-town shopping centres. There were 190 such centres in 1979, and 1,100 when the Conservatives left office. More greenbelt land was used by Asda and the rest of the out-of-town shopping centres than by any other developments in this country. At least the hon. Gentleman had the decency, when he was a director of Railtrack, not to speak on safety. It would have been better if he had had the decency not to talk about greenfield sites as a member of Asda's board, which was involved in the rush to build on greenfield sites.

The figures can be achieved through the monitoring and planning process that I have outlined. The hon. Gentleman made another mistake because he clearly had not listened to the statement. Under the old predict and provide policy, the figures were set for 20 years and then disaggregated down for a figure for every local authority to observe. That is wrong; it is much more sensible to set the figures for five years, monitor progress and review the results, and then make any necessary changes. That is better than imposing figures based on a 20-year prediction.

I liked the bit in which the hon. Gentleman said that I would be centrally commanding the situation and directing local authorities. The hon. Gentleman was not a member of the previous Government, but I shall give him some more information about what happened when the Tories were in power. In 1995-96, the Berkshire structure plan proposed 37,000 additional homes, but the Tories imposed 40,000 on the area. Kent county council proposed 113,000 additional homes, but the Tories imposed 116,000 on it. Bedfordshire proposed 47,200 additional homes, but the Tories imposed 49,300 on it.

In fairness, I shall also give the hon. Gentleman some information about our record. When 33,000 dwellings were proposed for Cheshire, the Labour Government allowed it only 31,000. Devon was faced with 83,000 dwellings, but we allowed only 79,000. Gloucester was faced with 53,000, but we agreed a reduction to only 50,000. That is the comparison with the previous Administration both in the establishment of targets and in flexibility when dealing with local authorities. We seek to work towards a solution, in contrast to the ideological requirements that the Tories imposed on local government.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that people in counties such as Berkshire—which, as he has pointed out, had 3,000 extra homes imposed on it over and above the Tory-controlled county council's allocation—will welcome the end of the discredited predict and provide policies? Does he recognise that we need affordable housing in the south-east, especially for first-time buyers and key workers in essential industries? For the south-east to survive and to be the engine room of our economy, we need a sustainable housing policy and an end to the absurd situation in my constituency, where two fire-fighters cannot afford to buy properties, because of lack of supply in the Thames valley, and have to commute from Lincolnshire and Dorset. We need to provide houses and homes at affordable prices for workers to sustain our essential public services, whatever area of the country we may live in.

Mr. Prescott: I agree with my hon. Friend and indeed we do wish to end the predict and provide model. In the plan and monitor guidance that we will give local authorities, we will make it clear that affordable housing must be given considerable priority, especially in mixed-use development, to ensure that it happens. That allows the Government to make a judgment about the

plans and to work with the local authorities to ensure that the needs of all the people are met, not just those who want executive houses in the south-east.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): How can we have confidence that the Deputy Prime Minister has carefully weighed the two options before him, when it appears that he has merely split the difference between them? How can we have confidence that his statement is not another example of centralised planning, when he proposes 142,000 more homes than experts on the ground in the region believe are necessary? Does he agree that we should talk more about creating new homes than about building new houses? In the south-east, excluding London, there are 130,000 empty homes. Why are we not taking tougher action to bring those empty homes back into use? Why are we not taking tougher action to make better use of existing housing stock? Is it not crazy that we charge VAT on the renovation of buildings but there is no VAT on new build?

Finally, is not the Deputy Prime Minister just whistling in the wind in believing that most of these new houses will be built on brownfield sites? He must be prepared to take the tough action that is needed to ensure that most are built on brownfield sites. He must give support for brownfield site development, and also tax any developments on greenfield sites.

Mr. Prescott: Tax matters will be settled by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as the hon. Gentleman will know. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] All Ministers have to give that answer sometimes, especially before Budgets. It is the proper answer to give, although that is not to say that Ministers and Chancellors do not discuss such matters. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but such decisions are made by Chancellors.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I think that the housing targets can be achieved. I believe that they can, and without a greater land take than that suggested by Serplan. One has to make judgments about densities. I believe that more people will want to live in cities if those cities are good enough to live in. I do not think that we have achieved that yet, but that has more to do with the many other factors involved in community living, such as crime, education and the environment. That is why the planning guidance makes clear the need to achieve sustainable communities.

The argument over density or land take is very important. It was discussed by Lord Rogers in his report on "Urban Renaissance", and he made it clear that the density levels that have been set out would be possible.

In Europe, those levels are normal. In the United Kingdom in general—and in the south-east in particular—density levels are very low. No one would say that a village such as Poundbury was heavily built up, but 40 houses per hectare is the average there. The millennium village that we are planning will have 80 homes or households per hectare. That is the density range that can be adopted, and achieving it represents a challenge to builders, architects and communities alike. I believe that it is possible, and the regional planning guidance makes it clear that we should achieve that.

As for achieving the proposed density levels on brownfield sites, I have made it clear that local authorities and housing authorities will have to use brownfield sites in preference to greenfield sites. However, even if the target is for densities of 50 or 60 per cent. on brownfield sites, we all agree that that will mean that we end up with 40 or 50 per cent. on other sites, or on sites where there is existing accommodation.

I believe that we can achieve that target, which I set some time ago. Since the Government came to power, there has been an increase of 2 per cent. in the number of homes being built on brownfield sites. We have set the target for 2008, and I think that we will achieve it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I am now looking for very brisk questions to the Secretary of State. Hon. Members should ask him only one, very brisk question, and I am sure that the Secretary of State will oblige with his responses.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Is it possible for the map of brownfield sites in the south-east to be published? Also, many houses in my constituency—

Madam Speaker: Order. Given that so many hon. Members want to question the Secretary of State, I can allow only one question at a time. The entire House is getting to its feet to catch my eye, and I must safeguard the rest of the day's business.

Mr. Prescott: If it will help, Madam Speaker, I shall answer only one question at a time, even if more than one is asked.

Madam Speaker: That is very kind. Then you can select the question that you want to answer.

Mr. Prescott: That had dawned on me when I offered my co-operation, Madam Speaker.

The registration of brownfield land is an important matter. That is why we established the national land-use data bank. We hope to publish the information shortly, so that people can see where the brownfield sites are. I hope that that will help people to increase the pressure to build on those pieces of land in their areas.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Deputy Prime Minister has fingered my constituency of Ashford for large-scale growth—an act of environmental vandalism that will cause justifiable anger. Does he acknowledge that any large development in that area will inevitably be on greenfield sites? Will not his rhetoric today about brownfield sites first and greenfield sites second seem like only so much hot air unless he agrees to drop the proposals?

Mr. Prescott: I think that I made it clear that, although the priority is for brownfield sites, we envisage that there will be new developments as well. In that context, I mentioned Milton Keynes and Ashford. The recommendation regarding Ashford does not come only from me. The Kent structure plans of 1984 and 1996 both suggested that Ashford was an important area for economic development. I agree with them.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): May I tell my right hon. Friend that there are areas in the south-east, north of Hastings, where substantial housing could be built subject only to construction of a bypass? Will he consider, when the report comes out, allowing a bypass so that it can be used effectively for the building of houses?

Mr. Prescott: It is an important question. We made it clear in the White Paper on transport and in the plans that we hope to bring before the House shortly that bypasses can play an important part in economic regeneration as well as environmental considerations and housing. I made that clear in statements to the House as well. Bypasses are an essential part of what we call the sustainable communities.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): If Elmbridge borough council in Surrey does not think that it can meet the targets originally set by Serplan, how on earth can it meet the targets set by the Deputy Prime Minister today, when there are no brownfield sites left in the borough?

Mr. Prescott: I hope that after what it has heard today the council will look at my proposals. I will be discussing the implications with local authorities, but that takes me back to density. Their concern was that they did not have enough land. These proposals for households are greater than those proposed by Serplan covering the whole of the south-east, but by using higher densities local authorities can achieve the building of more households without taking more land. As to whether we can force them, the previous Administration was pretty good at forcing local authorities to accept their housing projections, even though they were against them.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Will my right hon. Friend accept the congratulations of Labour Members on a very skilful performance on the tightrope? Will he confirm that not building sufficient houses will lead to house price inflation, with a disastrous effect on the country's economy, while building too many will ruin our green fields? Will he also confirm that high-density housing will be provided with services so that we do not make the mistakes made in the 1960s, resulting in high-density housing and poor services for the people living in it?

Mr. Prescott: I record my appreciation to my hon. Friend for the work done by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. We have responded to his Committee's report today, and it was helpful in arriving at some of these deliberations. Anybody reading the Committee's report will know that many of the issues that I have mentioned today were debated in that Committee, and very often supported by its members. I am grateful for that.

House pricing is a matter of great concern which needs a great deal of attention. It is also associated with the shortage of available houses. There are a number of reasons, but that is one of them. For the life of me, I cannot accept the Tories' proposal that the decision should be made by local authorities. A local authority has only to say that it believes in housing but that it should be built in another authority's area. If they all refuse to have any housing development in their areas, that will result in a phenomenal increase in house prices and do very little to meet the needs of ordinary people trying to secure homes.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): Will the right hon. Gentleman give an undertaking to the House this afternoon that no further planning of houses will be allowed in West Sussex without the incremental improvement in infrastructure that is so long overdue?

Mr. Prescott: In sustainable communities, matters other than houses have to be considered, such as transport, housing design, and density of housing. I am trying to bring a more flexible approach to bear on them. One authority in West Sussex was proposing to reduce development by 25 per cent., which was totally unacceptable. I hope that these new proposals will be more acceptable to the local authority and that it can achieve the kind of housing development in the area that it wants.

Mrs. Christine Butler (Castle Point): Which constituencies or local authorities will be in the extended Thames gateway? I thought that I heard my right hon. Friend say that he was committed to an extension of the Thames gateway area. As a person from south Essex, I would be delighted if south Essex were to be part of it.

Mr. Prescott: It is right that we said that we will extend the Thames gateway area. We wish to change the rather loose arrangements for its development, and I shall be making an announcement shortly about the new development body for that area.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I welcome the reduction from the Crow proposals, but the Secretary of State's statement will be taken badly in my area because it seems as if there will be many more houses than under the previous Government's plans. Will he confirm that Berkshire will be able to say no to any new settlement south of the M4, although I think that he will say the opposite? Does not his statement mean that he will drive not just his two Jags and one Rover, but a bulldozer across the face of rural England, deeply scarring the countryside?

Mr. Prescott: Welcome back.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) is not cheering.

Mr. Prescott: At least we can laugh at what the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) says.

In reality, all authorities in the south-east will take account of my guidance, which is more flexible and better than the predict-and-build approach previously taken. I think that it will help local authorities, and I hope that they will approach development more co-operatively than they did in the past. The right hon. Gentleman's local paper, the *Wokingham Times* made it clear that it is crucial to have

a mix of homes to suit everyone.

The present plan does not provide that, but we intend to do so.

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): Most level-headed people in the Thames gateway area of north Kent will welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and recognise the opportunities that it presents. Does he agree that many brownfield sites that we want to see developed to their full potential require substantial investment on infrastructure and on opening up before major development can occur? What robust bodies and mechanisms does my right hon. Friend envisage to provide that within the Thames gateway?

Mr. Prescott: It is indeed important to secure proper investment for the Thames gateway. The previous Government took a good initiative, and we are supporting and extending it. The connection of any major investment in development with transport communications is important. Ashford and the Thames gateway are closely connected with the channel tunnel rail link, which we had to rescue following its collapse under the previous Government. The link is now on budget and on time, and that will allow it to play a major role in development of the Thames gateway and Ashford. Regional development agencies will also have a major role to play, and they have already begun to plan development, a process that will be helped by my statement.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): Will the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions look again at the potential damage that his proposals are likely to cause to the green fields of Bedfordshire? Does he recognise that, to achieve a mere 50 per cent. of development on brownfield sites, the present figures already take his density increases into account? If the extra 21,000 houses proposed by the Crow report were built, the figures would be closer to 30 per cent. brownfield development and 70 per cent. greenfield.

Mr. Prescott: I think that I made it clear—most people heard me—that I do not accept the Crow report's recommendations. I have given my reasons for that. The numbers that I have accepted are compatible with the land take of Serplan, and are a good compromise, which should be welcome to all concerned. Brownfield sites have a higher priority than greenfield sites but, even under the previous Government, something like 50 per cent. of households were built on greenfield sites—the inevitable implication of having a target of 50 per cent. on brownfield sites. We are attempting to improve the position and have moved from 50 to 52 per cent. We have set a target to 2008, and we are going in the right direction. My statement will provide a major impetus for development on brownfield sites.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): While my right hon. Friend's first regional planning guidance has been on the south-east, will he confirm that the criteria announced in his statement are national, and that the principle of brown field first, green field last and a rejection of overdue reliance on increased traffic density will be in his mind when any case comes before him?

Mr. Prescott: Yes, I can confirm that. I made a national statement about the principles that will apply to housing. My right hon. Friend knows that each region sets its own plans, and those will be produced presently and publicly discussed. When each one comes to me, I shall take the same approach to it as I do to plans for the south-east region.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): As Southend-on-Sea is outside the Thames gateway, we will be exempt from this massive house-building programme. However, if the Secretary of State decides to include us, will he give us a guarantee that extra cash will be provided for secondary schools, bearing in mind that there is not one spare space in any secondary school in my constituency? Will he make extra cash available to provide the necessary facilities if Southend is included?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the support of essential infrastructure such as education. As he must be aware, we have put a considerable amount of money into education. As we implement the plans, we shall continue to take into account the problem that he describes.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): In Dartford, in the Thames gateway, 80 per cent. of housing is being built on brownfield sites. Our target is 86 per cent.—20 per cent. will be for social housing. When we build new communities, as we are doing, can we ensure that the character of existing communities is protected and enhanced?

Mr. Prescott: It is important that we do that. Indeed, the essence of sustainable communities is that we maintain and build on their existing life. I want to see greater community spirit in some of our housing areas. We have built many soulless estates—with more concern for the construction of houses than for the construction of communities. The emphasis in this plan is on building communities.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): How can the Secretary of State pretend that his policy is brown field first, green field last, when his first major action was to approve the largest-ever house-building programme on greenbelt land—10,000 houses in my constituency? As the electorate have turfed out the Lib-Lab coalition of concrete merchants from Hertfordshire county council, why does the right hon. Gentleman persist in giving approval to this plan? Does that not discredit his pretence that he does not believe in central direction? Until he changes his mind, he will not be believed on planning matters—in Hertfordshire or anywhere else in the country.

Mr. Prescott: I appreciate the point made by the right hon. Gentleman. He has made it on several occasions. However, it was his authority that recommended the programme; the planning inspector endorsed it and I endorsed the principles that they set before me. The programme also involves a major transport corridor—like the channel tunnel rail link and Ashford. It forms part of the attempt to ensure that there is growth and development around transport corridors.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Given my right hon. Friend's support for affordable housing, can he assure us that any new homes that are built will have the support of local authorities, so that the authorities can rent them out

[Ms Claire Ward]

and we do not have to rely on housing associations? In many cases, council rents are considerably lower than those of housing associations. That is real affordability.

Mr. Prescott: Those are important points—we are most concerned about such matters. We want to work in partnership with local authorities to provide affordable homes. Indeed, we shall shortly produce a housing Green Paper which will deal with the very real problems that my hon. Friend has mentioned.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What guarantees can the Secretary of State give about the integrity of the green belt?

Mr. Prescott: We have always made it clear that a Labour Government introduced the principle of the green belt. We have considerably increased the green belt since we came into office. That is a good indication of our desire to maintain it.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and the fact that he has rejected the Crow report, and so will many of my constituents. He is aware that in West Sussex, which borders my constituency, there have been 10 years of commercial and retail store building—none of those projects involved house building. That is why we need to build more affordable housing in Sussex so that people can have proper and effective places to live.

Hon. Members: Rubbish.

Mr. Prescott: I note that Opposition Members are shouting "Rubbish" at my hon. Friend's claim that there should be affordable housing. That is precisely the point. The Opposition seem to be more concerned about executive housing than about homes for ordinary people. Affordable housing is our priority. The land should be provided and there should be decent communities. That is what we intend to do; it is fundamentally different from the record of the previous Conservative Administration and from the intentions of the Opposition.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The Deputy Prime Minister should not hear imaginary voices. In West Sussex, he has increased by 30 per cent. the number of homes that the inquiry recommended. Will he increase further the figures that he managed by legal tricks to get through judicial review, and will he protect the Goring gap?

Mr. Prescott: It is amazing that a former Minister should talk about legal tricks when he must have received legal advice and acted on it. I know that lawyers cannot always be trusted, but Ministers must take the legal advice that is given to them.

In the new approach to the matter, local authorities should consider our proposals carefully and enter into co-operation. That will provide a better housing solution than the one that we have at present.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): I welcome the positive news in my right hon. Friend's statement that there is a possibility that there will be an area of plan-led expansion in the Bedford, Northampton and Milton Keynes triangle. That is potentially the most sustainable approach to this issue. Will he assure me that there will be thorough local consultation on how the plans are developed and that there will be an attempt at all times to match jobs with new housing to achieve the sustainable outcome that we all need?

Mr. Prescott: It is important to identify growth, prosperity and jobs along with the developments in housing. We established the regional development bodies to consider precisely how we can develop indigenous assets in the regions and, at the same time, reduce the differentials in growth that exist within regions. The development agencies, the planned reports and the studies that we are conducting will, I hope, bring all those matters together. We cannot have a happy community with high levels of unemployment. Jobs, prosperity and community development go hand in hand.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): In east Kent in general and in Herne Bay in particular, water supplies are scarce, primary and secondary schools are full, doctors' surgeries are full, the secondary road system is inadequate and police services are at full stretch. We are trying to reduce housing density, but the Deputy Prime Minister has just announced that he intends to increase it. Has he discussed that with the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment and for Health, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Home Secretary? Has he got their consent to go ahead with this ludicrous plan?

Mr. Prescott: Clearly, all the problems that the hon. Gentleman described did not start on 1 May 1997 when the Government came to power. He knows that it takes a considerable time to solve the problems that we inherited from the previous Administration.

Mr. Gale: Two years, and 10,000 asylum seekers.

Mr. Prescott: In two years, we have made considerable advances in investment in public services, transport and in the channel tunnel rail link, the plans for which collapsed under the previous Administration. To that extent, we will take into account regeneration aspects and growth factors. As I said earlier, we have to take account of the growth in school numbers and we have an obligation to do so. Indeed, much of our money has been provided to reduce class sizes. All those factors are an important part of community development. The hon. Gentleman referred to the problems of growth. I want more balanced growth and our proposals will help to achieve that.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Opposition's argument is unsustainable? If the health service were under pressure and suffered from a lack of nurses because they could not move to the south-east, it would be unsustainable to make a stark argument about further development. My right hon. Friend's proposals will be a means of achieving mixed communities with affordable housing and will help to contribute to a health service of which we can be proud.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The connection between the health service and other public services will determine the character of the communities in which our people live. I said that key workers will have to be provided for in areas such as the south-east, and I would like to see that point covered in the housing plans that are brought before me. The local mix in communities is important, and I made that clear in the statement. We will require communities to attempt to achieve that, because we must avoid the mistakes that were made in the past. There were huge estates for one class and other estates for another class and the different communities never came together.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Some of the 43,000 homes in the south-east will, sadly, be lost each year because of the increase in the ownership of second homes. What is the Secretary of State doing to end the peculiar anomaly under which it is rather easier to buy a home as a second home than it is to buy it as a first home? Second homes have half the council tax that is charged on the same house if it is used as a first home.

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about housing finance. We are looking at many issues, including housing benefit and the differential in council tax on second homes to which he referred. Those are matters for serious consideration. My statement today deals with how we can provide sufficient homes for people, and statements will be made later about those other matters.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on dumping the Crow report. May I ask him—

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Get on with it.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will my right hon. Friend ensure that, in densely populated areas such as mine—the most densely populated constituency in Berkshire—there will be sufficient flexibility to meet local needs? One important local need is for large houses for poor families, and a second need was highlighted just yesterday in a letter to me from the chief constable of the Thames Valley police, who said that he is unable to maintain a full-strength force in Slough because of the cost of housing.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend raises the issue of affordable houses, whether for key workers or for those who do not have much choice and are forced to live in greater density in their existing home. Our policy is designed to try to find affordable homes for more people, and it will hopefully reduce the problems that she has mentioned.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the Deputy Prime Minister explain how, when those numbers are disaggregated down to the level of planning authorities such as that in Reigate and Banstead, the policy behind the figures is anything other than impose and deliver?

Mr. Prescott: As in the old plan, the local authorities represented in Serplan will in discussion with us. One of the fundamental differences is that we have replaced predict and build with the monitor and manage approach, and the programme will last only five years. Local authorities feared that they were being forced to accept figures and build houses according to a 20-year prediction about which they could not be accurate. The five-year approach will give greater flexibility, and we will discuss it in the normal way with local authorities through Serplan.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the housing situation in the centre of Ellesmere Port, but he may not be aware that there are 800 empty privately owned properties. Will he, as part of the strategy for the reuse of property, encourage the Housing Corporation to look for imaginative solutions for bringing those homes back into use? They would make ideal starter homes and take some of the pressures off counties such as Cheshire.

Mr. Prescott: Yes, that is an important point. It is a matter of considerable concern that there are about 750,000 empty houses in the UK, very few of which are in the south-east or London. We have established a national empty house agency to work with local authorities, and I believe that £160,000 has been provided to help that process. We want to ensure that there is affordable housing, and using existing housing areas and converting existing properties have an important part to play in developing communities and achieving the balance of 60 per cent. of new houses on brownfield sites and 40 per cent. on greenfield sites.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): The Deputy Prime Minister has announced his intention to impose a large number of new houses on my constituency. Will he confirm that, in answer to questions from my hon. Friends, he has not undertaken to provide funding for the schools, hospitals and roads that we will need once we have all those new houses and new people?

Mr. Prescott: The first point is that we have not imposed any figure on any local authority at this stage. We have made a judgment as to what the annual figure should be. The previous Administration set that figure for 20 years; we say that it should be set for five years. Discussions will take place between the Government and, in this case, Serplan, which represents the local authorities, about how that figure may be distributed. Serplan has suggested the number of houses that will be imposed on the hon. Lady's area. We have to agree to that. New houses will be built in all local authority areas; it is the proportion that must be decided.

Mrs. Laing: What about the funding?

Mr. Prescott: As to the finance, Governments have responsibility to provide the finance for education and infrastructure. We are putting billions of pounds into the infrastructure in the south-east. It might not be in the hon. Lady's constituency, but it is considerably more than under the previous Administration.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Central to the Government's hoped-for success of their policy must be the Secretary of State's enthusiasm for terraced housing, which in today's jargon is high-density, low-level development. Is the right hon. Gentleman satisfied that it is possible to build 165 homes per acre or 400 homes per hectare? If so, does he realise that that necessarily means gardens for only a few, communal hallways and on-street parking? Overarching all that, does he accept that the success of his policy must depend on pretty radical proposals being delivered by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in a fortnight?

Mr. Prescott: With regard to density, our emphasis is on high-quality design. I have pointed out that, although the average density is 24 houses per hectare, on the millennium site it is 80 houses per hectare. On Georgian terraces, there is high-density housing, but those are desirable properties. The Poundbury development, to which I referred, has a density of about 40 houses per hectare, but it has gardens and is highly desirable. That is the challenge to the designer.

I invite the hon. Gentleman to look at some of the designs being produced, varying from the high-level designs into which we put a great deal of money a long time ago, to low-level and medium density, perhaps two or three storeys. The required density can be achieved, provided that the quality of design is good. That is the key factor, which is why we are giving it so much attention.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the Secretary of State agree that the term "brownfield" cannot be used to describe sports fields, open spaces or landscaped gardens? Will he give an assurance that there will be no double standards in the Government, and that he will instruct the Ministry of Defence, the national health service and others selling off land to follow the brownfield criteria that he put forward?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which we emphasise in policy planning guidance note 3. Land owned by local authorities, the Ministry of Defence or any public body should be in our national databank and should be taken into consideration.

Mr. Burns: Can the Secretary of State tell me unequivocally what the impact of his statement will be on a place such as West Chelmsford, which is expected to build 11,000 houses and where there are not enough brownfield sites for 60 per cent. build? Over the past week, we have seen proposals for 3,200 extra homes in villages such as Margaretting, for more than 1,500 homes on rural greenfield sites in the west of Chelmsford, and for others in the north on greenfield sites. What changes will there be?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The 60 per cent. brownfield site that we have agreed is a national figure and will vary from area to area. In London it could be as much as 80 per cent., but areas outside London, such as those mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, do not have that proportion of brownfield site available. That is why we have set a national figure. Through Serplan, we will consider how to distribute those homes. All Governments have had to face the fact that, in order to meet the need for affordable housing, some houses will have to be built on greenfield sites.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Thank you, Mr. Prescott. We must move on.

Speaker's Statement

4.29 pm

Madam Speaker: I have looked into the circumstances of the written answer that was given yesterday by the Home Office on arrangements for asylum seekers. The matter was raised last night by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe).

Although I am satisfied that no formal breach of the rules relating to pursuant answers has occurred, it is important that the House is given proper notice of the tabling of questions. The Home Office could have met that criterion simply by answering other questions already standing on yesterday's Order Paper, and without resorting to providing a further answer to a question that was tabled some three months ago.

I regret the use that was made of the procedure yesterday. Had the Table Office had any indication of the scope and extent of the reply, I would have advised it that it was not the practice of the House to allow pursuant answers to be used in that way.

I look to Departments to ensure that answers pursuant to earlier questions are made only in limited circumstances to correct or add information, and are not used to make substantial written statements. To do otherwise is to avoid giving proper notice of important impending answers. I believe that I have made my views clear.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I accept your ruling completely, Madam Speaker. I wish to apologise to you and to the House for any inadvertent breach of the procedure.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful, Mrs. Roche. Thank you very much.

Sex Discrimination (Amendment) (No. 2)

4.31 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 with respect to the selection by political parties of candidates for parliamentary or local government elections.

I am promoting the Bill because in 1996 the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 was used, contrary to its purpose, to prevent positive action in the selection of Labour women parliamentary candidates. The Bill is necessary for the future avoidance of doubt. In 1993, the Labour party adopted a new selection procedure whereby candidates for winnable seats would be selected from all-women shortlists. Although the policy was controversial, it was highly successful until two disgruntled male would-be candidates challenged it at an industrial tribunal.

Although political parties were exempted from parts of the SDA, the tribunal maintained that selection as a parliamentary candidate led to employment, and that that breached the vital employment provisions of the Act. Industrial tribunal decisions are specific to the case on which they are made. The judgment was not binding on others and did not make all-women shortlists illegal. However, only an appeal could have confirmed or overturned the decision. Such an appeal was never made.

Consequently, many politicians and commentators have held that all positive action is potentially illegal. Indeed, I can testify to the constant challenges that I, as Minister for Women, and my colleagues faced in pressing for positive action under the twinning arrangements that were adopted for selecting equal numbers of Labour women and men for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

While it remains my view, and that of leading barristers, that the SDA's employment provisions do not apply to the selection of parliamentary candidates, the Bill will remove any doubt. It provides for the specific exemption of political parties from the employment provisions of the SDA only when they are selecting candidates for parliamentary or local government elections, and are trying to redress the unequal treatment of women and men. The Bill prescribes nothing, but I am confident that it would remove any ambiguity from future positive action by a political party. It would also stop the Conservative party from hiding behind the smokescreen of illegality.

Why does this matter? If women cannot get selected by political parties, they cannot be elected. The result is a profound democratic deficit. Women make up 51 per cent. of our population, but more than 80 per cent. of Members of Parliament are men. In a democracy, the elected Parliament should mirror the society it represents. That view is not universal—certainly not in the House. However, I ask hon. Members to consider carefully their understanding of political representation.

There are two possible ways in which a group's interest can be represented: by the presence of its members in the decision-making process, or by having its interests simply taken into account in that process. I know which way most women would prefer; however, it is for men to answer.

No one denies that there are men, not least in the House, who have championed women's causes and campaigned on women's issues—I am pleased to have

[Joan Ruddock]

several as sponsors of my Bill. Indeed, the SDA was introduced by a male Home Secretary in Harold Wilson's Government. However, by definition, men cannot bring a woman's perspective to the whole range of political concerns. Most women Members contribute to the House through different life experiences and perspectives. Women electors agree that recent research shows that women still think that women politicians are more in touch with their lives than men. Women want more women MPs because they think that we are more likely to understand the problems that they face. I am proud that my party has recognised that fact. The presence of 101 Labour women, including 34 Ministers, has ensured delivery of policies on women's priorities—child care, family friendly working, the minimum wage, increased child benefit, improved maternity rights and financial help for the less well off through the working families tax credit.

Under the direction of my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the women's unit was established to maintain a focus on delivery for women across all Departments. More recently, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities has exposed the startling pay inequalities still faced by women in Britain today. The contributions of Labour women Back Benchers are too numerous to catalogue, but they have been well documented in a Fabian Society pamphlet by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart).

The challenge is how to maintain the momentum. Over the past 80 years, close on 4,500 Members have served in the House. Only 239 have been women. It is significant that two out of every three of those women were Labour women. The position is even more marked today—women MPs make up 24 per cent. of the parliamentary Labour party, but only 9 per cent. of Conservatives and 7 per cent. of Liberal Democrats. It would be easy for my party to rest on its laurels and wait for the opposition parties to catch up, but that would be neither fair nor just, and it would be out of step with modernisation. Our policy of 50:50 shortlists and the aim of equal representation in Parliament remain.

We are not alone. Women all over the world are campaigning for positive action to ensure more equal representation of women—not because women are less able and need special treatment, but because the pace of cultural change is too slow to remove the structural and institutional barriers to proper political power sharing. Where positive action has been applied over the years in other European countries, Governments have not become ineffective nor their Parliaments dysfunctional. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's world league for women's parliamentary representation is topped by seven European countries: Sweden leads with more than 40 per cent. and Germany is seventh with more than 30 per cent.—but the United Kingdom, with 18 per cent., comes in 31st.

My Bill lays down no prescription, but it would remove any excuses. Labour Members know that positive action works and we need more of it. Tory spokesmen oppose such actions, calling them patronising and likely to produce second-rate candidates. I wonder how many Tory hon. Gentlemen feel that they were patronised or are second-rate Members because they were shielded from female competition by all-male shortlists. True equality would mean having women as well as men with the whole range of talents, from brilliance to mediocrity, as Members of Parliament.

Others hold that it is impossible for women with children to cope in this place. I ask, what about the men with children? The nonsense of last Tuesday's all-night sitting is an argument for timetabling all legislation, not for excluding women Members.

Finally, there is the argument that society is changing, and progress will come naturally. I am happy to concede that that can happen, but in 1979 the Tory party returned eight women MPs; 18 years later, it returned 13. Some progress there! Seriously, how long do women have to wait? Even if the rate of increase achieved on the back of Labour's all-woman shortlist was maintained, it would take another 30 years to bring about parity in the House. At the Tory rate, it would take more than a century.

Tomorrow, we will join women throughout the world to celebrate international women's day. I believe that it is the responsibility of this Parliament to acknowledge our democratic deficit and to remove any obstacles to the achievement of equal representation.

4.41 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I did not intend to speak, but I feel that I must correct the impressions with which the House has been left.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) on presenting what would be a wide-ranging and—in her view alone, probably—welcome addition to the statute book, but I feel that I must oppose it and provide the House with the information with which it can make up its mind. I should point out, for instance, that the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equal Pay Act 1970, which came into force in 1975, derive their power from article 119 of the treaty of Rome.

The original all-party list of single-sex candidates submitted for selection, consisting only of women, was deemed out of order for a simple reason: "equal opportunities" means not just equal opportunities for candidates, but a free choice for the selection committee from both men and women. I think the hon. Lady will find that, according to leading opinion, the regular issuing of either all-male or all-female lists would be deemed illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act and, indeed, article 119.

I am extremely proud to have been elected as one of 14 lady Conservative Members, who, I believe, were selected fairly and on merit. Let me place on the record that it was indeed the Conservative party which, in 1979, made legal history by electing the first woman party leader and, indeed, Prime Minister. I know that it is disappointing that the hon. Lady's party has not seen fit to follow our proud record.

The hon. Lady mentioned all-night sittings. As a former Minister, she will appreciate that it is the duty of Governments to try to push through their business programme, and the duty of Oppositions to frustrate that programme with whatever procedures are at their disposal—especially in the face of a rather larger Government majority than one would like.

I do not want to detain the House by forcing a Division, but I think it important to realise that "equal opportunities" means not just the ability of candidates of both genders to apply to be placed on a list, but the ability of a selection committee to choose from both males and females.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business), and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Joan Ruddock, Jackie Ballard, Mr. Malcolm Chisholm, Lorna Fitzsimons, Barbara Follett, Dr. Ian Gibson, Ms Harriet Harman, Dr. Evan Harris, Dr. Ashok Kumar, Fiona Mactaggart, Ms Julie Morgan and Dr. Jenny Tonge.

Sex Discrimination (Amendment) (No. 2)

Joan Ruddock accordingly presented a Bill to amend the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 with respect to the selection by political parties of candidates for parliamentary or local government elections: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 14th April, and to be printed [Bill 82].

Orders of the Day

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I should inform the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews).

4.46 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is part of the Government's programme to modernise the criminal justice system and to improve public confidence in it. Its purpose is to make the system more responsive to the needs of victims, witnesses and the public at large—and defendants. The proposal has been considered extensively in the past seven years. In 1993, it received the unanimous backing of the royal commission on criminal justice.

Today, it enjoys the active endorsement of the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham, and of the vast majority of the High Court Bench of nearly 100 senior judges; of the Magistrates Association, representing 30,000 justices of the peace; and of all three police associations, representing more than 125,000 police officers, each of whom has to deal every day with the victims of crime and its perpetrators and who know that justice is not served, either for victim or defendant, by an antiquated and time-wasting procedure, which the Bill seeks to remedy.

The Bill is justified in its own right, but it will produce considerable savings of more than £120 million a year, representing resources which could, and will, be better used elsewhere in the criminal justice system.

I understand the concerns in the House about the effect of the Bill on the principles of trial by jury. I understand those concerns not least because, when I first considered the matter, my instincts were similar; I acknowledge that. However, as the House knows, I have changed my mind—there has never been any dubiety about that—because the more I have examined the arguments in favour of the present arrangements, the weaker they appeared to be and the stronger the case for reform.

In no sense does the Bill undermine the availability of trial by jury for appropriate offences. What it does is to ensure that there is a fairer and more objective basis than the decision of the accused for determining which cases involving the middle range of offences should be so tried. In doing so, we bring ourselves into line with the better practice of almost all comparable jurisdictions and come closer to the practice in Scotland.

Often, Scotland is, rightly, held out to be a nation with a more effective criminal justice system than ours. There, the decision on mode of trial has never rested with the defendant, but is made by the prosecutor. The Bill provides greater safeguards for the defendant by having the initial decision made by magistrates and the final one, on appeal, by an experienced Crown court judge.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Perhaps my right hon. Friend could assist me a little in that respect. Although I understand the Scottish example, if the Bill became law, unusually we would have trial by magistrate and perhaps sentence by judge, whereas in Scotland there is trial by magistrate and sentence by magistrate. Will he not think again? If the matter is to be tried in the magistrates court—he knows of the extensive correspondence that I have had with him and of my views on the matter—sentencing should be in the same court.

Mr. Straw: I understand my hon. Friend's point, which he and I have discussed at length. It would be better explored in Committee. However, I tell him now that one of the reasons why, in Scotland, it is possible to have a system in which the judge in the sheriff-only court has limited powers to sentence—three months in the case of a first offence; six months in the case of a second or subsequent offence—is that the prosecutor has access to a full record of an accused's previous convictions and makes that choice. Our system is different, but the fundamental similarity remains. Once the Bill becomes law, in neither system will the defendant have the right to choose his or her forum.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way in a moment to my hon. and learned Friend.

I remind the House that, in another place, my hon. and learned Friend the Lord Advocate, Lord Hardie, while acknowledging that he was from what he called a "foreign jurisdiction", said:

> What is essential in any system is that the various interests are balanced: that society's interests, as represented by victims and witnesses, are balanced against the interests of the accused. But what must be ensured is that the accused is protected from the effect of arbitrary decisions. Who better to perform such a task than an independent judiciary?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1287.]

I am not aware of any campaign north of the border to change the system, which is widely held to work well. Moreover, it is held to work well not simply because of the limits on sentencing power.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the Scottish system, there is a three-months' sentence limitation for sheriffs or magistrates sitting without juries? In those circumstances, any prosecutor making the decision on where any case warranting more than three months' imprisonment should be heard must elect for jury trial. Is my right hon. Friend not aware that, in our jurisdiction, in any event, all three-months cases are summary-only cases? Therefore, the parallel with the Scottish system is completely false.

Mr. Straw: That is not the view taken by experienced Scottish lawyers and jurists, who see very sharp similarities in the way in which the Scottish system and our system operate. If my hon. and learned Friend were proposing that the prosecutor should determine trial venue in every case, rather than what we are proposing—which would provide much greater safeguards for the accused, and entail the magistrates court making the initial decision, with a subsequent appeal to an experienced Crown court judge—he would have some argument in his favour. However, I do not accept that argument.

It has long been a feature of our system that magistrates have a power to commit a case for sentence. There is nothing objectionable about that. However, as my hon. and learned Friend will know—as he has studied with some care the small print of my Bill—if the magistrates come to the view that the punishment that a magistrates court would have to impose for an offence would be inadequate, clause 1 requires them in any event to commit the case to the Crown court.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: I should like to make some progress, and then of course I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

Most either-way cases heard in the Crown court are there because of a decision by magistrates. Interestingly, defendants who want to be tried by magistrates have no choice if the magistrates direct a Crown court trial. Similarly, the Government do not believe that it is right for the final decision on Crown court trial to be a matter for the defendant's personal choice. Both the royal commission and the Narey review found that too many defendants have been working the system and choosing jury trial purely to delay proceedings.

One very experienced magistrate, Rosemary Thompson, who is well known to hon. Members on both sides of the House and is a former chair of the Magistrates Association, told Narey, at the time of his review, that

> in considering elections for trial I cannot remember the last time someone elected for reasons of reputation. Inevitably, the ones who elect are experienced defendants, the ones who know how to play the system.

Rosemary Thompson has recently confirmed:

> Abuse is still rampant and there is still a pressing need for reform. Nothing has changed since the publication of the Narey report.

It cannot be right that we continue to allow repeat offenders with strings of previous convictions to demand full Crown court trials for trivial offences that can and should be heard in magistrates courts. As David Phillips, chief constable of Kent, said recently in support of our proposals:

> In the end it is plain daft to allow a persistent criminal charged with a minor theft to invoke the full panoply of a criminal trial with solicitors, barristers, court officials, jurors and judges at massive public expense.

The majority of those who opt for jury trial plead guilty at the door of the Crown court, but only after greater inconvenience and worry to victims and witnesses and considerable extra cost. Most people rightly regard that as a manipulation of the criminal justice system. The Bill will end it. If defendants are convicted at the Crown court, their success in delaying proceedings brings them not the lighter sentence that they might have hoped for, but a higher one. They lose their sentence discount and may spend longer on remand.

The evidence presented to the royal commission suggested that one of the key reasons why defendants chose trial by jury was that they thought that they would get a lesser sentence at the Crown court than they would at the magistrates court. Anyone with any experience of working in the two knows what the data show

overwhelmingly: those who opt for a Crown court trial, even if they plead guilty at the door of the court, as many do, will justifiably receive a longer sentence because they have not pleaded guilty timeously.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Home Secretary is being selective in the evidence that he chooses to support his case. Two reports commissioned by the Home Office in the past 10 years have shown overwhelmingly that defendants who elect to go to the Crown court do so for reasons other than simply to stay out on remand or because they think that they can spin out the case. A defendant in the Crown court gets sight of all the evidence against them. That is not available in the magistrates court. They could also be given advice by lawyers to plead guilty on the basis of later evidence at the doors of the Crown court. Why cannot we have an objective assessment of the case for law reform, saving costs and improving justice as a whole rather than taking one issue, which the Home Secretary accepts is controversial, against—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that perhaps his interventions should be brief.

Mr. Straw: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's reading of the data. It is preposterous to suggest, particularly these days with the huge cost of criminal legal aid, that defendants in magistrates courts are denied the availability of legal advice.

Mr. Hughes: I did not say that.

Mr. Straw: That is the implication of what the hon. Gentleman said. He said that they were denied advice from lawyers and that they might get that advice at the Crown court. I heard him say that, but it is not the case. The excellent Library briefing sets out the data, as have we. The figures do not show any evidence of injustice being perpetrated by the way in which magistrates try cases.

The hon. Gentleman also made points relating to the Auld review, which is currently taking place. The Bar Council and some of my hon. Friends have asked why the issue cannot be dealt with by that review, which is considering the future of the criminal justice system in the round. Our proposal has been considered extensively, not just by a very distinguished judge of the Court of Appeal but by a royal commission set up by the previous Administration. Their unanimous judgment was in favour of the change, but without the safeguards that we are proposing.

I took what the Bar Council said to mean that it would abandon its opposition if Lord Justice Auld approved of the change. If that is not the correct inference to draw, the idea is merely a tactic for procrastination. We have already had the opinion of the senior judiciary on the merits of the proposals, if that is all that the Bar Council is waiting for. The Lord Chief Justice made a powerful speech on 20 January in which he came down wholly in favour of the change. He said on the record that he had canvassed the opinion of all the senior High court judges—more than 100—and that all bar a tiny handful were emphatically in favour of the change. The Bar Council has its response already.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): The Home Secretary's point about defendants playing the system to get to the Crown court may have been a good one some years ago, but it is now grossly exaggerated as it hardly happens at all—not least because of the introduction of plea-before-venue, coupled with full credit for early guilty pleas. Does the Home Secretary accept that there is now very little milking of the system?

Mr. Straw: If I did, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I would not have gone to considerable effort to bring this Bill before the House, and I have applied myself to the evidence. If that were the case, does the hon. Gentleman think that I would be bothering to go through this exercise? What he says is not the case.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): Will the Home Secretary re-read what the Lord Chief Justice said, and ask himself whether he has overstated the case a little? The Lord Chief Justice said that he had stood up at a meeting of 100 judges and asked if anybody disagreed. Earlier at the meeting—at which Mr. Justice Mitchell was endorsed—he had said that the proposed change could be supported, but only if the magistrates' decisions on jurisdiction were subject to appeal to a circuit judge. That was not then part of the proposal, but has been accepted subsequently by the Government. Is not it fair to say that the judges felt reluctant to stand out against the elected Government, but that they hardly showed the wholehearted support that the Home Secretary suggests?

Mr. Straw: Perhaps the record should be sent for, for the greater elucidation of Opposition Members, but I do not think that what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just said can be remotely justified. The speech by Lord Bingham of Cornhill was unequivocally 100 per cent. in favour of the change—although with the change that he had proposed of a right of appeal to a Crown court, which we have accepted and which was in the original Bill.

The noble Lord Bingham made it clear that almost every single judge was in favour. He invited the 100 judges present at the meeting to write to him if they dissented, as he said that one or two of them—despite their lengthy experience at the Bar and on the bench—may have been shy in coming forward. One wrote, and a further judge indicated dissent orally. However, there seems to be considerable unanimity of opinion on this matter.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The Home Secretary should be cautious about relying on the support of the judiciary. I exempt the Lord Chief Justice from what I am about to say, but is not it correct that those of us who practise at the criminal Bar know full well that many members of the judiciary—both lay and professional—develop a predisposition in favour of the prosecution because they are exposed to crime over many years? It is precisely for that reason that many of us want to retain the jury system, and precisely for that reason that the Home Secretary should be cautious about relying on the views of the judiciary.

Mr. Straw: That was an extraordinarily ill-judged and intemperate attack on the quality of our judiciary by the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I am sure that it was not a contempt of court, but it was getting on for that. I simply do not accept what he says and, later, I shall

[Mr. Straw]

give figures which show without any doubt that the magistrates—whom he is suggesting are hard-boiled and willing to accept prosecution evidence, however poor—simply do not operate in that way.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: In dealing with the so-called idea that people are playing the system, is my right hon. Friend aware that Michael Zander's report to the royal commission suggested that the overwhelming reason why people changed their plea was that in 50 per cent. of cases the charges were reduced, because of the well-known practice of overcharging defendants, especially black defendants, in magistrates courts?

While I am on my feet, my second point is that my right hon. Friend says that he is applying the Runciman royal commission, but he is not, because Runciman said that we should allow magistrates the powers only if they deliberately considered, as a statutory point, the reputation of the defendant. That is exactly what—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is far too long a contribution.

Mr. Straw: I understand my hon. and learned Friend's point about reputation and livelihood, but he will know that much concern was expressed in the Chamber and in the other place about the inclusion of the criteria on reputation and livelihood, on the ground that that could unfairly discriminate against black and Asian defendants and those of what were regarded as a lower social class. I have responded to that concern by including in the Bill criteria relating to the seriousness and complexity of the offence, and to the sentencing power of the court, but not to reputation and livelihood.

My hon. and learned Friend will be able to make his point in greater detail in Committee but, if he is seeking to make a strong case, I advise him not to quote Professor Michael Zander in his favour, because both in his report to the royal commission and in an article in *The Guardian* on 25 May last year he came out strongly in favour of the basic principle of the Bill. He said:

> Opponents of the reform pray in aid Magna Carta, ignoring the fact that the defendant's right to choose jury trial dates only from 1855. It is true that juries acquit more often than magistrates, but in the Royal Commission's view it is as wrong to give the defendant the right to insist on the level of court that will give him a better chance of acquittal as it would be to give him the choice of a more lenient judge.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Does not the real unfairness of the Bill rest in who will be allowed to have a trial by jury? Will not it benefit the rich, the powerful and the famous who will have the right to trial by jury? Will the Home Secretary answer the questions he himself asked a few years ago:

> If . . . a Member of Parliament or even a Secretary of State were charged with an offence of dishonesty, would they not insist on being tried by a jury? If that is the case, why should others be denied that right of election?—[*Official Report*, 27 February 1997; Vol. 291, c. 434.]

Mr. Straw: I have answered those questions, because I have said that I have changed my mind on that point. Moreover, the more I thought about it, the more I accepted that it was wrong to have a system in which one of the criteria was tipped in favour of the people whom I mentioned. We have established criteria that are related to the seriousness and complexity of the offence and the sentencing power of the court. However, I said only yesterday that I have never brought a Bill before the House that has not been improved as a result of debate in the House, and that may well be the case for this Bill. The purpose of debate is to consider propositions from Government and, we trust, to improve them.

The provisions in the Bill are likely to prove significantly fairer. I repeat that we have strengthened the safeguards proposed by the royal commission to include in the Bill an interlocutory right of appeal to a Crown court judge against a decision of the magistrates to refuse to transfer jurisdiction.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will my right hon. Friend explain how the measures will assist victims of crime, when he is introducing a right of appeal to the Crown court and when the magistrates courts will cause a longer delay before disposal of the case in the Crown court? Does he not realise that when the Government introduce such measures, that is precisely why so many Labour party members and supporters feel alienated?

Mr. Straw: I do not know to whom my hon. Friend talks but, in my constituency, which includes a lively Labour party, I have found no significant opposition to the changes. In the frequent open-air meetings that I hold in the centre of Blackburn in King William street, all the comment about the proposals has been in favour of the changes. People know that the reality is very different from what is being advanced by some hon. Members here today.

Before I go into the details of the Bill, two fundamental matters must be addressed. The first concerns the categorisation of offences. In England and Wales, the venue for a criminal trial is determined by the classification of offence that is charged. In the first category are the most serious offences—such as murder, rape, robbery, wounding or causing grievous bodily harm with intent—which can and should be tried only in the Crown court.

Then there are offences that can be tried either in the magistrates courts or the Crown court. The most common cases are stealing from shops and stalls, absconding from bail, and assaults occasioning actual bodily harm. In 1998, the numbers of prosecutions for each of those offences amounted to more than 75,000, 45,000 and 38,000 respectively. Where the offence is serious, and the magistrate's sentencing power is too limited, magistrates themselves may commit the case to the Crown court.

That very important point has not been fully understood outside the House. Of the total number of cases that went for trial at the Crown court last year, 45,000 were directed for trial there by magistrates. As I have already said, quite a lot of defendants want to be tried by magistrates, but in such cases they have no choice: if the magistrate so decides, the case must be tried in the Crown court.

In the common types of case that I have described, the defendant must give his or her consent to be tried by the magistrates—even if the circumstances of the case are very petty. Last year, 19,000 elected to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) will be interested to know that does not mean that there is less delay when there is election for

trial. There is always greater delay than when the trial is held in the magistrates court, as is shown clearly in the data provided by the House of Commons Library.

Finally, there are summary-only offences which can only be tried by the magistrates. These include offences such as minor assaults. This categorisation is intended to represent a hierarchy based on the seriousness of the offence. In practice, however, that is often not the case. As the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham, has pointed out, a number of offences can be tried only in the magistrates courts, where a conviction would—and does—have serious consequences for the defendant that go far beyond the formal punishment imposed by the court.

I shall give the House an entirely hypothetical example. Let us imagine that a Member of Parliament gets drunk, takes a car without consent and then assaults the police officer who apprehends him. If that hon. Member were convicted on those three sets of charges, I suggest that there would be a serious question mark over his or her career. Yet Parliament has decided that the serious offences involved—of taking a vehicle without the owner's consent, of assault on a police officer, and of drink-driving—are ones that only magistrates can try. There is no right of election for jury trial and, as far as I am aware, there is general confidence in magistrates' ability to try such offences.

The second, general, observation that I want to make concerns the position of magistrates in our criminal justice system. I can tell Opposition Members—especially my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews)—that the logical consequence of much of the opposition to the proposal in the Bill is to deny the competence and capacity of magistrates to arbitrate on any judicial matter. That is odd, as about 97 per cent. of all criminal cases in England and Wales—many of them with very severe consequences for defendants—are already tried by magistrates.

Magistrates routinely handle decisions relating to defendants' bail, matters of guilt or innocence, and appropriate sentencing following conviction. Many of those decisions have a far more serious effect upon the defendant's liberty than the decision relating to the mode of trial. In the debate in another place, the Lord Chief Justice said about magistrates that

> it seems to me strange to baulk at entrusting to them the power to decide whether, subject to appeal, a case is more fitted for summary trial or trial by a judge and jury.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1253.]

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: Not yet. All the evidence shows that magistrates courts conduct themselves fairly in dispensing justice. Each year, our magistrates conduct 70,000 contested trials. That is two and a half times the number conducted in the Crown court, yet the Criminal Cases Review Commission has received remarkably few complaints about summary conviction and has referred only one case involving the magistrates courts to the Court of Appeal.

I suggest that that is partly because there is an unfettered right of appeal following conviction by the magistrates before a judge sitting with two justices, whereas there is no automatic right of appeal following conviction in the Crown court. Contrary to all suggestions, including that of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), when magistrates hear trials, they acquit in 33 per cent. of cases. Of those cases that go for appeal—one in seven are subject to appeal to a Crown court judge and two magistrates—one third are successful.

Let me come on to an important issue on which I have thought long and hard—whether the Bill would disproportionately affect black defendants. It is said that they elect for jury trial because they believe that they will not receive a fair trail in the magistrates courts. I have considered the issue seriously. Lawyers, above all, need to weigh the evidence, and the evidence suggests that any such belief is entirely misplaced. Recently published Home Office data show a higher conviction rate for white defendants than for black or Asian defendants in the magistrates court.

That finding is backed by another recent study, showing that in both the magistrates court and the Crown court, black and Asian defendants were less likely than white defendants to be convicted after contested trials. At both courts—although it is not possible to make direct comparisons between the two conviction rates—black defendants were 6 to 7 percentage points less likely to be convicted than white defendants. There is also a strong similarity between acquittal rates in magistrates courts and in the Crown court for contested either-way cases when account is taken of the differences in seriousness and complexity in Crown court cases.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Does not my right hon. Friend understand that these statistics about the conviction rate of black defendants in magistrates courts come as no surprise to civil libertarians? They vindicate the view, and the resource material that is available, that black defendants are regularly and repeatedly overcharged in magistrates courts. Regularly and repeatedly overcharging people means that it is highly likely that they will have a greater incidence of acquittal. Indeed, it vindicates precisely that view.

Mr. Straw: I do not accept my hon. and learned Friend's implication with regard to these figures. I believe that, if they are properly considered, it is impossible to follow his line of argument. He makes one fundamental error in talking about the offences charged at the magistrates court. The magistrates court does not charge offences. My hon. and learned Friend should know better than anyone that the police charge offences. That is of fundamental importance.

There is no evidence to suggest that black defendants, even if they are overcharged by the police, are treated in a discriminatory way by the magistrates court as opposed to the Crown court. In both the magistrates court and the Crown court, there is a higher acquittal rate for black defendants over white defendants.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Straw: There is no point in my hon. and learned Friend shaking his head. That is a fact, and it is in the House of Commons Library data. There is no difference at all there.

[Mr. Straw]

Let me deal with whether the changes might adversely affect mentally disordered defendants. Interestingly, the Royal College of Psychiatrists offered us a view about this. It said:

> We do not envisage that the proposed changes will affect access of needy individuals to psychiatric assessment, defence, mitigation or treatment. It is even possible that by speeding up the process, some mentally disordered defendants may benefit.

The Bill amends the relevant provisions of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980, omitting the requirement for the defendant's consent to summary trial in either-way cases. I have already explained about the changes that we have made in respect of livelihood and reputation. I believe that the safeguards that we have introduced will make a significant difference to the operation of the criminal justice system and that they maintain the right to jury trial for appropriate offences. At the same time, the system will not be brought into disrepute by cases such as the one that I am about to quote. Far from being a dim and distant case given in evidence to the royal commission six or seven years ago, it happened only last month.

A 26-year-old man with 15 previous convictions covering a total of 63 offences, including 36 offences of theft, elected trial for the offence of stealing one bottle of champagne. I ask the House whether it is sensible to have a system that allows that kind of election for trial.

Mr. Hogg: What if you were charged?

Mr. Straw: If I were charged with that offence, I should be happy to go before the magistrates because I happen to believe that they are capable of conducting fair trials. If I were convicted, I should have a right—

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: No. If I were convicted—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot have shouting across the Chamber.

Mr. Straw: I have given way a great deal but will give way shortly to the former Attorney-General, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), before I make some progress.

The seriousness of the offence and the nature of the case are the criteria that should, in our judgment, determine whether a case is dealt with by the Crown court or the magistrates. We can discuss that point in Committee, but I believe that our proposals will fairly and sensibly achieve that end. We have also strengthened the safeguards, moving away from those proposed by the royal commission, by providing for an interlocutory right of appeal. The appeal would go to the Crown court, and the procedure would be fast and efficient with most cases determined within 48 hours. That will not hold up progress with the case in the magistrates court.

We have sought to improve the safeguards relating to appeals by providing that magistrates would be required to give reasons for their decisions. The Lord Chief Justice has suggested that appeals on mode of trial should be heard by the resident judge or by a judge nominated by the presiding judges of the circuit. The Government agree that that would help to ensure public confidence in high standards of decision making. Appropriate arrangements will be made by way of a practice direction.

I shall give way—for the last time—to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am most grateful to the Home Secretary. Did he not become carried away by his own rhetoric in his example of his being accused of stealing a bottle of champagne? Does he recognise that those of us on the other side of the argument fully respect the way in which magistrates conduct themselves in the great majority of their hearings? However, the logic of the Home Secretary's argument is that, because magistrates generally provide a fair trial, the right to trial by jury can be largely dispensed with.

Mr. Straw: I am afraid that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is being carried away by his own rhetoric, but it is not very good. In any system of courts in which a hierarchy exists, there must be some criteria by which to select which cases go to the higher and lower courts. One criterion is sentencing power, but another is the seriousness and complexity of cases. Of course, some cases are serious in themselves, and serious enough to trigger the criterion of sentencing power. In addition, other less serious cases may have complicated evidence that makes it appropriate to take them before the Crown court.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: No, I have given way a great deal.

The logical conclusion of the argument being presented against us is that magistrates courts should never try cases—except, perhaps, for failure to pay a parking ticket. It is being continuously insinuated that magistrates are unfair. That was the clear implication of what was said by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Straw: As I have referred to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I suppose I must give way.

Mr. Hogg: I am most grateful. What I actually said applied to both the lay and professional judiciary. It was that there is a predisposition on the part of the judiciary—lay and professional—to favour the prosecution.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. and learned Gentleman seems to suggest that one cannot get a fair trial anywhere.

Mr. Hogg: From a jury.

Mr. Straw: I know. But the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows that it is not unheard of—indeed, it happens often—for a judge with a fairly clear view of a defendant's guilt or innocence to suggest cleverly that a jury might come to one conclusion rather than another.

I am only too well aware—not least from the debate—that our proposal, modest though it is, has aroused some controversy, in the House, in the other place and outside. I have taken careful note of that, and have sought to respond by strengthening the Bill's safeguards and amending the criteria to make them as objective as possible.

In putting the Bill before the House, I draw some comfort from the fact that at almost every point that a Home Secretary has sought sensibly to modernise our system of jury trials, he has been met with similarly vocal opposition. Yet once the measure has gone through, the opposition has faded, as the sense of the measure has been appreciated.

In 1967, Roy Jenkins proposed a change to the system of jury trial far more fundamental than this one: to change the requirement of a unanimous verdict to that which the European Union now likes to call a qualified majority. The proposal was met with howls from all sides. I give the House a flavour of the reaction by quoting the then Labour Member for Oldham, West, Mr. Leslie Hale, who said of the proposal made by the noble and Liberal Lord Jenkins—then the Home Secretary—that

never before in the history of Parliament has there been a provision undermining the constitution of the nation, the liberties of the people and a system of justice that, with all its faults, is the envy of the world, on less evidence, with less consideration, and with a more complete absence of reasoning in its support.—[*Official Report*, 26 April 1967; Vol. 745, c. 1744.]

He was joined by many Members on both sides of the House. His comments could even have been written by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway, who has just come back into the Chamber. I am glad that he has returned.

The measure had a bumpy ride, but it passed. None of the consequences foretold by its opponents came about. Even a year later, no one suggested that the clock should go back.

The story is remarkably similar for the proposals made in 1988 by Douglas Hurd. He proposed an end to the right of pre-emptory challenge to jurors; that a prosecution might appeal against unduly lenient sentences; and a reclassification of offences, such as drink-driving and taking a vehicle without consent, to summary only.

The whole of the then Opposition—myself included—trooped into the Lobby against that Bill on an amendment tabled by my now noble Friend, Lord Hattersley, claiming that it

would result in a substantial reduction in civil liberties.—[*Official Report*, 18 January 1988; Vol. 125, c. 691.]

Notwithstanding our ritual opposition, the Bill passed. The claim that those changes would substantially reduce civil liberties disappeared like snow in the sunshine, never to appear again.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Is not the difference between the witty examples offered by the Home Secretary and the measure the fact that those examples were of universal application, but his Bill is discriminatory?

Mr. Straw: I do not begin to follow the hon. and learned Gentleman's comment. The examples I gave were applicable to the criminal justice system; so is the Bill.

I understand that the hon. and learned Gentleman, rather than the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), will open the debate for the Opposition. I suggest that he should argue why it is wrong for there to be objective criteria for mode of trial—such as the royal commission suggested and the previous Government came close to agreeing.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Straw: Many people want to speak and there is a 15-minute limit on the speeches of Back Benchers. I have a few more comments to make.

One of the most powerful arguments made in 1988 came not from the Labour Benches, but from those of the Liberal Democrats—from Alex Carlile. It is interesting that all three of the Members to whose comments I have referred were elevated to another place on the strength of their opposition to those changes. Alex Carlile protested loud and long against the reclassification of criminal damage and common assault offences as summary only. He made the point that there would be no right of election to trial and no right of trial at a Crown court. He said that a defendant in those circumstances—charged with criminal damage and common assault offences—

may well be in jeopardy of losing his job, and he will certainly be in jeopardy of losing his reputation and the respect of all around him. That is much too serious a case for the defendant to be deprived of his right to trial by jury.—[*Official Report*, 18 January 1988; Vol. 125, c. 719.]

That was in 1998. I searched in vain—I made the search myself, to avoid any accidents—in the 1992 Liberal Democrat manifesto for any proposal to restore those offences to the either-way classification. The manifesto was silent. Those changes—

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Straw: There is no need for the hon. Gentleman to intervene. That is the truth. I warrant that the same will be so of the opposition to this Bill.

The proposal was recommended not only by the 1993 royal commission but by the Narey report on speeding up the criminal justice system, which the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the then Home Secretary, commended to the House on 27 February 1997, when I famously expressed my opposition to it. I have made no bones about that—how could I? I have told the House that I have changed my mind. I do not often do that, but every so often one is entitled to do so on the basis of the evidence.

It is true that the right hon. and learned Gentleman never quite committed himself to legislating on that proposal, but he did everything but. When the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), who until last month was the deputy to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, asked about either-way trials and asked

if we can trust magistrates to decide guilt or innocence, why cannot we trust magistrates to decide whether cases are sufficiently serious to be tried by a jury in a Crown court?—[*Official Report*, 27 February 1997; Vol. 291, c. 438.],

the right hon. and learned Gentleman greeted his remarks with approbation.

[Mr. Straw]

My guess—it can only be a guess—is that had the previous Administration been re-elected in 1997, they would have gone ahead with the proposal, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman hinted heavily that he would. No doubt, if the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald were to speak this afternoon, she would say that this was yet another issue on which she was profoundly opposed to her then boss, although not sufficiently opposed to him to resign. She now says that it is a matter of fundamental principle, but not such a matter of fundamental principle that she will make a speech about it.

The Bill represents a modest and important modernisation of our criminal justice system and will speed up justice in the interests of victims, witnesses and defendants alike.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way, as I always do, to my hon. Friend.

Mrs. Dunwoody: It is no secret that I am not a lawyer. I have listened carefully to my right hon. Friend, who was doing quite well until he started quoting Lord Jenkins.

I want to ask my right hon. Friend a simple question, because I need to be convinced. Is the change being pushed through because it will save money, or is it being pushed through because it will improve the law? I am really not clear.

Mr. Straw: The Bill is being put through the House because it will improve the administration of the law; it will also save money. That is the answer.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Will the Home Secretary give way on that point?

Mr. Straw: No, I am sorry. I must finish my speech. As the House knows, I always give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), and I explained the special circumstances for that yesterday.

As I said, the Bill represents a modest and important modernisation of our criminal justice system and will speed up justice in the interests of victims, witnesses and defendants alike. It commands the widespread report of practitioners. As the Lord Chief Justice said in Committee in the other place

> almost the whole High Court Bench . . . nearly 100 judges, including some former circuit judges

supported the proposal. He added that

> there seems to be a considerable unanimity of opinion on the topic.

He hoped that the Committee would attach

> some weight to a body of people with a close and current knowledge of the administration of criminal justice who are—

I point this out particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich—

> to the last man and woman, very strong supporters of jury trial in appropriate cases. There have been many occasions in the past when the judges have been united or almost so in resisting change. It is difficult to think of cases where they have been as much of one mind in approving it.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1255.]

The Lord Chief Justice said that about this Bill.

We have made improvements on the recommendations originally made by the royal commission and the Narey review. We have listened to, and acted on, concerns expressed in the other place and elsewhere. The Bill threatens no hallowed rights. It is just, fair and proportionate. It will enhance public confidence in the criminal justice system, and I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), I point out that Madam Speaker has said that there will be a 15-minute limit on the speeches of Back Benchers.

5.34 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I think that the Attorney-General made a better and shorter speech in the other place.

I declare an interest as a practising member of the Bar who appears before juries in defamation and other civil trials but not—or at least not for the past 20 years—before juries in criminal cases save when sitting as an assistant recorder of the Crown court. My experience as an assistant recorder and as an advocate in civil and criminal cases tells me that we tamper with the current system of jury election in either-way cases not just at our own peril as legislators, but at the peril of the system of justice itself and the public's confidence in it.

I make it clear at the outset that my arguments and those of my party against the Bill do not depend on attacking or denigrating the lay magistracy. Magistrates do a magnificent job for no pay and mean expenses. Over 90 per cent. of all cases that fall within the criminal or quasi-criminal jurisdiction go before magistrates. That includes parking and motoring matters, licensing applications and cases that we would all recognise as criminal. Magistrates form a vital part of the jigsaw of local justice, which Conservative Members want to strengthen and enhance. Our argument is not that magistrates cannot do the job that the Bill gives them, but that, as a matter of justice and fairness, they should not have to.

The Home Secretary has had a Bill similar to this one defeated in another place. It was defeated not by the much maligned but in-built majority of the hereditary Conservative peerage, but by an alliance of peers who, in the Prime Minister's reformed House of Lords, take the Whip not only of my party but of the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party. They were not alone in their disapproval of the first Bill, because they were joined by Cross Benchers and bishops.

The Government were defeated by 96 votes overall, but it should not be forgotten that the Prime Minister, who created the new House and who has created more life peers in his short period of office than any other Prime Minister in a comparable or even longer period, was defeated by a majority of 50, if one considers only the votes of life peers. That was a vote of the new House, whose decisions the noble Baroness Jay—new Labour's equivalent of a hereditary peer—said would command the respect of her party and Parliament as a whole.

If the Government had half an ounce of the common sense of their Members and half an ounce of real respect for their new House of Lords, they would pay attention to the vote in the other place on 20 January. It is not as though they were taken by surprise—or was Homer nodding or too arrogant to pay heed to the reasoned arguments deployed against the first Bill on Second Reading last December? Alternatively, are the Government now too stubborn to pay any heed to the lessons that they have been taught about the futility and sheer stupidity of trying to ram the new Bill through the House tonight?

If the Home Secretary were bad or stupid, or both, I could perhaps forgive him the Bill, but he is neither: quite the contrary. Yet he has allowed himself, either on his own initiative or perhaps at the behest of others, to introduce a bad and stupid Bill. It is fair to point out, and I do so willingly, that all Cabinet Ministers work hard and they work long hours. Every Cabinet post is a strenuous job, particularly for the Minister who is in office for reasons that have more to do with balancing the various interests of the Labour party than with intellectual or political ability.

I readily concede that the Home Secretary is a hard-working Minister who was appointed because he has the abilities to make a good Home Secretary. He works harder than most, if not all, of his Cabinet colleagues, and I will not permit the mauling that he received at the hands of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) in the debate on the dismissal of Derek Lewis in the previous Parliament to detract from my high opinion of him.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Garnier: The hon. Gentleman might let me carry on for a moment while I am expressing my high opinion of the Home Secretary.

The Home Secretary has an enormous legislative programme in this Session, and he has had a great deal else to deal with on top of that, including the welfare and accommodation arrangements of General Pinochet during his stay in this country, discussions with the Foreign Secretary on how best to ensure that the President of China was suitably cared for by the police during his stay here, and the welfare and accommodation arrangements for the passengers and crew of the hijacked Afghan aeroplane.

Each of those matters will have kept the Home Secretary busy polishing his periscope and adjusting his wing mirrors to see where the next disaster was coming from, because he knew that no sooner had he dealt, or failed to deal, with the fiasco of the passport office, than another disaster was bound to come at him unannounced. Every time a prisoner falls out of the bed, the Home Secretary is held responsible; every time an octogenarian Soviet sympathiser confesses that she was a communist spy—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Those problems come with the Home Secretary's territory, but they are not within the scope of the Bill.

Mr. Garnier: I appreciate that your patience may be wearing thin, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but if you will allow me to develop my point, you will find that it fits in extremely neatly with the arguments.

Every time that the Home Secretary tries to do something, such as dispersing asylum seekers throughout the country, he takes the blame when the plans fall apart. He used to laugh off the catalogue of disasters that have marked his period of office by saying that he could now call himself a fully paid-up member of the Home Secretaries' club—a nice little joke, but it would appeal to the public only if the disaster that hit him had not been wholly foreseeable.

Being a Labour Home Secretary is a big job. It requires 24-hour-a-day vigilance and the political radar of a nuclear-fuelled bat to survive the criticism of the press and of one's colleagues in the House, the Cabinet and the wider party outside. It brings on a state of mind that demands success at all costs in every battle. Retreat becomes unthinkable. Intelligent regrouping or choosing another way forward is retreat.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am anxious to hear arguments relating to the Bill. The House is merely getting is a lot of flannel from the hon. and learned Gentleman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have already made an observation on the matter. Although a Second Reading debate allows a certain leeway, we cannot stray entirely from the Bill.

Mr. Garnier: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am speaking about the Bill and its creator. What we have—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. As chairman of the proceedings, I would say that the hon. and learned Gentleman has made the point that our Home Secretary is an extremely hard-working Home Secretary. We must move on.

Mr. Garnier: What we have is a Home Secretary who is persisting with this silly and unthinkable Bill, not because it will do good or because it is the right thing to do, but because if he were to withdraw it and pass the issue to the Auld inquiry into the criminal courts, he fears that he will be seen as weak, as the Home Secretary who gave way to the unelected House of Lords—albeit softened up by the Prime Minister's removal of the hereditary peerage—as the Home Secretary who gave in to the 69 Members of this House who signed the early-day motion criticising his stance, and as the Home Secretary who was pushed around by his colleagues who are responsible for today's amendment.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Garnier: The Home Secretary fears that he will be seen as the Home Secretary who gave in to those of his hon. Friends who fulminate against him on the one hand for trying to be the darling of the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and on the other for being the poodle of the Treasury.

Mr. Bermingham: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman answer two simple questions? Do he and his party agree that the Crown Prosecution Service should set the level of the charge? If so, do they agree that the CPS

[Mr. Bermingham]

should decide the level of venue, so that we could end once and for all our rather stupid system of hybrid offences and perhaps follow the Scottish system in full?

Mr. Garnier: The interesting point is that the Home Secretary prays in aid the Scottish system, but does it, as the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews) pointed out, in such a way that he misuses the Scottish example. I shall come on to that.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is the hon. and learned Gentleman suggesting that the House would be better off with a Home Secretary who was overruled by the courts on, I think, 11 occasions, rather than with the current one?

Mr. Garnier: If the hon. Lady thought that she was helping her side, she has another think coming.

It is because the Home Secretary has been doing too much, because he has been overwhelmed by the volume of paper and advice in his Red Box with which he has to contend, because he does not dare admit that he is wrong, and because he believes that he must devour with gusto every scrap piled on his plate, that he has trapped himself with this Bill.

The Bill does not and will not appeal to the writers or the readers of the *Daily Mail* or *The Daily Telegraph*, or to the writers or the readers of *The Guardian* or *The Observer*, all of whom know in their heads and their hearts that it is wrong and muddled.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The hon. and learned Gentleman has been speaking for 10 minutes. We want to hear his fundamental opposition to the Bill. As he mentioned Scotland, has he considered the fact that more than 50,000 people in Scotland every year are tried without being allowed to elect for jury trial, and that that has been going on not just for the 18 years his party was in power, but at least since the 1600s? As there has been no outcry from Liberty or anyone else that that has caused any great breach of justice, does he accept that there are strong merits in the Scottish system, and that it is those merits and that part of the system which my right hon. Friend is trying to incorporate in the Bill?

Mr. Garnier: There may well be merits in the Scottish system, but the Home Secretary is not trying to incorporate that system in the Bill. If the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) had studied the Bill, perhaps he would not have made that intervention.

The Bill is also designed to appeal to the Treasury, despite claims that it will lead to savings of only £128 million. That is a smaller figure than the sum that the Government have made the taxpayers of Britain spend on General Pinochet in the past 16 months. The Home Secretary enabled him to escape trial—before a jury or otherwise—in this country or anywhere else because he permitted him, at least, the right of election; he granted him the right to choose a confidential medical examination.

Not long ago, an hon. Member for Blackburn spoke about a suggestion that the House should restrict a defendant's right to elect trial by jury in the Crown court. On 27 February 1997, little more than two months before the general election, whereafter he became Home Secretary and a right hon. Member, he said:

> Let me now refer to the proposal to end the right of many defendants to elect for trial by jury, even though they may face charges of dishonesty, and their reputation and their whole future may be at stake. Surely, cutting down the right to jury trial, making the system less fair, is not only wrong but short-sighted and likely to prove ineffective . . . Is it not the case that that not only is the view of the Opposition and many practitioners and jurists, but was the view of the Secretary of State, at least until today?

If the cap fits, wear it. The same man today sneers at woolly liberal lawyers from Hampstead who oppose the Bill. If he was right in February 1997, he is wrong now. If he thought that the justification for opposing the change was sustainable then, his current volte-face is incredible and—worse—risible.

The Home Secretary may believe that charges of theft, arson, burglary, handling stolen goods and some sex crimes are trivial now, but for those in the dock, they can be life-wrecking and career-shattering. In February 1997, he said:

> If a police officer, a Member of Parliament or even a Secretary of State were charged with an offence of dishonesty, would they not insist on being tried by a jury? If that is the case, why should others be denied that right of election?—[*Official Report*, 27 February 1997; Vol. 291, c. 433-34.]

I agreed with the right hon. Gentleman then. However, unlike him, I adhere to the principle of justice for all now. When the Home Secretary changes his mind, it is apparently a matter for self-congratulation; but the fate of those who have not changed their minds and oppose his policy is to be castigated and abused.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Given that the hon. and learned Gentleman has become slightly more impassioned about the subject, will he confirm today that, in the unlikely event of the Conservative party winning the next general election, it will make a manifesto commitment to reverse the effects of the Bill?

Mr. Garnier: Yes, I will. The Home Secretary should write it down.

The Home Secretary was not alone in the views that he previously held. In July 1993, after the royal commission on criminal justice had reported, Lord Williams of Mostyn, who is now Attorney-General, but who was then an Opposition spokesman on legal affairs in the other place and a former chairman of the Bar, wrote in *The Times*:

> The serious blemish in an otherwise admirable report is the proposal that in those cases where the accused can now opt for trial by jury, this right should be removed, and in cases where the Crown Prosecution Service does not agree to trial by jury, the magistrates would have the power to decide. This would be madness. There are delays and inefficiencies at present, but the way to deal with them is to improve the mechanics, not to erode a fundamental liberty. How will a defendant feel about his case if he has failed to obtain a jury trial and has his case heard in the very magistrates court that refused him his present rights? I hope that Parliament will refuse to countenance legislation of this kind.

So do I.

In an interview at the time, Lord Williams also said that there were "no circumstances" under which he could agree to a proposal such as that contemplated in the Bill.

He said he was "adamantly opposed" to such a proposal. It now seems that he is adamantly in favour of such madness.

If so, he is not the only man guilty of conspiring to damage the administration of justice. Step forward another lawyer, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair), who said that it was "totally unsatisfactory" to prevent defendants from choosing trial by jury. He said that "fundamental rights to justice" could not be "driven by administrative convenience." I agree.

Who else agrees with the views then expressed by those three members of the Government? The Criminal Bar Association, the Bar Council, the Association of Magisterial Officers, the Society of Labour Lawyers—every member of the Home Office apart from the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), may be a member of that august body—the Society of Conservative Lawyers, the Society of Liberal Democrat Lawyers, the Law Society, any number of Crown court and High Court judges to whom I and others have spoken but who cannot speak out publicly, the Legal Action Group, Justice, Liberty, the Institute of Race Relations, the Blackstone Society, the Howard League, the Portia Trust, Professor Lee Bridges—professor of law at Warwick university—Northumbria police, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, the Quakers and the legal committee of the Joint Council of Her Majesty's Stipendiary Magistrates.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Garnier: In a moment. Also in agreement are the Institute of Legal Executives, the Society of Asian Lawyers, the Association of Chief Officers of Probation and, I hope, the hon. Lady.

Ms Blears: The hon. and learned Gentleman is reciting a litany of those who oppose these measures, but has he given any thought whatever to the rights of witnesses, victims and people who have a stake in the criminal justice system, who all too often are not heard in the House and elsewhere because they do not have the ear of rich and powerful lawyers?

Mr. Garnier: Yes I have, which is precisely why I oppose the Bill.

Which are the most notable organisations that support new Labour's policy? The Crown Prosecution Service, the Association of Chief Police Officers, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, Warwickshire trading standards department, the joint office of the Department of Social Security and the Department of Health solicitor, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, to which the Home Secretary referred.

The Home Secretary also places great reliance on the views of the Lord Chief Justice. When he speaks in court as a judge his view, subject to appeal, is paramount. When he speaks in the other place as a legislator his views command respect, but are not to be granted any more respect than those of the Home Secretary.

What arguments do the Government put up for this silly and unnecessary Bill, which was not even mentioned in their election manifesto? First, they say that the accused does not have the right of election in Scotland so why should he have it here. After the mess that Labour has made of the party in Wales and the race for mayor of London, we could be forgiven for thinking not only that in Scotland there is no right of election, but that the Home Secretary's comparison is false for precisely the reasons advanced by the hon. and learned Member for Medway. The prosecutor chooses venue in Scotland, but the sheriff who tries the summary case is the equivalent of a stipendiary magistrate or a circuit judge in this jurisdiction, not a bench of lay magistrates.

Moreover, the maximum sentence available on summary trial in Scotland is three months, not six, and unlike in this country, the summary court has no power to commit a convicted defendant to a higher court for a more severe sentence if it feels that its powers are insufficient.

Mr. Hogg: Although I have a great respect for the stipendiary magistracy, is it not worth reminding the House that a stipendiary magistrate sits in a magistrates court as one judge—the judge of fact? We must consider whether one judge—namely, the stipendiary magistrate—should be the judge of fact in, for example, cases involving dishonesty.

Mr. Garnier: That is a perfectly good point and I hope that we shall be able to discuss it further in Committee.

Another point was mentioned by the Minister of State on the Radio 4 "Today" programme in support of the Bill: Britain is the only country in Europe, and possibly elsewhere, that allows the defendant the right to choose his place of trial. So what? Britain is the only country that does a great many things that do not need to be changed or done away with on that account. Many European countries do not have trial by jury at all.

Mr. Grieve: Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that a particularly chilling feature of the Bill is that the Government who introduced the Human Rights Act 1998 want to ratchet down to a common mean every single right that defendants have in the courts that are well over and above that Act?

Mr. Garnier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I often wonder why the Government allow themselves to rubber-stamp their Bills with the declaration under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act without having thought what they are doing.

Mr. Straw: Challenge the Bill.

Mr. Garnier: The Bill is not yet an Act of Parliament.

Many European countries do not have trial by jury at all. If new Labour stands for drab, dull, monotonous uniformity—or what the Home Secretary calls modernisation—we have further cause for concern.

In another context, but equally to do with human rights, the Government support those who dare to be different. For once, why do not they stand up for the distinctiveness that is Britain and have the courage and the pride to do so?

The Government's next point is that the Bill will save money. The figure has gone up in the past few days from £105 million to £128 million a year, but that is still less than they spent on General Pinochet. It is a misleading statistic anyway, as more than £80 million of the alleged

[Mr. Garnier]

savings will not come from reduced fees for lawyers or court costs. They will, so the Government say, come from the shorter prison sentences imposed by magistrates. They will be savings for the Prison Service. At least two points concern me about that. Why should a defendant receive a different and lesser sentence in another court for the same offence on the same evidence after a contested trial? Why are the Government, who said that they would be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, using the Bill to be weak on crime and weak on the causes of crime?

The Government say that efficiency savings in the courts will follow the passage of the Bill, claiming £12.5 million on committals and £41.5 million on Crown court trials that would no longer take place, but the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), who is no longer in his place, has already shot that fox. He said:

> Section 49 of the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 (plea before venue) has led to a decrease in the number of persons committed to the Crown Court for trial.

He did not, of course, thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe—the Home Secretary who introduced the provision to make that sensible change to criminal procedure—even though the number of cases going to the Crown court has almost halved, from more than 30,000 to about 18,000, as a direct result.

As Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws admitted in the other place on 20 January, making the simple administrative change of asking the defendant for his plea before asking where he wants to be tried has achieved an extraordinary reduction in Crown court cases. Like her, I have absolutely no doubt that it is not beyond the wit, even of this Government, to introduce proposals as useful as that in respect of the 1996 Act rather than bashing on with the Bill.

Mr. Clappison: Does my hon. and learned Friend recall that the Home Secretary, when shadow Home Secretary, said on 27 February 1996 that the Government should wait to see what effect the 1996 Act had on the number of cases being committed to the Crown court at the election of the defendant? Since then, as he rightly says, the number of cases has gone down. The Home Secretary does not have a leg to stand on.

Mr. Garnier: I agree with my hon. Friend.

If, as the Government claim, people are abusing the system of election because they want to spend Christmas at home rather than in prison, it should be made clear to them at the point of election that they will be penalised if they are found to have abused the system. As Baroness Kennedy said:

> Ways can be found of creating sticks and carrots here that would achieve the same ends.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1282.]

That seems sensible and timely advice.

The Bill will save money, says the Home Secretary. Will it really? Can we rely on the Government's unaudited assumptions? First, there will be a hearing before the magistrates about where the case should be heard. They will no longer be able to take into account the effect of a possible conviction on the livelihood or the reputation of the accused, which means that instead of discriminating in favour of one class of defendant—or to use the Home Secretary's words, a police officer, an MP or even a Secretary of State—the new Bill will lead to a new and diametrically opposite sort of discrimination. Those with previous convictions will—thanks to proposed new section 19(2)(c) of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980, to be introduced by the Bill—have a greater chance of a jury trial than those with no criminal record at all. Potential loss of a good reputation and livelihood will now be a positive bar to trial by jury, because the Bill does not allow that to be taken into account in a decision on venue.

Added to the many concerns that have been made plain by those who speak on behalf of the ethnic minority communities—the Home Secretary surely remembers the voices of the Lawrence family solicitor, Imran Khan, and of Peter Herbert, the chairman of the Society of Black Lawyers—that will add to the loss of confidence in the summary justice system that many groups have already undergone. It is undoubtedly true that those venue hearings will be lengthy and fiercely contested and that they will lead to dissatisfaction in the minds of many defendants with the summary process and the magistrates courts. With what result? There will be appeals to the Crown court under new section 20 of the 1980 Act, and there will be plenty of them. The Home Secretary's written answers about projected appeal numbers are no doubt honestly given, but they betray the Whitehall mandarin's detachment from real life in the criminal courts. These appeals will go only to the resident judge—the senior judge in each court centre—and will be heard, the Home Secretary tells us, within 48 hours.

Mr. Hogg: There is, of course, a right of appeal, to which my hon. and learned Friend is drawing the House's attention; but will he also point out that, if the appeal is heard within 48 hours, there is a real risk that those legal representatives of the accused person who are familiar with the case will not be present, or able in any way to deal with the appeal?

Mr. Garnier: That is a telling point, and one that has escaped the Home Secretary.

The resident judges—there are not many of them—will not thank the Home Secretary for this additional work when they are already hard pressed dealing with trial, pre-trial and other contested matters, as well as the administrative work that goes with their job. Even according to the Home Secretary's figures, appeals to resident judges are likely to add between two and four hours a week to their court work load, which will mean that other trials are delayed or held up. Nor is there any help at hand, as the Lord Chancellor's Department keeps them on short rations, and the Home Secretary has announced in a written answer that there will be no additional judges, full or part time, and no additional stipendiary magistrates, full or part time, to assist in dealing with the extra work that the Bill will create.

Let us assume that the judge agrees with the magistrates, and sends the case back for summary trial. Another bench of JPs will have to be found for a third hearing; if they convict, the defendant has the right of appeal to the Crown court for a complete re-hearing, before a judge and two magistrates, against conviction and/or sentence. If they convict but do not think they have adequate sentencing powers, the magistrates can commit

the defendant to the Crown court for sentence. The defendant can appeal against the increased sentence as well. That involves five possible court appearances.

Rather than decreasing the number of court hearings, the Bill will tend to increase their number, and to increase the cost of criminal justice. By increasing the number of hearings and causing delay, it will increase the anguish experienced by witnesses and victims of crime. That is the very point about which the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) was concerned, and if she maintains her concern she should vote with us tonight.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I hope that Labour Members are listening to this. Can the hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that the arguments about the number of stages that will follow the Bill, and the cost and delay involved, have never been evaluated by Government, have never been added to the equation, and have never been counted against any arguable savings that Government are presenting as some justification for their case?

Mr. Garnier: The Bill was presented by a Home Secretary who claims to be a lawyer, but who has simply not advised himself of the evidence and the issues. There have been a number of written answers from either the Home Secretary or his junior ministerial colleagues over the past two or three weeks dealing with the number of cases likely to go to appeal and the possible costs, but they are wholly unaudited: they are guesses.

Ms Blears: The figures given by the hon. and learned Gentleman in regard to the likelihood of appeals strike me as guesswork on his own part. How does he explain the fact that the appeal rate against magistrates' decisions in the thousands of cases already heard by them—cases of theft, burglary and plenty of either-way offences—is less than 2 per cent? How does he explain the fact that people are content with magistrates' decisions, feel that they have had a fair trial and feel that they have been dealt with properly? Surely the hon. and learned Gentleman's figures have been plucked out of the air: we have no evidence that that is the likely number of appeals.

Mr. Garnier: I am not sure that I follow the hon. Lady's argument, but if extended to its logical conclusion, it probably suggests that we do away with any form of criminal trial system.

What further reason did the Home Secretary adduce to persuade us to support the Bill? He said that the current system was an old lag's charter. It is no such thing, as the Home Secretary knows and as even a cursory analysis will reveal. But if it is an old lag's charter, why not listen to Lady Kennedy? If it is an old lag's charter, why did the Government abandon our "honesty in sentencing" proposals, which allow a judge to disregard time spent on remand by those who have tried to play the system?

In any event, as the hon. and learned Member for Medway pointed out, it is well known that the Crown Prosecution Service overcharges defendants on occasion. The defendants then do not plead guilty, and elect trial at the Crown court. At the Crown court, perhaps at the plea and directions hearing in advance of the trial, independent prosecuting counsel will advise on the merits of the prosecution, reduce the charge and secure a guilty plea to the lesser charge.

How can the exercise of a right to jury trial—where a defendant is given better disclosure of the prosecution case, and where he may feel that he will be tried by his peers and not by those of a different ethnic, social or economic background—be termed an abuse? It is as much a defendant's right as any right enjoyed by the citizen, and should not be done away with at the whim of this Home Secretary.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Is not that point particularly important now, when the Director of Public Prosecutions has just gone public with his grave concern about the difficulty of the police in giving proper disclosure, and the difficulty of the Crown Prosecution Service in correcting that? We are talking about 40 per cent. and 14 per cent. of all cases in each instance.

Mr. Garnier: My right hon. and learned Friend is entirely right. These are not new points, yet they seem to have escaped the attention of the Home Secretary.

Our concern is all the greater when we consider that our criminal justice system is largely consensual. Defendants are rarely shackled in court, and often sit in the dock by themselves. Security is low key, and guilty men are sentenced knowing that, although they have been convicted, they have been justly convicted by their fellow citizens who have heard the evidence.

This is a short and simple Bill. It is a short, simple and bad Bill. It is an unwanted and unnecessary Bill. It is an unjust Bill. It is a Bill whose older sibling was deservedly defeated in the Lords, and it is a Bill that deserves to be defeated here. If we cannot knock it down here—even with the assistance of the many Labour Members who know a just cause when they see one—we, the Bill's opponents of all parties and of none, look forward to its defeat in another place.

The Bill will do the Home Secretary no credit, and he knows it. It does the Government no credit, and they know it. It will hang round the neck of the Home Secretary like a rotting albatross.

6.7 pm

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): I support the Bill, and I do not do so on grounds of cost. I spoke recently to someone from the Commonwealth, who said that, when he thought of Britain, he thought of fair play, justice and democracy. Justice and democracy are expensive, and I think that we should be prepared to pay the price. I accept that those who are responsible for the Government's purse strings may consider that to be a factor, but to me it is utterly irrelevant.

Unlike my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, I did not criticise the proposal when the royal commission published its report, because I paid great attention to who was on the commission. It consisted of 11 people, most of whom I did not know, although the positions that they held at the time suggested that they could be trusted to consider the way in which our criminal justice system should be amended to deal with the collapse in public confidence that came in the wake of all the miscarriages of justice that we have seen, many of them in Irish cases.

Two members of the commission in particular, who are known to me in different contexts, led me to feel that I should respect its unanimous view. I refer to the chair, Lord Runciman—Garry Runciman, a highly respected

[Jean Corston]

social scientist, treasurer of the Child Poverty Action Group for many years and also, as it happens, a business man, as well as being the author of major works of sociology—and Professor Michael Zander, of the London school of economics.

I must declare a kind of interest at this point: Professor Zander was one of my teachers when I was a somewhat elderly law student at the LSE. In any event, I have the utmost respect for him, and no one could doubt his civil liberty credentials.

The royal commission relied on figures from research by the Home Office's research and planning unit, conducted by Hedderman and Moxon and published by HMSO in 1992.

In case anyone is going to say, "Ah. We now have plea before venue," the House of Commons Library says that, so far as it is aware, the number of cases in the last year for which figures are available, post-plea before venue, where people plead guilty at the door of court, is 11,000. At that time, however, Hedderman and Moxon pointed out that only 18 per cent. of cases tried in the Crown court were indictable. The remainder were either-way cases. Fifty-two per cent. were directed automatically by magistrates, who considered that it would be more appropriate for a Crown court to deal with the matter.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Is my hon. Friend aware that it was an essential part of Runciman's suggestion that, should the right of trial by jury be given up, that magistrates should consider, by statute, the reputation of the people to whom they were denying trial? It was an essential part of Runciman, which has been taken out of the Bill. As she knows Michael Zander, does she know whether he has changed his mind?

Jean Corston: Of course I am aware that the commission thought that the reputation should be considered, but surely my hon. and learned Friend is aware of the reasons why it has been removed from the Bill.

Thirty per cent. of cases went to the Crown court as a result of the defendant's election—the defendant chose trial by jury. Three main objectives in making that choice were cited. The first was that it put off the day of trial, which is obvious. If in custody, the defendant will spend time on remand. Spending time in any prison is not pleasant, but at least someone on remand will have better access to lawyers, more visits, the right to wear their own clothes and to spend more money in the prison shop.

The second objective was said to be that defendants believed that there would be a better chance of acquittal as they thought that the trial process would be fairer. There may be some truth in that, but the royal commission found it odd that most of them ended up pleading guilty. By the day of trial, 70 per cent. of those who elected for trial had pleaded guilty to all the charges. A further 13 per cent. pleaded guilty to some charges.

The third objective cited was the belief that a Crown court sentence would be lighter. That belief is much mistaken. Judges are three times more likely to impose immediate custody. On average, sentences are two and a half times as long. One third of defendants who elected trial by jury said that, in retrospect, they would have preferred to have been dealt with by magistrates. For all types of offences, magistrates are more likely to order defendants to pay compensation to victims.

The royal commission knew that there would be objections, particularly from the legal establishment. It was not mistaken, but it said that magistrates conducted more than 93 per cent. of all criminal cases—that is 1.8 million cases a year—and should be trusted to try fairly. Therefore, it is invidious to suggest that it is not possible to get justice in a magistrates court. Very few miscarriages of justice have been referred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission following magistrates court decisions; indeed, it may be only one.

The royal commission did not consider that defendants should be able to choose the mode of trial that they thought would offer them a better chance of acquittal, any more than they should be able to choose the judge whom they thought would give them a more lenient sentence.

Last year, 400,000 either-way cases were tried by magistrates: that is, 400,000 cases where defendants said that they were happy for the magistrate to proceed immediately to trial. That does not seem like a lack of confidence to me. Furthermore, of the 65,000 cases that went to the Crown court, 47,000 were sent by magistrates themselves because they thought it inappropriate for them to try those cases. They do have some knowledge of what is appropriate in terms of their jurisdiction.

In any event, the Bill will provide for a right of appeal to a Crown court judge for anyone who is refused jury trial as a result of a magistrates court deciding to reserve the case to themselves. It is an important safeguard, but not one that was recommended by the royal commission.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jean Corston: With respect, may I ask for a short intervention because there is a time limit on my speech and there will not be on the hon. Gentleman's?

Mr. Hughes: The question is simple. Why is the hon. Lady's argument not an argument for getting rid of jury trial all together?

Jean Corston: That is an extraordinary question from someone who, I understand, practises law. In some cases—for example, murder and rape—no one would suggest that magistrates have the competence to deal with such matters. Apart from anything else, there is the length of the trial.

The Attorney-General, Lord Williams of Mostyn, for whom I have much respect, said that those who opposed the Bill would have to say

to the female complainant in a rape case—

the type of victim to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) referred earlier—

> "Your case is not going to come on for nine months" . . . why? Because the system is clogged up with matter that . . . does not really need to be there.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1293.]

That is something that we have to acknowledge.

Mr. Burnett *rose—*

Jean Corston: I will not give way again because of the time limit on my speech.

I turn to the question of race. In my constituency, there is a considerable population of people from the black and Asian communities. If I had thought that the Bill would in any way harm their prospects of a fair trial, or their representation in the criminal justice system, I would have been the first to have said so and to have voted against it. I am absolutely committed to the eradication of racism in our society and oppose the way in which black people can be stigmatised by the criminal justice system, but I have been influenced by research by Dr. Bonny Mhlanga of Hull university, who conducted an analysis of 5,500 defendants, which was published in October.

The research concluded that black and Asian defendants were less likely to be convicted after contested trials in both Crown and magistrates courts. At magistrates courts, 48 per cent. of cases involving black defendants did not result in conviction. The equivalent figure for white defendants was 41 per cent. In the Crown court, 36 per cent. of black defendants and 30 per cent. of white defendants were not convicted. Therefore, it is not true to say that black people are less likely to get justice from magistrates.

If there is a problem with the magistracy, let people say so and let us do something about it. As a result of the royal commission and the lack of confidence that most of us displayed in our criminal justice system after the disgraceful and outrageous cases involving people such as the Birmingham six, the Bridgewater four, the Guildford four and all the rest, Labour Members said that we should look at the way in which the judiciary was elected and judges behaved. We are trying to do that. If there is a similar problem with the magistracy—it has not been brought to my attention that there is—let us deal with it, rather than say, "Let us have a Crown court system," which is bogged down with things that simply do not need to be there and is used as a delaying tactic by people who know the form.

In turning to the legal profession itself, I have to declare an interest: before I came to the House, I practised as a barrister. I never practised criminal law, but I have during my time as a Member of Parliament been much persuaded by briefings from organisations such as the Bar Council—I am a member of the Bar—the Law Society, Justice and Liberty. I am not so persuaded now.

I served on the Standing Committee that considered the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill. One of its provisions was the abolition of the right to silence. A new form of caution was to be administered to people when they were arrested, or taken to a police station.

We were all told—those of us on the Standing Committee had a specific responsibility to look at every single briefing that came before us—that that was the most appalling attack on the rights of defendants, that it would lead to miscarriages of justice, that it was wrongheaded and anti-democratic. I cannot describe the effect that that had on me. Those were the days when we were in opposition and used to turn up at a three-line vote for a principled abstention.

I was one of the 40-odd Labour Members who made myself very unpopular by voting against that Bill. I did so on the basis that the Bar Council and Law Society had said that it was the end of justice as we knew it, or words to that effect. Ever since, I have been waiting for all those miscarriages of justice that were going to emerge because of that measure to do so, but they have not. All I say to people at the Bar Council and the Law Society is, "Think very carefully about how you conduct yourselves, because some of us are beginning to think that you sometimes raise siren voices."

The name of the Attorney-General was invoked by Opposition Members. He was once the chairman of the Bar Council. When he heard some of the objections being made to the Bill in another place, he said that, as a former Bar Council chairman, he himself had behaved in that type of "neanderthal" fashion. I tell those organisations—for many of whom I have the utmost respect—"Be very careful in how you express yourselves, because the way in which you are pursuing some of these issues is having precisely the opposite effect to that which you intended."

6.20 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston). She made an extremely cogent speech. I particularly enjoyed her remarks about the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. She will recall that, in opposition, Labour Front Benchers opposed the right of silence provisions, although they did abstain on Third Reading.

I was also particularly interested in the hon. Lady's comments on the long study that she has evidently given to the issue of jury trials. She will forgive me if I am wrong—I hope that she will correct me if I am wrong—but I do not recall her rushing to support the original proposal, which now finds itself in the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial)(No.2) Bill, when I made it in February 1997.

The Home Secretary has acknowledged that introducing the Bill in Parliament represents for him a complete volte-face from the position that he took when I proposed it, for consultation and without commitment, in February 1997. He then described it as wrong, short-sighted and likely to prove ineffective. Unfortunately—I say this to him as gently as I can—he has been more than a little disingenuous in explaining the change in his position.

In a press notice issued by the Home Office, on 19 November 1999—the day on which the original version of the Bill was introduced in another place—the Home Secretary laid great emphasis in explaining his change of position on what he described as the "new provision" of a special right of appeal. That, he said, deals with what he described as one of his "key worries" when he was in opposition.

The Home Secretary cannot possibly be unaware of the fact that, in the very statement that I made in February 1997, when I announced the proposal, I referred to the provision of a right of appeal against a decision by the magistrates not to allow a case to go to the Crown court. So that is hardly a "new provision".

So far from making any reference in his response to my statement to what he now describes as one of his "key worries", the Home Secretary criticised that right of appeal on the grounds that it would cause delay. I am, therefore, sorry to say to the Home Secretary—as gently as I can—that he has been less than straightforward in the explanation that he has given for his change of heart.

I suppose that no one should be at all surprised by that. The Home Secretary's change of heart on this issue is all of a piece with his change of heart on many other issues.

[Mr. Michael Howard]

When he was in opposition, he described private prisons as "morally repugnant", but now he embraces them with enthusiasm. The truth is that Labour Members won the previous general election through unprincipled opportunist opposition, and they have remained true to those values in government.

My right. hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench have made their position on the proposal clear, and they are perfectly entitled to do so. As I made clear when I originally made the proposal, it was for consultation and it was without commitment. But I know what I wanted to do. The Home Secretary is quite right: had I remained Home Secretary after the general election, I would indeed have tried to persuade my colleagues to accept and implement the proposal. I do not know whether I would have succeeded in doing so. Nevertheless, that is what I have tried to do—for all the reasons stated by the Home Secretary and, in another place, by the Attorney-General when they presented the Bill in its original form.

If the Bill had been presented to the House in its original form, I would have voted for it. I know that it is a moot point whether that support would have caused more embarrassment to my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench or to the Home Secretary, but that is what I would have done. That is what I was fully prepared to do, because I have not changed my mind.

Mr. Hogg: Had my right hon. and learned Friend presented his proposals on the right of appeal, would that right of appeal be an oral one or on the papers, as is proposed by the Home Secretary?

Mr. Howard: I had not considered in detail the type of appeal that would be offered, and so I cannot give my right hon. and learned Friend an answer to that question.

The Bill that we have before us today has departed from the original Bill in one vital respect.

Virtually every statement that I have been able to find on this issue has emphasised the importance of taking into account, in any decision on the mode of trial, the effect of a conviction on the reputation and livelihood of the defendant. The reason for that—it has absolutely nothing to do with class, colour or any of the other matters that have been drawn into the argument—is that, for someone with a string of convictions, the only punishment that he would receive if he were convicted is the sentence imposed by the court. If someone of good character were convicted, however, particularly if his or her livelihood depends on that good character, the punishment is far more severe than the sentence imposed by the court.

That is why the Home Secretary was absolutely right, when he originally announced his proposal, to describe the requirement to take into account the effect of a conviction on the defendant's livelihood and reputation as a "safeguard". That was the word that he used, and he was right.

That is why the Attorney-General, when he was justifying the original Bill in another place, chose this example to make his case:

> Is it right that someone, let us say, who has 10 previous convictions for shoplifting a jelly or a banana from Tesco is automatically entitled to the right to trial by jury?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 December 1999; Vol. 607, c. 923.]

That is why the Lord Chief Justice, when he spoke in favour of the original Bill in another place, used this example to make his case:

> On a relatively recent visit to a court outside London . . . I found myself trying for shoplifting an elderly man, of weak intellect, in poor health, who had more than 60 convictions for that offence. He had really no defence, as the jury concluded.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1253.]

The example cited by the chief constable of Kent, and quoted by the Home Secretary in his speech today, was a similar example. The example quoted by the Home Secretary himself in his speech today was a similar example. That is why the original Bill contained the requirement that the magistrates should take into account the effect of a conviction on the defendant's livelihood and reputation.

I agree with the Home Secretary that that provision was a safeguard. I agree with the Attorney-General that someone with 10 previous convictions for shoplifting a jelly or a banana from Tesco should not have an automatic right to trial by jury. I agree with the Lord Chief Justice that the elderly man whom he tried, who had more than 60 convictions for shoplifting, should not have an automatic right to trial by jury. I agree with the chief constable of Kent in the example that he gave. That is why I would have voted for the Bill in its original form.

But I also passionately believe that a lorry driver with an unblemished reputation, whatever his colour, who might lose his job if he is convicted of an offence of dishonesty, should at least have that fact taken into account by the magistrates when they decide the mode of trial.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that one of the Bill's major vices is that magistrates are proscribed from considering anybody's background? They are forbidden to do so.

Mr. Howard: I was coming to that point. The scale of the Home Secretary's volte-face on the issue is enormous.

Mr. Straw *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I should like to make my point before I give way to the Home Secretary. The original Bill required magistrates to take such issues into account. The redrafted Bill could have said that reputation and livelihood may be taken into account, but instead it forbids magistrates to take them into account. They are not allowed to have the slightest regard to the effect of a conviction on the reputation or livelihood of a defendant. If the Home Secretary still wants to intervene, perhaps he can explain how magistrates can decide whether they have sufficient powers to sentence a defendant, as the Bill requires them to do, without taking into account their circumstances, which the Bill forbids them to do. That is beyond me and the House has had no explanation. I shall be delighted to give way if the right hon. Gentleman wants to answer that.

Mr. Straw: My question to the right hon. and learned Gentleman is different. It is clear from the text that he has just read out that the court can take into account the likely sentence. That is bound to include some circumstances relating to the offender.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman gave an example of a lorry driver. Whether a lorry driver convicted of a theft loses his job will depend on the circumstances of the theft, but a lorry driver convicted of drink-driving will certainly lose his job. Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman suggesting that the offence of drink-driving should be upgraded from summary only to either way?

Mr. Howard: I am assessing the criteria that magistrates should take into account when deciding the mode of trial for either way offences, because that is what the Bill is about. The Home Secretary has not answered my question and I believe that what he said was wrong. New section 19(2) says:

> For the purpose of subsection (1) above the court shall consider—. . .
>
> (b) any of the circumstances of the offence (but not of the accused) which appears to the court to be relevant.

I stress those words "not of the accused". Paragraph (c) continues

> whether, having regard to the matters to be considered under paragraph (b), the punishment which a magistrates' court would have power to impose for that offence would be adequate.

Paragraph (b) governs paragraph (c). According to the language of the Bill, in considering whether they have sufficient powers to sentence the defendant appropriately, magistrates would, extraordinarily, not be allowed to take into account the circumstances of the defendant.

On the Government's estimate, at least 2,000 people a year who would have been tried by a jury if the magistrate could take into account the effect of a conviction on their reputation or livelihood will not be so tried as a result of the proposals. That is not justice. This is not a Committee point, as the Home Secretary said to the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). The provision cripples the discretion that magistrates can exercise and strikes at the heart of the Bill. That is why I shall vote with my right hon. and hon. Friends against Second Reading.

6.35 pm

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

> "this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill which, while making provision for determining the mode of trial in the case of offences triable either summarily or on indictment, fails properly to safeguard or maintain the right to trial by jury in either way offences which may result in serious punishment and loss of livelihood."

I declare an interest in the debate. I have been a member of the Bar for 33 years and recorder of the Crown court with full powers of a Crown court judge for 18 years. In that time I have presided over many criminal trials, sitting together with magistrates in appeals from magistrates and committals for sentence. I have represented many defendants. I have represented the police, serious crime squads and regional crime squads. I have met a lot of coppers, a lot of victims and a lot of witnesses.

I have one abiding and passionate interest in the Bill: that it should preserve the integrity, reputation and fairness of the system in which I have served. With that experience and interest, I have no hesitation in saying that this is one of the worst Bills to come before the House for many years. It will cause real and perceived injustice; it will cause immense delay and anxiety to victims, defendants and witnesses and their families; and it will create vast expense. I hold that view in common with every institution and organisation that is concerned with civil liberties.

I have three preliminary points, the first of which has already been made several times. The Bill is a total volte-face for the Home Secretary. I shall not repeat again the quotation that has been given several times, when he asked whether any Member of Parliament, if charged with an offence that would have a serious effect on their well-being if convicted, would not choose trial by jury. That rhetorical question is as relevant today as it was then. I have heard nothing from him to explain that apostasy. I am not against apostasy. St. Paul had his change of mind on the road to Damascus, where he was going to carry out a bit of public prosecution on behalf of the Romans without a jury. I commend to my right hon. Friend the fact that that example of apostasy was in favour of civil liberty and religious tolerance.

My second preliminary point is that this is not a manifesto commitment of the Labour party or any other party. It has never received careful consideration and control through conference or any forum—policy or otherwise—in my party. It has never been placed before the electorate. The proposal has been brought from its huts in the Home Office, where it has been lingering for the past 25 years, rejected repeatedly by respective Home Secretaries and Home Office Ministers, among whom it is not possible to find a single Hampstead liberal.

It is surely wrong that the Government should use their massive and quiescent majority without the issue ever being put before the electorate, particularly as a review commission is sitting and will report by the end of the year. Its finding may then be properly considered by the electorate.

My third preliminary point is that much use has been made of statistics that were described in the House of Lords as a heap of guesses. That was charitable. Many of the statistics that have been used to reinforce the Bill turn out on close examination to be misleading to the point of deceit. I shall give one example. The number of appeals likely to be generated as a result of magistrates in 14,000 cases denying to people who have pleaded not guilty the right to go to trial by jury has been arbitrarily calculated by the Government at 25 per cent. There is no reason to suppose that that is an accurate assessment. Anyone who practises in the courts will know that there is likely to be a much more significant number of appeals—let us say 10,000. How many days do the Government say will be lost on these appeals? The answer is 148. If 10,000 appeals are to be heard in 148 days in the Crown court, that allows four minutes and eight seconds for each appeal.

Some in the Home Office may think that such a decision can be taken in the time that it takes to boil an egg, but that will not appeal to Crown court judges. If judges hear 10 or 12 of these cases a day, 1,000 days of Crown court time will be lost. The answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) is that if hon. Members want to clog up the Crown court system, pass this Bill.

Mr. Hogg: Is not another vice of the appeal system as prescribed in the Bill that it is not a real appeal system? Has the hon. and learned Gentleman seen the written answer on 2 February, in which the Home Secretary makes it plain that, in the great majority of cases, the appeal will be a paper appeal, not involving representation?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. This is a wish and a prayer. The idea is that it should start off as a paper appeal. The appropriate judge will consider it, and then decide whether there should be representation. In the vast majority of cases, the judge will allow representation. The average price of an appeal to the Crown court is £679. If there are 10,000 of these cases, more than £6.7 million of public money will be wasted on the system. There is no mention of that in the Government's statistics.

The point of principle is that jury trial is fundamental to our system of criminal justice. The reason—which the Government seek to avoid—is simply this: our system is adversarial. We do not inquire after the truth; we are interested in proof. The state brings the case against its own citizen, and must prove it. It is an axiom of our law that the state does not prove it in front of its own appointees. If cases are serious, they must be proved in front of your fellow citizens. That is the right that you have. That is not an aspersion on magistrates. It is simply a matter of saying that justice must be seen to be done.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I thought that my hon. and learned Friend was on the point of suggesting that the members of the magistrates bench—of which I am one in north-west Leicestershire, although I am not sitting currently—were somehow placemen and appointees at the whim of the Government in the decisions at which they will arrive. Surely my hon. and learned Friend is not suggesting that.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Of course I am not. My hon. Friend, with great respect to him, confuses what I said. If we have a system such as this, it is implicit that justice is seen to be done—not only that it is done. If the state brings a case, it must be judged by one's fellow citizens, because the perception of justice matters more than anything else. I have enormous respect for magistrates, to whom I shall refer in a moment.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I have been following my hon. and learned Friend's argument closely, and his logic seems to suggest that he would have to argue for the right of election to jury trial in every case. As I understand it, that is not what he is arguing.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Certainly not, but I am grateful for the intervention. With great respect to my hon. Friend, I am either not articulating or she is not understanding what I mean. I said, in terms, that in any case where there is the risk of serious punishment—whether by sentence or by loss of reputation—the right to jury trial must be maintained. However, that right need not be exercised and, in the vast majority of cases, it is not.

Mr. Straw: My hon. and learned Friend knows that a serious loss of reputation and employment can follow from convictions for drink-driving, indecent exposure, assaulting a police officer or taking a motor vehicle without the consent of the owner—each of which are summary only, with no right to jury trial whatever. Is he proposing that those charges should now become either way?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Certainly not. *[Interruption.]* I will tell you—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. and learned Gentleman must remember to use the correct parliamentary language. He should not use the word "you".

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

If I may enlist what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said himself, in making such a decision there must be areas on the margins. For me, the margins are about right. I would not object to the margins being extended in some way, but there must be margins.

I refer my right hon. Friend to a short passage from one of our greatest judges, who explained the issue far better than I could. He said:

> Each jury is a little Parliament. The jury sense is a parliamentary one. I cannot see the one dying and the other surviving.

This is a good quote.

> The first object of any tyrant in Whitehall would be to make Parliament utterly subservient to his will, and the next to overthrow or diminish trial by jury, for no tyrant can afford to leave a subject's freedom in the hands of 12 of his countrymen.

That principle underpins the whole of our judicial system. It is a fundamental principle in all cases where serious punishment may apply, either by sentence or by loss of reputation.

In this respect, I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) that the Government have performed an impossible volte-face. To overcome the initial difficulty—which everybody understood—that the gross loss of reputation is very often a far greater penalty than the sentence in not very serious cases, the Government put in the reputation clause. Of course, the reputation clause is repellant because it creates a two-tier system. We have all argued against that, and everyone on the Government Back Benches would make common cause on that.

The Government replied not only by abolishing the safeguard, but by making the position infinitely worse, so that now magistrates cannot take these matters into account in deciding on the right to criminal trial.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Are we not in danger of losing another safeguard if we remove the right to elect for trial by jury? Is it not correct that about 70 per cent. of those accused who opt for trial and then plead guilty at trial actually plead guilty to different charges, and that the removal of the right to jury trial would invite overcharging through the magistrates courts, which would be their own perversion of justice?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: That is absolutely right. The findings of the royal commission were clear—one of the principal reasons why defendants change their plea when they get to the Crown court is because, in 50 per cent. of

cases, charges are reduced. That is as a result of something that is well known—namely, overcharging in magistrates courts. That accounts for the otherwise inexplicable point that people elect jury trial and subsequently plead guilty.

Mr. David Taylor: Will my hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: Before I do, could I clarify a brief point, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I was told by your immediate predecessor in the Chair that, as that I was to move the amendment, I would be allowed injury time on my fifteen minutes to take interventions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. and learned Gentleman will not be given any special treatment. Interventions on him are allowed, but his responses are not.

Mr. Taylor: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for allowing me this brief intervention. He refers to overcharging in magistrates courts, as though it were the magistrates courts bench that is responsible for that. Is it not at least possible that those cases which will be retained and heard in the magistrates courts under a revised regime will result in a lower charge to which defendants can, with some equanimity, plead guilty?

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: Obviously, it is the police who overcharge, but they do so in magistrates courts knowing full well that the expertise, experience, learning and knowledge to deal with that practice does not exist in magistrates courts. When a case of overcharging comes before the Crown court, it is immediately perceived. The statistics are against my hon. Friend.

I shall give two examples of what will happen if the Bill is passed and in both I have in mind real cases. The first is the case of a schoolteacher who has taught for 30 years, is widely respected in his community, and stands charged on one offence of indecent assault on the uncorroborated evidence of one pupil. The sentence would not be custodial, but it would destroy his life. In those circumstances, the man will almost certainly lose his right to jury trial because the magistrates are deliberately precluded from being told of the nature of the penalty that will be imposed.

Ms Blears: Does my hon. and learned Friend accept that the national guidelines issued to magistrates on the circumstances of the offence could include the fact that one person was in a position of trust and responsibility over the other person? Magistrates would be able to take that into account when deciding venue.

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: That is right, but for that to be brought before the magistrates they would have to be told that the case concerned a teacher of immense reputation who had been teaching for 30 years and who had abused that trust.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will my hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: I am sorry; I cannot do so because I have to finish.

My second example is dear to all our hearts. It is the case of a young man, of impeccable character and background, who has spent much of his time fighting and demonstrating against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Let us suppose that one day he is charged with theft—not robbery—from a bank, on the basis of a patently false identification. Under the Bill, that young man would almost certainly be denied the right to jury trial.

Mr. Straw: There is no doubt that such a case—of the kind that was faced by an hon. Friend—would go to the Crown court because of its complexity. My hon. and learned Friend knows that, and so does our hon. Friend.

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: My right hon. Friend and I can argue that point, but it was not a complex case. However, our hon. Friend would be at risk if he were in that position today because he would no longer have a right to opt for jury trial. The decision would be a lottery as to whether a particular bench of magistrates had decided that it was too complex or not complex enough. It is too serious a matter to be left to a lottery in that way.

My time is up. I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall simply say in closing that the Government have, possibly unjustifiably, a reputation for being authoritarian. The jury system is the main and principal bulwark against authoritarian—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that the hon. and learned Gentleman's time is now up.

6.54 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am happy to follow the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews). My colleagues and I will vote for his reasoned amendment, and if that does not succeed we will vote against the Second Reading of the Bill. If we still have not prevailed, we will seek to persuade the House that the Bill should go to a Special Standing Committee to take evidence on the facts, so that people can make up their minds on the facts instead of on the Government line. I do not claim that we have not had internal difficulties about the issue or that everybody in our party originally had the same view, but after a considered debate we have come to the view that the proposal is wrong in principle and would be wrong in practice.

It is not an argument to say that something is good because it is modernising. That was the argument used for the poll tax, which is hardly a commendation. The issue is whether a proposal will improve the law and make the system fairer and more just. The fact that a system has been long established is also not an argument against it. We are clear that the history and effectiveness of trial by jury both argue in favour of its retention.

After the general election, we were surprised to discover that the Home Secretary had changed his mind on the issue. One of the reasons why people voted the Tories out was that they wanted an end to what were perceived as right-wing policies, but they have now come from another source. Some of the arguments from the Home Secretary and Ministers have just oversimplified the case. They say that the system is abused, but that is not borne out by the facts. They claim that the concession

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

made since the House of Lords threw out the Bill has solved the problems. That is an oversimplification, because it has not solved some problems. Ministers also claim that great costs will and should be saved. Both points are arguable, but the bigger point is whether a small amount of cost-saving is the price that should be paid for a large amount of loss of choice.

Sometimes people get bogged down in the detail of the arguments, but I wish to return to the starting point for the Bill. We have a system—we can argue about how we got here—in which some cases have to go for jury trial. Those are the big cases. Some cases—the smaller ones—have to go before the magistrates. In between are many offences—interestingly, when I asked Ministers how many they could not tell me—that are either-way offences. There are 370 categories of such offences in English law, applicable in England and Wales. The proposal is that—without considering the detail or whether it is appropriate for the individual offence—all those offences will be changed in one go from a situation in which the defendant chooses the venue to the court choosing the venue.

There will be no review of whether the Bill should apply to all the offences. No one is asking whether some summary or some indictable offences should be either way. Many of the offences included in this sweeping change are significant offences. They include making threats to kill; assault occasioning actual bodily harm; putting people in fear of violence; child abduction; indecent assault; indecency between males; burglary; theft; handling stolen goods; affray; possessing firearms; possessing controlled drugs; supplying controlled drugs; and cruelty to children. It is callous of Parliament to think that the right way to deal with that huge number of serious offences is to say to defendants to charges of any of them—it could be one of us one day—that at a stroke they will lose their right to choose where they will be tried.

Mr. David Taylor: I shall try to help the hon. Gentleman. He is right to detail the litany of serious offences that fall into the each way category. He will know from the detailed documents that of the 1.8 million cases processed by the judicial system every year, some 65,000 are each way cases. By simple subtraction, some 47,000 cases are already referred to the Crown court on the decision of the magistrates bench, so the offences to which the hon. Gentleman refers are already properly handled by the magistrates courts.

Mr. Hughes: The House is aware of the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. The truth of the matter is that most of these cases are decided by the courts and the defendant is happy with the decision. As the hon. Gentleman says, many of the cases are sent to the higher courts by the magistrates, not at the election of the defendant. However, I shall give the hon. Gentleman two facts that he may not have picked out of the raft of parliamentary answers on this topic over recent weeks. First, only about 18,500 defendants elect trial every year, whereas, as we know, magistrates send more than twice that number to Crown courts. Secondly, although three quarters of defendants plead guilty in Crown courts, the significant fact is that there is very little difference between the numbers of people who plead guilty who have elected for Crown court trial, and the numbers who plead guilty whose cases have been sent for trial in the Crown court. Clearly, those answers show that people are not abusing the system.

Mr. Taylor: That is utterly illogical.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman may say that, but the facts support many arguments that I do not consider to be illogical. However, the more important point does not arise from statistics.

I remind those hon. Members who are still minded to support the Government but who are not on the payroll vote of what the arguments are.

First, the public case for retaining a broad base for jury trial is that it allows citizens to participate in the legal process. Jury trial is popular and adds to the legal system's credibility. It reduces those elements of the legal process in which only lawyers are involved.

The hon. Members for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) and for Salford (Ms Blears) take a pro-Government view. However, I maintain that the argument does not come down to supporting either the witnesses or the defendant. Both are worthy of support: many hon. Members are committed to ensuring that victims and witnesses get a better deal, but not at the expense of defendants. It is important for the balance of civil liberty and justice that everyone feels confidence in the system. That system will be undermined for all of us if it loses the public's confidence.

Another argument concerns the defendant's case for a jury. The election for Crown court trial is an election for trial by judge and jury, and not just by jury alone. The Crown court system separates questions of evidence, procedure and abuse of process—which are heard when the jury is not present—from the facts that are for the jury to determine. Some people believe that magistrates cannot easily separate what they hear in the debate about procedure from what they hear in the case.

Mr. Taylor: Claptrap.

Ms Blears: That is patronising.

Mr. Hughes: It is neither: I practised at the Bar before I came to the House, and I was involved in both prosecuting and defending. I have been in court often enough to know that people do not trust magistrates as much as they trust judges and juries, because they believe and understand that judges and juries have different roles.

Mr. Hogg: If the position were as the hon. Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) suggested, would not trial judges in the Crown court deal with questions of admissibility in the jury's presence? It is because it is important that the jury does not hear the underlying debate that it is excluded.

Mr. Hughes: One of the reasons why people do not plead guilty at the beginning of their trial is that they do not see all the evidence against them. The clerks' advice to magistrates is given out of sight, so that defendants never know what that advice is. It is never recorded, so cannot be read subsequently. There are all sorts of ways in which the magistrates system is less open and transparent.

The crucial point for defendants, whether we like it or not, is that the composition of the magistrates' Bench is not representative of Britain in 2000 in the same way that the composition of juries is.

Ms Blears: That is such nonsense.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We must not keep having interventions from sedentary positions.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Member for Salford does her reputation no good by saying that. Juries represent age, gender and race in a more balanced way than the magistracy. For defendants, therefore, the case for trial by jury is strong. The Home Secretary cited the people who support the Bill, but defendants, and those who represent them, also have a right to an opinion. They are just as important as judges, magistrates and the police.

There is also a political case for retaining jury trial. Certainly, there is a political case to be made against abolishing jury trial for hundreds of offences in one go. We must be careful that the Government do not push Parliament into supporting the majority against the few. Most people are not defendants in court cases. It may be popular on the streets to talk about toughening up the system, taking away people's rights and giving people who have been in trouble before a hard time, but that does not mean that it is right. We must resist populism, especially in the criminal justice system, as it sets a very dangerous precedent.

The Government have made some concessions with regard to the Bill. They inserted a reputation clause, but that only serves to show their dilemma over the Bill. A Bill with a reputation clause is clearly discriminatory, as some people have a reputation that could be presented as being more important than that of someone else. For example, if two people with no convictions were brought to trial for the same offence, and if one were 21 and out of work, while the other were a member of the Government, would the court regard their reputations as similar? No, it would not.

The reputation clause has to go, and in that I disagree with the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). That leaves a proposal that does not allow people, irrespective of reputation, to choose jury trial at all. I hope that the House will accept, therefore, that these arguments in support of the Bill are poor, however one approaches them.

The Government say that abuse goes on, but they are out of date. It is no longer true to say that. The evidence cited by the House of Commons Library makes it clear that most people who plead guilty at the door of the court do not do so because they want an extended time on remand. They plead guilty because the evidence that comes to light between committal and trial has persuaded them to plead guilty, or because their lawyers have. Research by the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department proves that.

Ms Blears: What does the hon. Gentleman say about the research that shows that 27 per cent. of defendants intend to plead guilty at the time that they elect for jury trial? That means that about 6,000 cases a year proceed on the basis of a sham.

Mr. Hughes: The other argument is that the number of people who change their plea later is going down, as is the number of those electing jury trial. The figures are not going in the direction that supports the hon. Lady's case. They are going in the opposite direction. A parliamentary answer to a question of mine states that, in 1995, 33 per cent. of either-way cases were committed for trial on the election of the defendant. However, that figure fell to 32 per cent. in 1996, and to 28 per cent. in 1997. The studies show that that reduction can be put down as much to reasons of legal process as to reasons of the interests of defendants.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the 27 per cent. of defendants who, according to Hedderman and Moxon, intended to plead guilty in 1989 all knew that they would go for trial in the Crown court anyway? That was where they were to be committed for sentencing, so they were not causing any trouble in the judicial system.

Mr. Hughes: That is clear from the reports, and colleagues can read the research.

Even if some people abuse the system, punishing the many because of the "abuse" of the few is wrong. It is like saying that because some people fiddle housing benefit, there should be no right to claim housing benefit. Therefore, the hon. Lady cannot argue that case and the Government should not. It is fundamentally illiberal and unjust.

Mr. Garnier: Is not that precisely the point made by Labour's Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws? We do not have to destroy the right to jury trial in either-way cases to deal with the abuses mentioned by the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears)—we change the mechanics.

Mr. Hughes: Not only is the hon. and learned Gentleman right, but many of the mechanics have been changed and are being changed. They have produced the speedier process and better system that everyone agrees should be achieved.

On cost, the argument that these changes will save a lot of money is untested. Once we add appeals systems, we add to the cost. I ask colleagues, if they have not already done so, to read an article by probably the most learned expert in Britain on sentencing. Writing in *Current Sentencing Practice News* in December, Dr. David Thomas describes the bizarre procedure now proposed in the Bill and referred to by Conservative Members. Three different groups of magistrates could be trying different parts of the proceedings, as well as having appeal processes at two stages.

The truth is that any possible cost benefits could be lost. In any event, most of them, as a parliamentary answer to me revealed, do not result from changes to the system. As a sentencing court cannot pass such long sentences, the cost of imprisonment is less. I am in favour of reducing the bill that the Prison Service gives the state, but let us

[Mr. Hughes]

do so by reducing directly the costs of imprisonment. Let us not use cost as a back-door advantage when there is no direct relation.

The crucial point is that the fewer jury trials there are, the cheaper it will be. No jury trials would mean a very cheap legal system. Making every trial a jury trial would make it very expensive. Please let us not argue that in order to save a bit of money, it is worth reducing the right to jury trial. If we believe that certain offences should not go before juries, let us argue for that, but for reasons other than cost.

Mr. Burnett: My hon. Friend is making a most powerful speech. Is he as surprised as I am that the figures for the proposed savings have changed in the past month from £105 million to £128 million? Is he not amazed that there has been no independent validation of those figures?

Mr. Hughes: It may disappoint my hon. Friend if I say that nothing now surprises me. A Bill is coming back to this House tomorrow in which free post for the London election was originally stated as costing £40 million, when it has now been agreed that it will cost £1 million or thereabouts. Independent auditing of the Government's figures does not seem to be a characteristic of this Administration. Although I am not surprised, my hon. Friend is right to argue that there should have been an audit.

The Scottish point is another very poor point. The Government say that they want the system in England and Wales to move more in line with that in Scotland. If we are to have a debate about whether the legal system in England and Wales should be more like Scotland's, let us have it. Perhaps we should have juries of 15 people; perhaps a straight majority on a jury should be enough; perhaps we should have verdicts of "not proven"; perhaps we should have an entirely different court system. The Scottish system has a better reputation than the English one, with sheriffs and judges having better reputations than magistrates. However, a system in which there is no right to send to the higher court once someone elects conviction in the lower court is not a proper parallel. Scotland has different judges with different powers in different courts. There is no parallel.

The Government are on weak ground in arguing the Scottish case. They cannot say that we must follow their legal system but not their stance on tuition fees. The Government say that we should not pray in aid the view of a devolved Administration. We may think that to do so is fair enough—we believe in devolution. However, let us not argue false parallels.

Let me now deal with the ridiculous argument that anyone who knows anything about the subject is in favour of the Government's proposals. First, Lord Bingham spoke out in favour of the proposals. He cited the fact that he had had a conference and called on other High Court judges to give a view, and that the majority had apparently given their support. However, in a vote in the other place, these senior judges voted as follows: Lord Donaldson voted with the Government; Lord Ackner, Lord Brightman, Lord Lane—a former Lord Chief Justice—Lord Oliver of Aylmerton, Lord Simon of Glaisdale and Lord Wilberforce voted against the Government. Of the judges who voted, the majority were not on the Government's side but against them.

Secondly, the High Court and the Court of Appeal are not the most appropriate forums to judge such matters. Crown court judges have a very different view—they deal with these offences and with jury trials every day. From my correspondence with them and knowledge of them, they have a different perspective. Praying in aid Lord Jenkins of Hillhead and his amendment in the 1970s to reduce the verdict in juries from unanimous to majority is no argument, as Lord Jenkins himself said in another place. He did that with significant cross-party support and only a small minority of opposition in this place. The Government cannot get away with arguments that are not supported by the facts.

Finally, of course the Government have evidence on their side. There was, for example, the royal commission view—its report was unanimous—and the Narey recommendation. There are, however, equally strong bodies of evidence, commissioned by the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department, that show that it is not an open and shut case. The parliamentary answers show that the changes introduced by the previous Government are having an effect. Taking the plea before the venue is decided has resulted in fewer cases going to the Crown court. Delays are reducing.

A National Audit Office report in December made many further good proposals to speed up the legal system. Nobody wants a slow legal process; nobody wants to block justice being done quickly. The Auld committee is there—the issue can be referred to it. Even if Labour Members are committed, bizarrely, to supporting the Government on what will become an increasingly unpopular position, I hope that they will take the option to refer the matter to a Special Standing Committee. All parties will be able to call people in to explain the position and come up with a better formulated response.

I am not against considering whether some offences should be tried by a different method. However, it should be done in the context of looking at the criminal justice system as a whole rather than pushing through one untested, untried and unpopular item against the will of the other place and, as far as it can be judged, the will of the public.

This is piecemeal criminal justice legislation, which is a bad way to legislate. It is populist without being principled, which is a bad way to legislate. It is not popular with people who have considered the issue and looked at the facts, which is not a good way to legislate. This measure is unworthy of the Government and many people find it particularly surprising that it should come from a Labour Government.

The Government may discover that their proposals are politically foolish as well. They have already had one defeat in the other place. It is almost certain that they will not get the Bill through in this Session. So they will be back for the fourth time—the fourth argument, the fourth row—after the next Queen's Speech, in the run-up to the election. If Labour colleagues think that this is good election-winning stuff, they underestimate the criminal justice affinity and the liberal instincts of the British people. I hope that they learn their lesson soon. If they push the Bill through tonight, they should not expect any support for their wider criminal justice agenda. This Bill will not help reduce crime, it is not in the interests of defendants, it is not in the interests of liberty, and it should be opposed.

7.20 pm

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): What are we going to do about the Home Secretary? I found his speech deeply depressing. Until today, in my innocence, I had thought that the function of Cabinet Ministers was to get good publicity for the Government and the political party whom they represent. If the Home Secretary thought that his speech today would get him good publicity, he and I come from different planets.

One of the Home Secretary's major arguments—taken up by at least two Labour Back Benchers—went roughly like this: in the past, when anyone tried to change the English legal system, there was an outcry, but subsequent events proved it unjustified, so the outcry in this case must be unjustified. I know 11-year-olds who could tell the Home Secretary that that is a false Aristotelian syllogism, in which the conclusion has not come from the premises.

As the Home Secretary seeks to drive an indelibly stained Bill through the House, we should give him a touch of his own retributive justice. We should strip him bare, whip him to the bone and send him into exile to a land governed by tyrants. I am tempted to say that the rule for the Home Secretary should be not "three strikes and you're out", but "one strike and you're dead, Jack." However, I am a bit diffident about adopting that approach, because something about the Home Secretary calls on one to temper condign criticism with admiration—if it is possible.

In addition, I have a reputation to uphold. In recent months, I have been described as an odious, obsequious, toadying Government lackey; a Blairite loyalist; and an unthinking supporter of the project. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has sedulously put it around that I have given up the search for truth and have become a desperate man in search of ermine. I can only refer hon. Members to Michael Foot's wonderful biography of Byron, who, as he lay on his death bed and the priest asked him whether he would confess and return to God, replied, "Let's not be silly at this late stage."

I hope that my criticism of the Bill and its progenitor, the Home Secretary, will be temperate, targeted, restrained and worthy of a hearing. Let me begin not with the fatal flaws in the Home Secretary's character or the iniquities of a fallen politician, but with a few general comments on the jury system that might explain to the irrational, the uncomprehending and the totally stupid why the Bill has aroused such hostility in those who believe that freedom and justice are not accidents of the English character, but necessary constructs for civilisation the world over.

While the jury trials that are about to be abolished are, as far as the Home Secretary is concerned, "irritations"—a word so offensive suggests that he was on Prozac when he uttered it—they live deep in the psyches and the history of most English men and women, and they are a matter of national pride. I say nothing about the Welsh, who have the same legal system as the English, because of what that nasty, bloody Welshman Judge Jeffries did to my ancestors after the battle of Sedgemoor in the summer of 1685.

> England's attachment to jury trial is the lamp that shows that freedom lives.

Those words were uttered by Lord Devlin, who was quoted in part by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). Lord Devlin went on to add that if a tyrant took over our country, one of his first acts would be to diminish trials by jury because

> no tyrant could leave a subject's freedom in the hands of twelve of his countrymen.

Well might the Home Secretary ponder those words tonight as the Division Bell sounds.

Before trial by jury, England had trial by ordeal, which was certainly summary justice, the scope of which the Home Secretary is intent on extending. The ordeal often involved submerging people in cold water. If the suspect sank, God had accepted him, and he was innocent. If he bobbed to the surface, however, God had rejected him, and he was guilty. Today, we would call that a catch-22. I suspect that the Home Secretary, as a born-again Christian, and though constrained by the mores of modern civilisation, has a sneaking admiration for that quick, cost-free kind of summary justice.

No matter what Home Office officials and Ministers think, there appears to be general agreement that jury trial originated in 1166 with the Assize of Clarendon, at which Henry II ordained that 12 lawful men of each hundred, and four of each vill, should report to the royal justices or sheriffs those persons reputed to have committed certain serious crimes. Out of that developed the grand jury and, later, jury trials.

However, the most important event in the history of the criminal jury was the abolition of trial by ordeal by the edict of the Roman Catholic church in 1215, when God's messengers here on earth realised that summary and retributive justice was, perhaps, not all that it was cracked up to be. Slowly, democratic instincts replaced God as the arbiter of justice.

My point is that a system that has a lineage stretching back not to, but beyond, Magna Carta should not be tampered with lightly. To that, the Home Secretary replies that either-way offences have been with us only since the mid-19th century. Even if we ignore a certain sophistry in that, the Home Secretary is tampering with a system that has survived for 150 years. I should be surprised if he could point to any other thing under the purview of his Department that is deemed to be good and that has lasted 150 years—150 days, perhaps. Indeed, I defy the Home Secretary to come to the Dispatch Box to tell us of any such thing.

The Home Secretary cites three reasons for supporting the change. I shall not go over his "irritations" again, but the other two are delay and cost. I agree with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that we should put cost aside, but we cannot. Like every Member of Parliament, I know that cost, cost and cost are what drive the Bill. It has nothing to do with the Home Secretary's irritations, as if he had problems with his bowel movements. It has nothing to do with delays and with whether old lags are fiddling the system; it is all about money.

I am prepared to cede the Home Secretary the argument on cost. I do not know whether he is right or wrong, but I have examined the figures produced by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway and I have listened to the Home Secretary. My hon. and learned Friend should give up trying to challenge the Home Secretary on those grounds. Do we really want the public

[Mr. Brian Sedgemore]

to believe that our battle hymn should be "Cry freedom—so long as it doesn't cost too much"? Who wants to follow a leader who utters such limp and palsied words? Our battle cry must be "Cry freedom—even though 'twould cost the earth". We should fight the Bill on principle, or not at all. We should leave it to the mean, small-minded Poujadists, shopkeepers and tradesmen on the Conservative Benches to haggle over the price of freedom and justice.

The Bill will undoubtedly lead to miscarriages of justice, by which I mean the conviction of the innocent. It will undoubtedly disadvantage young black people and other ethnic minorities. It will lead to an increase in excessive charges and convictions in magistrates courts. By definition, it is, therefore, a very bad Bill indeed.

At times like this, when I want to rail bitterly against the Home Secretary—whom once I considered nice, kind and wise—I seek refuge in the words of the poet Shelley, who wrote, in "Prometheus Unbound", perhaps the greatest cry for freedom and justice:

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love and bear; to hope till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
> Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
> This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
> Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free.

Let us, therefore, this day in the House of Commons, with our hearts and our minds, vote to preserve the freedom of and the right to trial by jury.

7.30 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore), who has spoken brilliantly. About 33 years ago, I played rugby against the hon. Gentleman. He was outstanding on the pitch, if a little punchy. I congratulate him on everything that he said this evening.

I declare an interest: I have been a practising criminal lawyer for many years. I have sat judicially as a recorder of the Crown court and as an acting metropolitan stipendiary magistrate, also for many years, in dozens of court centres in London and the south-east. I may be the only Member of the House who has sat both in the Crown court as a judge and in the magistrates court.

The debate has nothing to do with where one receives a better trial. It has nothing to do with whether the trial is better in the Crown court or the magistrates court. It is possible to have a wonderful or a bad trial before lay magistrates; to have a wonderful and fair trial before a stipe, or not; or to have a jury that goes one way or the other. The debate is not about that. It is about the freedom of people in this country to say, in relation to certain offences, "Rightly or wrongly, I would like to exercise my right to trial by jury."

What does the Bill do? What does it say? What are the Labour Government saying through the Bill? They are saying, "You, the defendant—man or woman—are charged with an offence of minor dishonesty. You are a person of good character. You have a job and an outstanding reputation. As a Government, we understand that if you are convicted, you will lose everything." The Government are telling the defendant, "Until today, you have had a right to jury trial—trial by your peers. With this Bill, we are taking away that right, simply because we believe that we can save money thereby." That is the issue.

That approach is shameful and shoddy. The Government should not have introduced the Bill. They did not have to do so. There are several reasons why it was unnecessary. As we have already heard, Lord Justice Auld is reviewing the working of all the criminal courts and the court system. Is not it silly to introduce such a dramatic Bill and to make such a fundamental change, rather than to wait for his report?

The Government say that the changes will save money. The explanatory notes state that the Bill is expected to save £128 million. I do not believe a word of that. If I were allowed to ask hon. Members to put up their hands if they agreed with the Government's figures, I do not suppose that a single hand would be raised. Indeed, not a single hand has gone up. What is that £128 million? Tomorrow, it could be £138 million or £148 million. Who in the Chamber believes a word of that claim?

Mr. Garnier: It was £105 million last week.

Mr. Malins: Indeed. It is nonsense. Anybody who has been around has learned by now to distrust Government figures. However, money is their prime motivation for introducing the Bill.

I worry about the Bill, not least because of the delays that might result. Let us picture the scene: a defendant in the magistrates court is refused trial by jury, and he or she appeals. Until a few hours ago, I had assumed that the normal rules in the magistrates court would apply; there have always been 21 days for appeal—probably with a hearing 21 days later. However, it was only when I was talking to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) that I learned that it was envisaged that the appeals should go through in 48 hours.

The Home Secretary must get real. It would be nonsense for him to go to a magistrates court or a Crown court and to try to get an appeal through in 24 or 48 hours. Ten to one, the prosecutor in the magistrates court would be an agent, who would push off immediately after the hearing and take a fortnight to return the papers to the Crown Prosecution Service.

Who would draft such an appeal? What about the defence lawyer? If it is intended to conclude the appeal within 48 hours, why is there no provision for that in the Bill? Why is there no mention of it in the explanatory notes? Furthermore, will it not be a sham if the appeal is merely carried out by paperwork? A worthwhile appeal must have an oral hearing. In his reply, will the Minister undertake that oral hearings may be granted in every case? Any appeal judge would look at the bits of paper and say, "I want to hear the advocate on this matter." It cannot be done in 48 hours; it is nonsense to believe that that could occur.

There is another cruel unfairness about the Bill. The Government are saying to a defendant, "We won't let you go to the Crown court for your trial, but having insisted

that you be tried in the magistrates court, we retain the right to send you to the Crown court for sentence." That is a fundamental unfairness. It will create much dissension and unhappiness.

The Government claim that many people who elect for trial in the Crown court eventually plead guilty. It is true that some people do. However, we need to ask why. Furthermore, just because that happens, does it mean that we have to introduce this measure? Of course it does not. There are two principal reasons why people go to the Crown court and plead guilty. The first is significant; it is to do with disclosure. Only when a case is committed to the Crown court does the defence receive all the papers—or nearly everything.

Mr. Hogg: On disclosure, is there not another point that my hon. Friend would want to make? In the magistrates court, there is not the same degree of disclosure. Consequently, the defendant's conduct of the defence case in that court would be hampered by lack of disclosure.

Mr. Malins: My right hon. and learned Friend is right. In the magistrates court, disclosure sometimes amounts to only one side of A4 paper with a summary of the facts. It is only by going to the Crown court that the defendant knows everything and so, better-informed and with counsel's advice, has to say, "I must plead guilty."

The second reason that people who go to the Crown court sometimes plead guilty is because when they arrive there, the charges are reduced. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor), no one is saying that the magistrates overcharged—the charge has nothing to do with the magistrates. The CPS or the police overcharge; it is a real problem.

Those are the main reasons why people change their plea at Crown court. They do not suggest that we should remove the right of jury trial. All we have to do is to give closer consideration to accurate charging and to proper and fuller disclosure.

Furthermore, what will happen in the magistrates courts or the stipes courts? What happens if the appeal fails and the case has to be tried in the magistrates court? Come with me to the stipes court at Camberwell Green, or wherever, and read the daily list. There are 100 overnights or remands, and sentences all morning. The space is crammed. Where is there room for a two or three-day trial? In a Crown court, the trial carries on—Monday, Tuesday and the next day. If a trial is adjourned part-heard in a magistrates court, it will go two or three months down the line. What would be the chance of getting the same bench or the same stipe? It would be slim. If there are to be more trials in the magistrates courts, the listing problems will be awful.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is the reason why the average delay in contested cases in magistrates courts is 21 weeks, whereas the average time for two-day cases to be heard after committal to the Crown court is five weeks? The delay is infinitely less.

Mr. Malins: The hon. and learned Gentleman has an outstanding history at the Bar. He is right. At present, to get a two-day slot for a trial in the magistrates courts, one has to look months ahead. It is much quicker in the Crown court.

Ms Blears: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in the Narey pilot areas the time taken to deal with cases in the magistrates courts has been reduced by two thirds and that, because the Narey recommendations came into force on 1 November last year, we should see a similar decrease in the time that it takes such courts to dispose of cases?

Mr. Malins: It is my fault, but I do not know whether the hon. Lady has a great deal of judicial and court experience; I am sure that she has. The Narey courts that sit at the moment are creating quicker through-processes, but that is no reason to introduce this Bill. It is every reason to let the situation develop over the next few months and see how things go on.

I shall have to conclude my remarks shortly, but let us consider the position and assess what we need to keep and what we need to change. First, plea-before-venue has done very well. It was introduced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the former Home Secretary, and it has saved a lot of time. It has been coupled with the huge credits that defendants now get for an early guilty plea, so when I am in court I see, day after day, plea-before-venue and guilty pleas. That saves a lot of time.

There is far less abuse of the system than there used to be. Frankly, if, once every couple of months, I scratch my head as I sit judicially in a stipendiary court and say, "This is a bit of an abuse of the system"—and I have said that—that is a very small price to pay for the greater good that we want to maintain.

Why do we not look at other issues, such as declassifying—or is it reclassifying—offences? Hon. Members have pointed out that habits and moods change. Years ago, all cases of criminal damage would go to the Crown court, but now—I shall be corrected if I am wrong—there is a £5,000 maximum limit. Taking and driving away a car used to be worth a sentence of three years on indictment, but now it is only six months. Driving while disqualified was worth a sentence of 12 months, but now it is worth only six even though sometimes it should be worth more. Finally, drink-driving is only a summary offence. Times changes and should we not, along with the Auld report, consider such issues? Are there other offences which we could perhaps consider for summary trial only?

I have described the approach that we should consider in future. We also need to wait to see what the Law Commission says about assault cases. My goodness, one sees many assaults charged as actual bodily harm even though they should be charged as common assault. Why are the people in the House who know about the subject not being asked by the Government for their views? Why do we not think about the issues carefully and constructively? That is what we should do.

What we do not want to do is say to that man or woman to whom I referred earlier, "You've had this right for many, many years. We're taking it away because we are going to save money." That is why this Bill, which has not been thought through and will not save time or money, is at the end of the day terribly unfair.

7.43 pm

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): I say at the outset that I shall support the Bill, as I said I would in my contribution to the debate on the Queen's Speech. It is much needed and it gives us an opportunity to debate the role of lay people in the justice system, which is a good thing. It is important that we consider the balance between fairness to the accused and fairness to victims. We have to ensure that we make justice efficient and fair.

I believe that I am the first person to speak in the debate who is not, or has not been, a practising lawyer. I am therefore rather reluctant to enter the fray with the great and incisive minds of our revered legal profession. However, I find it difficult to leave something alone if I see something wrong with it. I feel obliged to challenge it, and that is one of the reasons for my speech.

I am tempted to say that I have come to bury lawyers, not to praise them, but I will not. Some of them are not such bad people. However, I hope that the Bill will bury the arrogant, patronising and elitist attitude that so many in the legal profession have shown towards the lay magistracy and to the jury system.

When I spoke in the Queen's Speech debate, I said what my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) said earlier. My reasons for supporting the Bill are not to do with whether it saves any money. That should not be the serious motivating factor behind it, and I hope that it is not. If there are financial gains as a consequence, that is well and good and I shall welcome them. However, it is not my first reason for supporting the Bill.

There has been an amazing outcry from some quarters, including the press and the legal profession, that the Bill is an outrageous assault on civil liberties. Although I realise that some hon. Members—and certainly the gentlemen of the press—do not allow facts to get in the way of a good story, let us consider them. More than 90 per cent. of all criminal trials begin and end in the magistrates courts. Some of them are for petty offences and others are for quite serious ones, such as those that we have heard described tonight. I think that assaulting a police officer is a serious offence, and I hope that the House would agree. That offence is dealt with in a magistrates court. I think that driving while unfit is a serious offence, and that is dealt with in a magistrates court.

If trial by jury is such a safeguard for our civil liberties, why is no one suggesting that those offences—indeed, all offences—should have jury trials? I hope that, because we have sufficient faith in the magistracy to deal with such cases fairly and with common sense, we accept that it is appropriate for them to be dealt with in the magistrates courts.

As has been pointed out, of the either-way cases sent to the Crown court, the vast majority are sent by magistrates declining jurisdiction themselves. Using their common sense and experience, they say that they prefer certain cases to be dealt with in the Crown courts. That is despite the fact that some defendants would have preferred to have their cases tried in a magistrate court at the time.

When defendants opt for jury trial—the figure of 18,500 has been bandied about—70 per cent. of them admit guilt before the case comes to trial. We are talking about a small number of people who go before a judge and jury. Defendants in the Crown courts are three times more likely to receive a custodial sentence than defendants in magistrates courts being tried for similar offences.

The guardians of our civil liberties—affectionately known as the legal profession—say that this is a bad Bill for another reason. They say that magistrates are case hardened or that they are unqualified lay people. The implication is that the higher acquittal rate by juries shows that juries must be right and magistrates must be wrong. However, there is no way of telling whether that is true, because we do not analyse the way in which juries come to their decisions. We have no evidence on that.

I wish to reiterate what my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East said in passing. Miscarriages of justice in this country have taken place in Crown courts. It was not in magistrates courts that we saw the Guildford four, the Birmingham six and many others being, tragically, the subject of miscarriages of justice.

Some people suggest that defendants should have a right to trial by jury because that gives them a better chance of acquittal.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Will my hon. Friend explain why the proportion of acquittals in magistrates courts is less than the proportion of cases thrown out by judges which never come before a jury because there is no evidence? That is a worrying statistic, but why does it happen?

Ms Prentice: My hon. and learned Friend made a similar point to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, but he misses the point. There are fewer acquittals in a magistrates courts because more people plead guilty, and very few cases are thrown out by judges. People go to the door of the court and decide to plead guilty. My hon. and learned Friend's point is a different argument altogether.

The claim that defendants exercise their right to a jury trial because they think that it will give them a better chance of acquittal is a dodgy reason for supporting the present system. We might as well say that the defendant should be able to opt for the judge whom he thinks will be a soft touch. That would bring the whole system into dreadful disrepute.

I want to make it clear that I support both the magistrates system and the jury system. I have been a magistrate and a juror, and both sets of good citizens work hard to come to the right decision. No system is perfect, but on the whole jurors, like magistrates, try to bring their common sense and local experience to each case and do their best to come to a fair judgment. It is wrong to suggest, as hon. Members have done in the debate, that magistrates do not know or understand the local area. They come from that area; they live and work there; they represent it, and they are as concerned as anyone else in the area to uphold justice.

I agree that magistrates could do with a makeover. They do not get a very good press, which is probably thanks to debates such as this. They are portrayed as living in a world separate from that of those on whom they sit in judgment. I think, and after listening to the debate I am even more convinced, that that image has been conjured up by people who have not spent much time in magistrates courts in recent years. Magistrates are citizens too. Certainly, we need more JPs from ethnic minorities, and

JPs must reflect all strands of our society, but they are much closer to doing so than some of the hysterical arguments that we have heard would lead us to believe.

In response to a point raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I put in a plea about the jury system. Are we really seeing the true reflection of our communities on every jury? Do we really understand how juries come to their conclusions? The fact that we uphold the jury system as a good method of justice is no reason to believe that it is always perfect. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not here at the moment. He suggested that the jury system was far more representative and therefore better than the magistracy.

Last week, I sent the student on placement with me to the Inner London Crown court at Elephant and Castle, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, to carry out a rough check of how many of the jurors in the 10 courts there were white and how many were from ethnic minorities; and, if possible, to give me a gender and age breakdown. I acknowledge that it was not scientific research, but the results were very interesting. She said that 95 per cent. of all the jurors were white. That does not represent inner London terribly well. My simple point is not that juries do not do a good job, but that it is wrong to assume that only juries are representative.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): As my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is not here to speak for himself, I ask the hon. Lady whether she accepts that everyone on the electoral register has an equal chance of ending up on a jury. That is not the same mechanism as the one by which magistrates are chosen, and every member of the population does not have an equal chance of ending up a magistrate.

Ms Prentice: That is only partly correct, because there is enormous opportunity to decline the chance to sit on a jury. I looked at the form that a colleague had and saw that the number of exemptions is remarkable; so jury selection is not a straightforward, random process.

I turn now to some letters and articles from barristers, whose ignorance of the magistracy seems to know no bounds. One said that in Scotland sheriffs are qualified, experienced and respected—good, so they should be—and went on to say that magistrates are unqualified. That is true; it is part of the process and it is why they are magistrates. His implication was that because they were unqualified they were unfit to try cases. How qualified does he think juries are?

Another barrister described magistrates as

worthy people who sit on the bench.

Being worthy seems now to be a disqualification. A third barrister described magistrates as legally untrained, which is not true. They get rigorous, regular training. One need only consider the training that they are receiving to deal with human rights legislation. The patronising attitude and sheer arrogance of some leading barristers is almost breathtaking. Clearly they do not spend much time in magistrates courts.

It strikes me that too many defendants in magistrates courts are not being given the best advice by their legal advisers, and I wonder why. Call me an old cynic—

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Glasgow, Rutherglen): Never an old cynic.

Ms Prentice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

Many legal advisers are allowing, or perhaps even persuading, their clients to opt for trial by jury, knowing that it will prolong events and may well financially benefit themselves. When a considerable number of defendants, having opted for jury trial, would prefer to have been dealt with in the magistrates court, we owe it to them to ask whether they were given the best advice in the first instance.

Opponents of the Bill say that we cannot compare our system to that of Scotland, in which the procurator fiscal decides where a trial should take place. They accept that the people of Scotland believe that their system is just and fair. They are upholding the civil liberties of the people of England and Wales, but they are saying that it is all right for the prosecution to decide where a trial should take place, but not for lay justices to do so. That is a strange argument to make, from a civil libertarian point of view.

Victims want swift justice. So do most defendants. Those defendants who go court shopping, looking for the venue that will give them the best chance of delay or acquittal, are bringing the system into disrepute. That is wrong in principle because it puts the interests of the defendant above those of witnesses, victims and everyone else. No other country that I am aware of allows the defendant to decide where he should be tried, and it is beyond me why we should do so in a minority of cases, and not even the most serious ones.

I hope that whatever money is saved as a result of the Bill will be used to fight crime, not to pay lawyers. I do not blame the legal trade unions for fighting the Bill, but let us get real and not pretend that they are doing it for reasons of altruism and civil liberties. The Bill will make the justice system fairer and more efficient, and it will show that we value the magistrates system and the jury system, because both will be allowed properly to do the job that we ask them to do. I hope that we will take this opportunity to say loudly and clearly that we value juries and magistrates, and in doing so we will legislate for a better system of justice for everyone.

7.58 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I am afraid that after the speech of the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice), I have to declare an interest as a member of the Bar. I suspect that her criticisms of barristers are sometimes justified, but I do not agree with her criticism of the jury system. Her contribution and that of the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) swam against the tide of opinion on both sides of the House.

There is concern about the future of the jury system, and there has not been much support for the Government's position on either side of the House, with the partial exception of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who made clear his position and his support, in principle, for the Government, but not for their methods in the Bill. He can claim to have spoken frankly today and to have been consistent in his behaviour towards the jury system.

In opening the debate, the Home Secretary was wise to warn against overstating one's case, so I shall confine myself to saying that I have not been convinced by the arguments of the Home Secretary and his supporters that there is sufficient justification for removing a civil liberty and what used to be a right for the ordinary man in the

[Mr. James Clappison]

street. I agree with the analysis of my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), who made an outstanding speech. The Bill removes a right enjoyed by all our fellow citizens, and exercised by many of them. The measure will result, at the very least, in perceived unfairness, especially for many members of the public of relatively humble origins and good character.

The Home Secretary may have been wise to warn against overstating one's case, but he is not in the best position to give that warning. In his speech he spoke as though the proposals in the Narey report on the jury system and in previous reports were self-evident truths, and as if all those who opposed them were blinkered and hysterical. The Home Secretary read out a long list of previous examples.

I shall not labour the point, as it has already been touched on, but I recollect the approach of the Home Secretary in dismissing the Narey report shortly before the last general election. He said then that it was wrong, short-sighted and likely to prove ineffective.

When the right hon. Gentleman dismissed the Narey report with those words shortly before the general election, he must surely have considered all the underlying arguments and the example of the Scottish system and all the European systems that he now prays in aid.

I do not want to hear about the Scottish system this evening. The Home Secretary considered all that and dismissed it when he opposed the Narey report. I wait to hear from the right hon. Gentleman, but so far in the debate, he has not produced a shred of new evidence to have emerged since February 1997 in support of his position. He can produce long lists of eminent people who support his view now. We can all produce long lists on one side of the argument or the other, and we could have done that in 1997, but there is not a single piece of new evidence to justify the Home Secretary's change of mind.

The number of committals generated to the Crown court by defendants exercising their right in a magistrates court has gone down. We heard the percentages and we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Woking some of the reasons why that is happening. The Home Secretary said in 1997 that the then Government should wait and reflect. A diminution has occurred in the problem that he perceived then, which he now prays in aid as a reason for making the change.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe comprehensively demolished the Home Secretary's argument that the new right of appeal is some sort of magic ingredient. It existed in 1997, but the shadow Home Secretary then, now the Home Secretary, did not even bother to mention it in his response.

Mr. Hogg: I accept that the point that I am about to make could be debated, but when the last general election took place, the electorate judging the Labour party's position would have done so on the present Home Secretary's then stance, which was hostile to the proposal. Not only was the Bill not in the manifesto, but the electorate would have assumed from the posture adopted by the Home Secretary at that time that it would never be introduced.

Mr. Clappison: My right hon. and learned Friend is right. There is no way that the Home Secretary can rebut the criticism made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe.

The Home Secretary is entitled to say that he has changed his mind, but he cannot convincingly rebut the criticism that he has not been consistent and that he has been opportunistic. I wait to hear from him any new evidence in support of the complete volte-face that has taken place since 1997.

I am not attracted by the argument on savings. No doubt the Home Secretary was aware in 1997 that there would have been savings. The argument is flawed and doubtful. There will be delays and additional expense as a result of the new right of appeal, and the magistrates court system will become clogged up. I place no trust in the estimates given by the Government.

I do not like the argument, anyway. The Government are telling us that the price of law and order is the curtailment of freedom—we can have a properly staffed police force, but only if the Government save money by doing away with one of our rights. Without being partisan, I do not think that the Home Secretary and the Government are best placed to present arguments about police numbers and police forces, especially in respect of my constituency, after the terrible problems that we have experienced in Hertford—but I shall not go down that road.

The line of argument pursued by the Government is not an attractive one. We have heard the argument before that the price of law and order is the curtailment of freedom, and we know where it eventually leads. It is a dangerous argument.

The Home Secretary got off to a bad start by having to perform a complete volte-face, but matters have got worse since then because of the way in which the Government have introduced the legislation. By trying to address the problem of reputation, which is a real problem, the Government got into trouble and were criticised for creating a two-tier system of justice. Some legitimate criticisms were made in that regard.

The solution to the problem is even worse. Under clause 1(2)(b), the court may not take into account the circumstances of the accused. That means that reputation cannot be taken into account. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe made clear, that is extremely damaging. It is inevitable that men and women of good character, whose reputation and livelihood will be at stake, will be deprived of the right to trial by jury—just the sort of people who many members of the public would think should have the right to a trial by jury, if they so wish.

Mr. David Taylor: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Can he adduce evidence to demonstrate that the prospect of such a defendant obtaining justice in the Crown court is greater in each-way cases than in a magistrates court? If he has, he should tell the House.

Mr. Clappison: I have heard that argument, but I am not impressed by it. Let the individual choose. Let us not take away the right to choose. The Bill would do so in an unfair way, as I hope to show. Before I do, I shall deal with another argument advanced by the hon. Member for North–West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) and by the Home Secretary: that the existing jurisdiction of the magistrates court justifies extending jurisdiction to whole new and different categories.

As the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews) said, there must be margins. Especially in respect of offences such as those of dishonesty, it is important for people to have the right to a trial by jury, because dishonesty carries a certain stigma. It is important that people, especially those of humble origin and perhaps with low incomes, should have the opportunity of a trial by jury when reputation and dishonesty are at issue.

Mr. Straw: Is the hon. Gentleman therefore saying that taking a car without the consent of the owner involves no dishonesty on any occasion? Is he also saying that indecent exposure does not carry any consequences for the reputation of the defendant? Is he suggesting that we should not have summary-only cases at all?

Mr. Clappison: The Home Secretary is again advancing an extremely unattractive line of argument, by extrapolating justification from the lesser to the greater. There must be margins, especially in cases involving dishonesty that go to the Crown court for trial by jury, such as shoplifting and burglary. For offences where people's reputation and way of life may be at stake, they should have the right to trial by jury.

We can consider the classifications and the margins, but individuals whose reputations are at stake through dishonesty should have that right. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that the Home Secretary does not take the matter more seriously. It is serious, not least because the measure will prove to be discriminatory.

The lorry driver, about whom we heard, the council employee charged with stealing from the council, the shop assistant alleged to be stealing from her employer, the confused old lady charged with shoplifting, a coal miner charged with stealing coal—I have defended many humble people like that in the course of my career as a member of the Bar, and in each case I think that the person concerned should have had the right to a trial by jury.

These are the sorts of people most likely to lose the right to a trial by jury. The famous broadcaster, businessman or politician, the Member of Parliament and certainly the Secretary of State, perhaps also the rich man who arrives at the magistrates court with eminent counsel—all those people will get the right to a trial by jury. But the man in the street, who comes from humble origins, has a lower income and perhaps cannot afford counsel at all—certainly not eminent counsel—will not. It is inevitable that, under the proposals, ordinary men and women will lose the right to trial by jury—trial by their peers. They want to exercise that right when something greatly important to them—their reputation for honesty, their livelihood—may be at stake.

The Bill is a bad measure, and it can only be bad for the man in the street. Without indulging in the high-flown rhetoric against which the Home Secretary warned us, we should use our consciences and consider whether we are justified in removing a right that has been exercised for a long time by many ordinary people—not the rich, the powerful or the famous, but the humble, the man in the street, the ordinary employee and the ordinary chap. Under the Bill, they will lose a right that has hitherto been theirs.

The other place was right to throw out the Government's first version of the Bill.

Ms Blears: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clappison: No.

The Bill is a worse version of the previous draft. Hon. Members should not lightly remove such a right from the ordinary man in the street.

8.11 pm

Mr. Harold Best (Leeds, North–West): I have sat through the debate from the start, and I have been intrigued by the complex and difficult arguments that have been presented by what could be described as counsel for both sides.

I am not an expert in the law. I made my living as an electrician, not a lawyer. However, I have taken a lifetime's interest in the notions of justice available in the society in which I live. I was at school during the second world war and the period immediately afterwards, when public debates were commonly held about that society's values for which it was worth fighting and dying.

One value that was repeatedly brought to my attention was the wonderful right to a trial by jury. That made sense to me. It was represented to me very simply. Our teacher never described it as "trial by your peers," because he probably believed that I would not understand that; he was probably right. He presented it as being "tried by your fellow citizens," who had some understanding of the offence with which someone might be charged and the effect that that might have on a person's life and the lives of those close to him.

Trial by jury holds a place in the public's mind that is special, if not unique, among the elements of the British constitutional structure. If we face the likelihood of being charged fairly and properly, or unfairly and improperly, the notion that we can get a hearing before our peers comforts us. Trial by jury represents a commonly held sense of justice. It is common-sense justice, which people understand. Anyone who interferes with access to that sort of justice walks into a difficult area, where people have been before, but which has led to serious civil rights difficulties.

Mr. David Taylor: I have the greatest respect for my hon. Friend's views on almost every subject. However, is he aware that miscarriages of justice are far more frequent in the Crown court and the jury trials that underpin it? For example, I am not sure that the Birmingham six were

[Mr. David Taylor]

reassured by the verdict that was reached by the 12 people who were drawn from the society in which they had lived and worked for many years. Trial by jury did not do them much good.

Mr. Best: I am, to say the least, acutely aware of that. Anyone who has been involved in politics in the past 20 years will also be acutely aware of it. However, my memory of the case suggests that the problem was that the evidence in the trial was rigged, and that that caused the jury to reach the wrong conclusion. I am surprised that my hon. Friend, with whom I normally agree, should make such a point.

We are not considering whether the jury system is infinitely superior to magistrates courts and the role that they play. No one who has made the case against the proposed diminution of the right to jury trial has attacked magistrates. I cannot understand magistrates' hypersensitivity to the debates that have taken place in the Chamber on the subject. I would be grateful if someone could remind me of any attack on magistrates courts in our system.

I am also acutely aware that, in any justice system, we get it wrong. My closest friend is a judge—perhaps it is one of my life's disbenefits. However, he is a fine fellow and his wife is a magistrate. They do not spend their time falling out. There is remarkable agreement about the jury system. Other friends who are magistrates spend a remarkable amount of time agreeing about the justice that derives from the jury system, of which we should be proud.

A lawyer, who is a Member of Parliament, said that we were considering a matter of justice for the offender. When I heard those words, I nearly fell off my seat. That was a prejudicial judgment if ever I heard one. The phrase "justice for an offender" implies that the judgment has already been made that we are considering an offender, who has to be treated differently. That emphasises my worries about professionalism in the judicial system.

In the 1960s, I had the pleasure of listening to a barrister whose name was Freddy Beeton. It is possible that one other hon. Member who is present might have heard of him. He was a well-known barrister in Leeds and he spoke to the Leeds trades council, a body of trade unionists. I was a shop steward and I went to listen to him. He spoke about the proposed move to introduce majority verdicts in the jury trial system. He was vehemently opposed to that. When he had finished speaking, the Leeds trades council decided to write to the Home Secretary of the day to say that we would not support such a move.

Freddy Beeton made another comment that I found interesting and have not forgotten. He said that the professional prejudices in the jurisprudence system would return because an anxiety for costs drove the system, especially when increasing numbers of ordinary people opted for trial by jury because they believed that they might get a better deal. He warned us by saying that, in 20 years, proposals to cut down the number of options for the right to trial by jury would be introduced. He was wrong about the time scale; it is now 40 years later, but the proposals are before us. Another pound of flesh is being requested from the judicial system. That disturbs me enormously.

If we concentrate exclusively on the justice system, I cannot imagine how anyone could present an argument that would be detrimental to people's rights to exercise a wider choice for trial by jury. Rather than make observations against the diminution of the right to trial by jury, I would much rather make a case for its expansion. Perhaps the Home Secretary should consider that.

Despite all the attacks on the moves to reduce people's rights and the jury system, I notice that crime rates continue to rise and that the effectiveness of crime prevention seems not to be enhanced by further diminutions of the rights of people in the judicial system. The case that has been made against the Home Secretary's proposals is of such quality that, if tonight's decision were based on the evidence and made openly by a jury, its members would walk into the Lobby to support the amendment tabled by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews). That is where I shall stand. I thank the House for listening to my remarks.

8.21 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): I shall be brief. I compliment the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best) on a speech that could hardly have put the case better. My approach is very much the same and, although I suspect that we disagree on a number of political matters, on this we agree strongly.

The debate involves three issues. Fundamentally, it is about liberty and the liberties of the subjects of the United Kingdom who live in England and Wales—I shall not discuss Scotland because the system is different. It is also about confidence in our criminal justice system and, to some extent, efficiency and cost, although I very much doubt whether the Bill will achieve many cost savings should it be forced through.

Liberty is the key point, and the right to elect for jury trial is one of this country's great liberties. The most serious offences—murder, manslaughter and a number of others—have to go to jury trial, but either-way offences do not. They are huge in number and run up to some serious offences. Almost always, they deal with either violence or a significant element of dishonesty. There are some 369 categories and at least 700 offences, and there may be a great many more.

Jury trial means that the citizens of this country have the right to be tried not by a professionally appointed member of the judiciary or an appointed member of the magistracy—I have the highest regard for the magistracy, as I shall explain—but by their peers. A random group of 12 ordinary men and women from all walks of life is brought together to consider a particular case, and probably a small number of others, over a fortnight, but they do not sit day in, day out judging such matters professionally.

I must declare my interest, obviously. I have been a barrister for 30 years, I am a recorder, I was a Law Officer for 10 years, I am the son of a barrister and High Court judge and my late stepmother was a magistrate for 25 years and chairman of the bench in Dacorum. *[Interruption.]* I see the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) in his place. I must have appeared hundreds of times in the magistrates court in my early days and a great many times in the Crown court, although I do not make my money there any more—except, from time to time, as a recorder.

The quality of justice in the magistrates court is very high and I am the strongest supporter of our 29,000 magistrates, but they should recognise the danger that erosion such as that provided for by the Bill will encourage erosion in their area. However, that is a different matter. One has to say that, for a number of reasons, the quality of justice in the Crown court is of a higher order, not because jurors are better people than magistrates—they know less than magistrates and have less experience—but because cases are better prepared when they get to the Crown court. As has been rightly said, there is much fuller disclosure. There is also time for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to make much fuller disclosures, for legal advisers to consider the matter, for evidence to be gathered and for advice to be taken.

It is not a criticism of the system that those who elect for trial by jury subsequently plead guilty in the Crown court. That is not a matter of wasted costs, but of saving costs. At least they and society know that those cases have been carefully considered and, by the time that they decide to plead guilty, all the proper avenues have been gone through.

I want to say something that may be thought to be more controversial and more critical, but is certainly not intended to be. I have personal experience of cases that were tried and rightly acquitted in the Crown court. I say rightly acquitted because I was convinced that either the person was innocent or the case was at least not proven. I have in mind examples from my experience as an advocate and as a recorder, when I watched cases being tried, and I cannot say with confidence that those people would necessarily have been acquitted in the magistrates court. That is not a criticism of the magistrates, but the system is more careful, more thought through and more balanced in the Crown court. In the Crown court we put ourselves before ordinary men and women who think frightfully carefully, and I have great admiration for the jury system and the seriousness with which jurors play their part. That provides a higher system of justice and one in which we can have the greatest confidence.

What will happen if we go down the route suggested by the Bill in matters of cost and efficiency? I do not believe that it will have the good effect that is intended. I am not naive enough to say that there are no semi-professional criminals who do not play the system. Of course there are. Accused persons elect for trial partly to serve their time in custody in less harsh and more open conditions on remand. There is an element of abuse there—I fully accept that—but those people will play whatever system we have. They will certainly try to play the system that the Government propose to introduce.

There will be a ping-pong match. Such people will elect for trial by jury, but that will be refused because they have a number of previous convictions and the case seems to be unmeritorious. They will therefore appeal to the Crown court judge. They will certainly make sure that their lawyers demand an oral hearing; if, as a result of the oral hearing, the matter is none the less heard in the magistrates court, it is highly likely that they will ask for it to be fought in the magistrates court.

I think that far more than 2,000 cases will be involved. I think that the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews) was much nearer the mark when he said that there would be several thousand. Many people, having been convicted in the magistrates court, will then seek to appeal. If they are in custody the position will change, but they will nevertheless seek to appeal, and that will involve more time and more money.

Let us return to the question of one, two or three-day contested cases in the magistrates court. It is difficult to find time for the hearing of such cases; it seriously upsets the existing system, and it will undoubtedly lead to increased costs. In such cases, people will demand more discovery. They will demand adjournments for more discovery. They will expect advocates—indeed, they will rightly expect legally aided advocates—to defend them in the magistrates court. Although the costs of hearing such cases in the magistrates court will be less than those in the Crown court, because it will not be necessary to pay for the jurors and the extra accommodation, they will be significantly more than the average cost in the magistrates court.

The truth is that the Government do not know what the costs will be. As I am sure that the Minister knows, last June I tabled a series of questions that I had thought through carefully. The answers, which he will know as well as I do, show that the Government do not have the material at their disposal to be able to calculate the costs accurately. I think that the more recent figures that I have been given are at best educated guesses; in my view, they are significant underestimates. The bottom line is that we will not see much saving, but will see a considerable diminution in the quality of justice and in our liberties.

I respect those who take a different view from mine as much as I respect those who take the same view. I have read carefully what the Lord Chief Justice thinks, and would say only—with great respect to the Lord Chief Justice—that I consider the freedom to be tried by one's peers to be too precious for us to attempt to judge these matters narrowly. I believe that we would be wise to hold back and to refrain from adopting the course in which he believes.

I was probably the chief influence for the fact that Lord Runciman led the last royal commission. I thought it an excellent commission, but on this specific matter I beg to differ with its views. I had great respect for Lord Justice James, who prosecuted in the case of the great train robbers and produced a very similar report in about 1973. Nevertheless, I do not think that they reached the right conclusion.

Jury trial is one of our great liberties. It is one of the foundations of our democracy, as is the right to choose. When he gave his lighthearted example involving a bottle of champagne, the Home Secretary said that he would choose to go before the magistrates. That is his right, but he, and all other citizens, should also have the right to choose to go before a jury in the whole spectrum of cases in which honesty and dishonesty are involved. If we remove than right, we reduce our liberties; we should not do so.

8.32 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke–on–Trent, Central): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best), and unlike the right hon. and learned Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell)—and, I think, every other Member who has spoken—I have no legal interests to declare. I am not a lawyer, I am not a magistrate, and I have never even served on a jury. I therefore listened to the Home Secretary's

[Mr. Mark Fisher]

original explanation of why he had introduced the Bill—or, rather, its predecessor, the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill—in what was as near to a state of grace, or at least of ignorance, as is possible, albeit for someone who remembers the 1986 White Paper that discussed the issues, and the attempt by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) to introduce a similar measure as Home Secretary in 1997.

Both were seen off by widespread opposition. In 1997, it was led by my right hon. Friend the present Home Secretary, who launched a forceful attack on the proposals. On that occasion, my right hon. Friend persuaded me that he was absolutely right—and, indeed, persuaded every other member of the Labour Opposition. As I recall, he was cheered to the echo for his attack on the then Home Secretary.

As a layman, I have not been aware of anything substantially wrong with the right to elect trial by jury. In nearly 17 years as a Member of Parliament, I have not received a single letter complaining about that right. I wonder if any Member has ever received such a letter; I rather doubt it. I am, however, aware of the good principle behind jury trials that, if one of us is accused by the state of a serious crime, the right to be judged by a random selection of our fellow citizens is very precious. That may explain why the right to elect trial by jury is so important. If we are to change that right, the case has to be proved overwhelmingly. Neither the previous Home Secretary nor the present Home Secretary has produced an overwhelming case.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Fisher: No. We are short of time. I shall try to speak for less than 15 minutes to allow other hon. Members to get in.

I was persuaded by the Home Secretary's argument that any justice system can be improved and that we should not be against change just because it was change. I am not against change, but I ask whether the Bill proposes the right change to give better justice, rather than, for example, proposing recategorisation of offences between summary and committal?

Therefore, as I listened to the Home Secretary's supporting arguments today, I had an open mind. He was generous in giving way to hon. Members. It is difficult to deny that his speech was more concerned with attacking his critics than giving a strong explanation and defence of the Bill, but he was brought to the point by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who asked whether he could tell us what the Bill was about. He said concisely, "It is about cheaper justice and better justice." He said exactly that. She asked, "Will it save money, or give better justice?" He said that it would do both.

On whether the Bill will give cheaper justice, I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) and for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore): Governments are always concerned about saving money, but, on such an issue to do with our justice system, it should be the lowest priority, not a prime consideration.

Like other hon. Members, I am baffled as to what money the Bill will save. I had not heard the figure of £128 million before the explanatory notes were published. I cannot see any detailed audit or explanation of where the money is being saved. Perhaps it is being saved in the prison system, but that is not the way to improve the prison system. We should find other ways to save money.

Probably the figure is a guesstimate. Perhaps it has to be a guesstimate in the nature of things, but the savings argument is not a strong case. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) said, the figure probably ignores the undoubted cost of more appeals; there will be more appeals. Whether his or the Government's figure is correct, people will appeal if they have the right to do so—as they must have—so I wonder where the savings will be and where the hard evidence of savings is. However, I am certain that savings should not be what the Bill is about.

The Home Secretary was on better ground when he said that the Bill would give better justice, but again I was not sure what he meant. Surely, he did not mean better justice in the sense of better judgments. That would be an aspersion on the Crown courts. I suspect that he meant better administration of justice.

Again, is that a sufficient reason for making what is a fundamental change? Everyone wants an efficiently administered system, but the Bill goes to a fundamental right. To introduce it in the interests of better administration seems a very narrow and constrained ambition for such a Bill. Indeed, it is an ambition that seems to have been refuted by the Government's own 1998 consultative paper on either-way cases, which showed that, in the past 10 years, the proportion of such cases going to the Crown court had decreased. In 1987, 53 per cent. of cases were in that category and now only 28 per cent. are. If we want a more efficient system, we seem to be getting one.

The Home Secretary has a good point about abuse of the system. If he wants to create a better and better-administered system that squeezes out abuse, everyone will support him. Nevertheless, people will try to get the best out of any of the world's legal systems, and, particularly if those systems threaten the liberty of human beings, they will try to work the system. If it is an abuse to try to seek the best for oneself in protecting one's liberty, there will always be abuses. It is in human nature to try to protect oneself. However, I suspect that there are better ways than those proposed in the Bill of attacking abuse—such as by making greater use of plea before venue and recategorisation—and of creating greater clarity in the administrative system.

Therefore, the Home Secretary did not prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that, on grounds of cost, time and abuse, we should alter the system as the Bill proposes.

As I said, I am not lawyer and have no legal background. I therefore thought that I should consult my constituents on the Bill. I certainly did not want not to support my Government—whom I am proud to support—without knowing my constituents' thoughts on the Bill. I therefore approached all 14 firms of solicitors in my constituency, the chairman of the magistrates bench, the clerk and as many magistrates as I could contact. This is what they replied.

Mr. Eric Hodgkinson—who is president of the North Staffordshire Law Society, but stressed that he was replying in a personal capacity, rather than as a partner of Bowcock and Pursaill—said:

> I consider that the present arrangements as regards the right for an accused to insist upon trial by jury should not be interfered with. The right to trial by jury should not be sacrificed on the alter of expense.

Mr. Steven Park, of Park and Co., said:

> I am most concerned. I do not believe that the present system is being abused. The biggest delay in getting cases into the Crown court is on the part of the prosecution preparing their committal file.

I expected the magistrates and their clerk to be enthusiastic about the Bill, which would increase their responsibilities and their work. Indeed, the clerk was enthusiastic about it. When I asked whether he would be able to cope with the presumably greater load on courts—the number of courts in North Staffordshire has been reduced considerably in recent years—he said that he thought that there was no technical reason why they could not cope with the Bill's consequences.

Interestingly, however, and to my surprise, both the chairman and the magistrates whom he brought with him to the meeting were very cautious and uncertain about the provisions. Although they agreed that they could cope with the changes, they said that the process was speeding up regardless, particularly because of the recent pilot scheme in which North Staffordshire was chosen as one of the five areas to participate. Although they could not give me any figures, their view was that the majority of either-way cases were already being dealt with in the magistrates court.

One thing on which everyone I consulted agreed was that they could not understand why the Government were proposing the changes now, rather than waiting for the review of the criminal justice system that they themselves established. The review is chaired by Sir Robin Auld and will report later this year. Both magistrates and solicitors in my constituency said that, until they saw the exact scope of Sir Robin's report, we should not be tackling this one, small—albeit very important—part of the criminal justice system. They thought that we should first have the benefit of that overall review of the criminal justice system—much of which they thought could be improved.

Why are we dealing with one tiny sphere of the justice system, comprising perhaps 5 or 6 per cent. of all cases, when we shall soon have the benefit of Sir Robin's views and report on the overall system? After we receive that report on the broader context, we shall be better able to judge whether the proposed changes are sensible.

The Home Secretary's reply to that point was deeply confusing and unimpressive. He said that Sir Robin had already obtained an answer on the point because he had consulted High Court judges. I presume that Sir Robin will consult more people, and a wider range of people, than only High Court judges. Furthermore, we should not anticipate what the Auld report will say. We should wait for it, and then consider possibly much wider reform of the overall justice system. We should then perhaps place particular emphasis on recategorisation, which has helped us in the past, and probably could be beneficial in future.

I was certainly persuaded by the Home Secretary's speech—but it was the speech that he gave in 1997. That speech was much more persuasive than the one that he gave today. Therefore, with regret, I shall today be supporting not the Government, but the reasoned amendment tabled by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway.

8.45 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): It is always a privilege and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher). I could not agree more with everything that he said. I, too, shall support the reasoned amendment. Like him, I entered the debate with some trepidation, as a non-lawyer, but I considered being called a Hampstead liberal sufficient provocation for someone of my interests to take part. When listening to a debate that appeared to be between the technocrats and the lawyers, I was uncomfortable to find myself on the side of the lawyers. I have now redefined the debate as being between the Treasury and the libertarians, and I am on the libertarians' side.

The Home Secretary clearly has a case for dealing with this aspect of the judicial system. He knows that I share some of his views, as set out in the National Audit Office report a few weeks ago. There is a real problem with the criminal justice system. It is the least joined-up aspect of government. That arises partly from the necessary independence of components of that system. That is unavoidable. However, it also arises from the manipulation of the system by criminals and lawyers, each for their own ends. The management of our judicial system has historically been slack, bordering on the slapdash.

The cost of the current system, which processes about 2 million people, is £9 billion a year. The process is undoubtedly inefficient. I could give the House dozens of statistics, but I shall not, given the limited time. The easiest proof can be found by looking at the variation in the amount of time that even magistrates courts—we have heard a lot of good about them this evening—take in dealing with cases: from 30 to more than 90 days on less serious cases, and between 60 and well over 100 days on serious cases. That is driven by the fact that they have up to 2.6 million adjournments a year, each of which ranges from one to 101 days.

Some 40 per cent. of adjournments are driven by errors and omissions on the part of the various players in the system. Many of them are significantly influenced by Government rules or agencies. I found an example of one police force that turned out 80 per cent. of the prosecution files late or of inadequate quality. That is hardly acceptable. One quarter of the adjournments were caused by defendants failing to attend. Almost another quarter were caused by a defence solicitor. I know that the Home Secretary is doing something about that. Another 15 per cent. were caused by defendants in custody being delivered late. That is hardly acceptable. More than 10 per cent. were caused by problems with advance information. There are similar problems in the Crown courts, leading to costs in each case—£41 million for the magistrates courts and £40 million for the Crown courts. There are serious management problems.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 brought into effect various measures to correct much of that. The pilot studies that we have heard about and the Narey report have brought down hearing times by 45 days in one of the six areas affected. However, that system went national only last November—barely three months ago.

[Mr. David Davis]

There is a great deal wrong and a great deal is being done to put it right, but in the midst of all that good work the Home Secretary has introduced this ill-considered measure. The proposal to remove the right of election for trial by jury in each-way cases is seriously flawed technically, as well as striking at what is without hyperbole called a foundation stone of British liberty.

Let us deal first with the supposed savings. When the Bill was being debated in the other place, we were told that the savings were £105 million. Now we are told that the figure is £128 million. There has been no explanation of that difference. A large proportion of the savings come from a reduction in sentences, which I am not comfortable with when assessing the value of the measure. Those in the other place were also told that there would be no loss of public service jobs. I spend a lot of my time looking at supposed economies in government, and those two claims strike me as inconsistent. I find the proposal implausible in financial terms.

We must remember the size of the costs that we are discussing—£9 billion a year. We are now talking about £128 million, of which a small fraction would be within the judicial system per se. We will never know whether these illusory savings are actually made. Even if they were, if we had to choose between money and justice, surely we would choose justice every time. The case thus falls apart.

A more important component—to which the Home Secretary referred implicitly when he talked about the better administration of justice—is the problem of delay versus justice, or delay versus fairness. We all understand that justice delayed is, in a sense, justice denied, but if we had to choose between delay and fairness, we would again choose fairness on every occasion.

The Home Secretary talked about time-wasting activities that are undertaken by some people, and that the Bill aims to eradicate. The primary problem of the system about which I take the right hon. Gentleman to be talking is the so-called "cracked trials"—the one third of Crown court trials that fail to go ahead on the day, very largely because of guilty pleas at the door of the court. To be fair, preparation for these trials costs £29 million.

I do believe that hardened criminals play the system, and the reason for that derives directly from the way in which the system is operated. The hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) pointed out earlier that the practice of reducing the charge en route to the Crown court occurs in fully half of the cases. That procedure is guaranteed to get the case-hardened criminal to go to the Crown court—it is a way of reducing the charge against him. We have put an incentive into the system, in the behaviour patterns of the Crown Prosecution Service. We should put that right before we even think about such a Bill as this.

We have a higher tariff for defendants who change their plea late in the process—that came in under the last Government. That ought to deter anyone from playing the system—either to delay or to spend some expected sentence in a softer remand prison. The evidence is that that is having an effect, hence the reduction in the numbers of each-way cases going to the Crown courts. However, it is not having as big an effect as the Home Secretary or I would like.

The survey evidence, repeated in the NAO report, shows clearly that many defendants either do not understand or do not believe that they get the tariff. That should be put right also before we even consider this Bill. That could be done by increasing the tariff, as Lady Kennedy argued in the other place, particularly for those with numerous previous convictions—the group we are trying to target in this ill-targeted Bill. Most particularly, it could be done by requiring clear notification to the defendant of the consequences before the election and plea.

If we stop the overcharging mechanism and fix and communicate the steeper tariff, we may dramatically reduce the playing of the system. Had the Home Secretary tried to address that and allowed time for us to see the consequences, I might have been more sympathetic towards the Bill.

I view the right to jury trial as a foundation stone of our civil liberties, but I am not starry-eyed about it. It is not perfect, as many Members would agree. It undoubtedly leads sometimes to the guilty going free. There is no doubt about that. Sometimes—very infrequently—it leads to worse cases of an innocent defendant being found guilty. As an aside, if magistrates courts considered the sort of cases that appear before Crown courts, they would face similar problems of miscarriages of justice. However, the jury system is a better method of delivering justice than any other. That is why jury trials are expensive. They are, by nature, more thorough. They are a near-ideal balance between the professional skill and experience of the judge and counsel and the clear-eyed common sense of ordinary citizen jurors.

Mr. McWalter: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the delay to which the process is liable has the potential for seasoned criminals to try to put pressure on witnesses to withdraw? That is a significant aspect and the Bill seeks to address it.

Mr. Davis: First, such pressure is rare, and secondly, if it worked, 60 per cent. of defendants would not plead guilty at the door of the court—they would go through it with their intimidated witnesses. Thirdly, and most importantly, my argument is that we should try every other mechanism first to reduce the number of manipulations of the system before we throw away a fundamental civil liberty. That is what the Bill will do.

The jury trial is a better mechanism, but that is not to say that magistrates do not do a very good job. The proceedings of jury trials are carefully recorded and the procedures are carefully designed. While we are on the subject, those procedures have improved after every miscarriage of justice, but the reforms that have arisen from that process have not necessarily had the same impact on the magistrates court. It is not a criticism of individual magistrates to say that the jury trial procedure is better—it is more expensive and ponderous, but it delivers a high quality of justice.

My concern is not with the 60 per cent. who eventually plead guilty—we can reduce that figure by other methods—but with those people who go on to face trial by jury and who might not have that option under these proposals. We should not swallow the presumption that has been floated today that all those who elect for jury

trial are playing the system. Some are, but a significant number are not. We should remember that almost 40 per cent. of those who eventually go to trial are acquitted. Those people will face the prospect of real and perceived injustice under the Bill.

Trial by jury may not go back to the Magna Carta or Henry II's Clarendon fields. In fact, its original roots date back to Anglo-Saxon times, but we need not worry about that. The system that we are talking about today has been in place for 150 years and it is stable.

Mr. Straw: Could the right hon. Gentleman explain why he believes that because there is an acquittal rate of 40 per cent.—it is a little higher than that—in the Crown court, it would lead to manifest injustice if the magistrates court were to deal with those cases? Many of the cases would still be heard in the Crown court, but in wholly contested cases in the magistrates courts, there is an acquittal rate of about 33 per cent. If one takes account of relative seriousness and complexity, there is little difference in acquittal rates in magistrates courts compared with the Crown court.

Mr. Davis: The Home Secretary misses my point. Actually, 38 per cent. of each-way cases are acquitted, and my point was that those people were not just a group of manipulators of the system. My other point is that jury trial is a fundamental civil right. It is the right of the British citizen in an each-way case to choose the more thorough process, in the reasonable belief that that will give him more opportunity of being proven innocent. It is those people about whom I am concerned.

The current arrangements go back almost 150 years. They have been in place longer than universal suffrage, and nobody calls that ill-founded. We should not remove that foundation stone without great care and without testing every other option first. That requires more care than has preceded the Bill.

There is a natural tendency in all Governments to be authoritarian. That tendency becomes more pronounced as time passes. However, the proper and natural role of the House is to defend the civil liberties of citizens. We shall do that today by supporting the amendment.

9 pm

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who adopted a very managerial approach to some of the judicial system's problems. He noted, in the context of the Narey report, that some people think that justice and managing the system are contradictory. However, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that managing the system properly is vital to making it more efficient.

The contribution from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden contained many sensible suggestions, but it missed the point. I believe that the Bill is right in principle. It transfers the decision about the venue for a trial from the defendant to the court. Defendants should not have the right to veto, on the basis of their personal interests, the venue in which the trial will take place. It is right that the court should decide, in an objective, transparent and straightforward way, the right venue for the charge that has been brought. The court will hear representations on the matter and will have to give its reasons for its decision, which will be subject to appeal.

That is the right way to proceed, as it allows an objective decision to be made, whereas the current system allows one side of the case the right to veto the decision.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): As a Labour Member talking about principles, does the hon. Lady feel comfortable arguing a case that is the opposite to the one being put by organisations such as Liberty and Justice?

Ms Blears: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I have been a member of Liberty for many years. However, I represent a constituency that has suffered tremendously from crime and disorder in recent years. In some respects, my community has lost faith in the criminal justice system. My duty as a constituency Member of Parliament to represent my community weighs more heavily with me than the pursuit of self-interest that has been the main concern of organisations that are dominated by the legal profession.

Dr. Lynne Jones: How will the Bill help the community whose concerns my hon. Friend rightly wishes to represent? For example, how will it help victims of crime?

Ms Blears: I strongly believe that the Bill will tackle the problems of delay and manipulation by experienced criminals. As a result, the confidence of victims and witnesses in our system of justice will be increased, as they will know that the process can no longer be manipulated by experienced criminals simply stringing out trials for their own self-interest. That is an important point.

The changes proposed in the Bill will mean that it is for magistrates to determine the appropriate venue for trial, in light of the circumstances of the offence. I agree with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who is no longer in his place, that balance in the criminal justice system is crucial. However, I believe that the balance at present errs on the side of the defendant, rather than in favour any of the other parties involved.

At the moment, defendants choose where they will be tried. Home Office research shows that nine out of 10 of those electing Crown court trial have previous convictions, that five out of 10 have three or more previous convictions, and that two out of every 10 have in excess of 10 previous convictions. Most of those who plead not guilty and elect for Crown court trial end up pleading guilty when their cases are finally heard.

No one who has heard the debate can deny that some defendants manipulate the system to delay their eventual sentences. Perhaps stupidly, they are even prepared to risk a heavier sentence in the Crown court if by doing so they can remain on bail, at liberty, for a few more weeks or months. It is a sad fact that some defendants hope that witnesses will not come forward if there is a delay, or that they will be intimidated and not give evidence, with the result that the defendants will be allowed to go free.

Research has also shown that 27 per cent. of defendants who plead not guilty and elect for Crown court trial intend to plead guilty later. That means that nearly 6,000 cases are a complete sham from start to finish. It means that the full machinery of the Crown court system has to be put into action. Victims and police are involved, witnesses are

[Ms Blears]

warned and a great deal of money is spent—when, in 6,000 cases, the defendant knows from the outset that he intends to plead guilty to the offences charged.

I have a couple of examples from my city. They are not from a royal commission or any theoretical report but are real-life cases that have taken place in Salford in the past 12 months. In one case, two defendants were charged with possession of a class B controlled drug, cannabis. The date of the charge was 5 May 1998. They were found in possession and charged with possession. The matter was committed to the Crown court on 13 November 1998. They had a plea and direction hearing a month later. Four prosecution witnesses were made absolute and, on 10 June 1999—seven months later—the defendants appeared before the Crown court at Manchester. All prosecution witnesses were in attendance—police officers not patrolling the streets of Salford but stuck in the Crown court because they had been called to appear. The defendants changed their pleas to guilty; they were each fined £100, and that was the end of the matter. The case took 13 months to dispose of, all the witnesses were in attendance and, at the end of the day, the defendants were each fined £100.

The second case involved indecent assault on a female under 16. The date of the charge was 20 April 1998. Nine prosecution witnesses were made absolute in July of that year, including young people who had to give evidence. The trial was set for 2 December 1998. All nine prosecution witnesses attended, including police officers. The defendant changed his plea from not guilty to guilty. No jury was sworn. The case took 26 weeks to be dealt with, an enormous amount of police time was wasted and the distress and anguish caused to the witnesses was considerable.

My third example is a little closer to home. A young man reached into a parked vehicle on a garage forecourt and stole a handbag. He committed that offence on 25 July 1998. It took a year to deal with him in the Crown court. Five prosecution witnesses attended and were sworn.

That example is close to my heart, because last year I was the victim of the same offence. A young man stole my handbag from my car. I chased him for 400 yd. I shouted, "Stop, thief, I'm a Member of Parliament," but that did not seem to have much effect. He jumped over a 7 ft wall and, as can be imagined, I was not able to follow him. A month later I identified him on an identification parade. He arrived with his solicitor and said, "She'll never pick me out," but despite his having shaved off his hair, I managed to identify him. He then took the case all the way to the Crown court. It took seven months to resolve. Witnesses were warned and appeared, and on the day of the hearing he pleaded guilty to the offence against me and asked for 30 other similar offences to be taken into consideration, including robbing Bev Callard of "Coronation Street". I am glad to say that he was dealt with very severely.

Those are examples of what is happening week in, week out, month in, month out, up and down this country, when defendants play the system.

In my view, this is not a cost-driven measure. If we save £100 million, all well and good. But this measure has been introduced because it is the right thing to do. I have discussed the matter with the chief constable of Greater Manchester, who said that the provisions are likely to save him about £2 million in wasted police time. Greater Manchester is about to get 378 extra police officers, and I want them on front-line policing duties, not tied up in the Crown court on the sort of wasted cases that I have described.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Blears: No, because time is limited, and I know that other hon. Members want to contribute.

There are genuine concerns about the possibility of more cases being dealt with by magistrates. They already hear 90 per cent. of cases, and the appeal rate is very low. I do not for one minute believe that magistrates will suddenly want to hear cases that it is inappropriate for them to deal with. I think that it was Lord Justice Bingham who said that magistrates are respectful of the Crown court. In fact, they are deferential to the Crown court, so I do not think that they will take on very serious cases.

I would like to see improvements to the magistracy, irrespective of the changes proposed in the Bill. We need more representative magistrates, particularly in inner cities. Three wards in my constituency have no magistrates at all. The majority of them come from the better off, affluent areas of the city, and we have a responsibility to recruit more representative magistrates. They need more training, and we need more consistency in sentencing. We should recruit more stipendiary magistrates, who offer quicker and more efficient justice and who are not intimidated by lawyers—prosecution or defence—or heavily influenced by the police.

I am pleased that improving the criminal justice system is a top priority for the Government. Tackling crime is fundamental to making communities such as Salford safer for people to live in, for businesses to locate in and for people to bring up their families in. In some areas, we must acknowledge, there is a criminal culture. Theft and burglary have become a way of life, and experienced criminals prey on the most vulnerable people.

We have set tough targets for reducing crime, we are providing extra police officers and we have anti-burglary initiatives. All that is welcome, but we must ensure that people have confidence in the criminal justice system. Witnesses must feel safe if they come forward. It is disastrous when they are forced to wait for months to give their evidence, only for the trial to collapse at the last minute. That will not encourage them to come forward again.

Hon. Members are properly concerned about the fundamental rights of defendants, but I must ask them to think about the rights to freedom that many of my constituents have lost as a result of the tidal wave of crime that has swept over them in recent years. All of us—victims, witnesses, defendants and the wider community—have a stake in the criminal justice system. We need always to strike the right balance, and the Bill will bring fairness, objectivity and transparency into the system. It will reduce delay and manipulation by experienced criminals. The right of appeal on venue and the general right of appeal will safeguard defendants' positions.

I shall vote for the Bill because I believe that it is another step forward in our battle against crime. It will help to make the criminal justice system swift, effective and fair to everyone. I urge hon. Members to support it.

9.12 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Like several hon. Members, I declare an interest as a practising member of the Bar. I come from a family long associated with the law. It happens that both my sisters are members of the judiciary—one a judge, the other a magistrate. I therefore come to the debate with some baggage.

I have a lot of sympathy with the Home Secretary. My criticisms of him are perhaps less dramatic than those made by some of his hon. Friends. That said, I think that he is wrong. Over the years, I have been rather attracted by propositions of the sort that he advanced, but I have always recoiled from them in the end because they do not satisfy the proper requirements of justice. In truth, as the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best) said, the sense of the debate has gone against the Home Secretary. If a decision were genuinely to be made on the basis of what had been said in the House, there would be no doubt that the Bill would fail.

I shall begin with two preliminary points. I am extremely cautious—indeed, wholly unpersuaded—on cost. The figures are extremely suspect. For example, if the appeal against a decision to allow a jury trial means anything—I suspect that it does not, and that it will exist only on paper—there will be a great many appeals, which will be extremely expensive. In addition, if the Bill proceeds, I suspect that there will be many more appeals against conviction to the Crown court. Those two considerations lead one to suppose that the figures on costs with which we have been supplied are defective. In any event, they are not particularly relevant. Unlike the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), I am sure that the Bill is Treasury driven, and I have had some experience of spotting such Bills. It should not be so. We should not determine this matter on the basis of cost—the real motive causing the Government to advance the Bill.

My second preliminary point, which does not go to the substance of the matter, is the criterion of reputation, to which justices ought to have regard when determining whether a trial by jury should be allowed. If we are to have the Bill, justices should have regard to the impact on a person's reputation of refusing or allowing a jury trial. However, the Bill prohibits that. If it is so offensive for reputation criteria to be enshrined in the Bill, we should not have the Bill; the matter simply comes down to that.

In relation to the substance of the Bill, I make a proposition that is self-evident: a conviction—especially for dishonesty—can be wholly disastrous for a person of good character. We should therefore be slow to remove the protection that such persons enjoy.

The Home Secretary expostulated when I intervened during his speech to make a point about the character of the judiciary—of which I have considerable experience. Labour Members constantly made that point in opposition, although, curiously, few of them make it now. If one spends a long time exposed to criminal courts, one develops a certain attitude of mind. If one spends a lifetime listening to dishonest explanations of what people get up to, one develops a predisposition in favour of the prosecution. There is nothing odd about that.

I spent many years in the criminal courts, so I know that that is true. I have often thought that the judiciary—lay or professional—had a predisposition in favour of the prosecution, but seldom in favour of the defence.

Mr. McWalter: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that that might be directly related to the fact that members of the judiciary work closely with the police and that often, after a long and difficult investigation, they do not want to let down the police?

Mr. Hogg: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful to him because he supports what I am saying. I am not making a criticism; I merely point out that we need to face life as it is. There is a risk of a predisposition in favour of the prosecution within the judiciary—whether lay or professional.

The role of the jury is to prevent that predisposition from doing injury to defendants. That is why I attach such high importance to juries. By definition, there are no juries in magistrates courts to redress that predisposition—although, of course, there are juries in Crown courts.

Although I have the greatest respect for stipendiary magistrates—they do an extremely good job and I should like to see more of them—that does not alter the fact that a stipendiary sits alone and is the only person to make judgments as to fact, honesty and so on. If that person has a predisposition in favour of the prosecution, the defendant is in serious trouble. When I was a young man at the Bar, I knew several stipendiary magistrates to whom my comments would have applied.

Incidentally, the processes in the magistrates courts, especially on determining the admissibility of evidence—the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke to that point—and on disclosure, tend to mean that the trial is less satisfactory for the defence.

I am concerned about the predisposition in favour of the prosecution among some members of the judiciary—I make no distinction between lay and professional members.

I ask the House to consider some related points. Our jury system is diverse—in ethnic mix, age, background, experience and so on. The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) shakes her head, so I shall make a concession. The magistracy is better than it was. When I first went to the Bar years ago, it was a very middle class and professionally oriented organisation. It is better than it was, but it is not as diverse as the jury system. The professional judiciary most certainly is not.

Many of the questions that juries or the judiciary have to determine in a criminal case are very much questions that ordinary people are perhaps best suited to answer because of their own experience of the ordinary events of life that give rise to criminal actions. For example, the cases relate to what has happened in a street, pub or supermarket. Juries have to consider whether provocation existed and was likely to cause someone to act in the way that he did. They consider whether a degree of force was reasonable and whether people could really believe that something happened in the circumstances described. Ordinary people, drawing on their experience of ordinary life, are perhaps better placed to answer such questions than the judiciary, either lay or professional. I am anxious not to remove the protection that the jury system provides.

[Mr. Hogg]

Finally, I wish to make an unusual point that the House should take into account. In a small number of cases, the elements in the charge are established but, for one reason or another, it would be unconscionable to convict. For example, there may have been a high degree of provocation that fell short of lawful justification. That can happen in assault cases and in cases dealing with sexual offences. In another type of case, the offence may be intrinsically trivial, but the consequences may be dire. Therefore, a conviction would be unconscionable.

In such cases, a jury serves as the public conscience in a way that the members of the lay or professional judiciary—I include myself in this—would find difficult. We are attuned to applying the law more strictly than a member of a jury would. He would have more regard to the broader interest and the public conscience test that I just mentioned. I would be very reluctant to see the jury trials system withdrawn in the sense that we are debating.

Mr. David Taylor: Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman perhaps guilty of smearing magistrates by associating them with the professional lawyers? He has suggested that, because some of judiciary might be somewhat detached from the realities of everyday life, so are magistrates because they fall within his umbrella definition of professional people in the legal system.

Mr. Hogg: I have smeared no one. I have made no distinction for these purposes between the lay magistracy and the professional judiciary.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. and learned Gentleman should.

Mr. Hogg: No, I should not. I am drawing on years of personal and vicarious experience and I venture to say that there is not much dispute on these matters among those who really know about them. If one spends a long time in a criminal court, one is likely—if not certain—to develop a predisposition in favour of the prosecution. The hon. Gentleman should talk to the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), because he agrees with me.

I have a lot of sympathy for the Home Secretary. I understand that he is an honourable man who is dealing with a problem that causes anxiety. However, he would be well advised to reflect on the fact that he has derived very little support from those who have spoken in the debate. He will derive very little support in the other place and his Bill has already been defeated there. That is not coincidence. The plain truth is that the sense of the House is that the Bill is unfair and will diminish the justice administered in this country. I hope that the Home Secretary will reflect on what has been said tonight.

9.25 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): I am relieved to have the opportunity to explain why I oppose the Bill. My objection is based on principle, and not the details to which many hon. Members have referred during the debate. I summarise that point of principle as follows: this is a Bill from a mighty Government to weaken one of the bulwarks of our liberties that protect us from the acts of some future over-mighty Government.

I realise that I am open to the same accusation of self-interest that is faced by many other hon. Members—for 20 years before election to the House I was a solicitor, and I practised regularly in the magistrates court and even presented cases in the Crown court before a judge. I declare an interest in that I am a non-practising solicitor, because I have left that behind me.

My 20 years' experience leaves me with great respect and admiration for the magistrates court and the Crown court as means of delivering criminal justice. However, I had to write letters of advice to any of my clients who had the opportunity to decide whether to consent to a trial in the magistrates court or to insist on a trial before a jury in the Crown court.

I hope that my hon. Friends who are magistrates can bear to hear me say that the points that I made against a magistrates court trial sometimes included the lack of representation of the local community on the magistrates bench. I am heartened by the fact that the Attorney-General accepted a similar point in the other place during the Second Reading debate on the first Bill.

Of course, I also mentioned in my advice the systems failings of magistrates courts, such as magistrates' inability to determine points of law and put them out of their mind when dealing with a case. How, for example, do magistrates decide that they are ruling a confession inadmissible and then go on to determine the case without taking account of the fact that the person confessed? It is difficult for magistrates to do that. Equally, the level of disclosure of evidence in magistrates courts is inferior.

There are reasons why some people should not elect to have a trial in a Crown court, and I would warn them against the dangers of receiving a custodial sentence from a judge which they might not have received in the magistrates court. I would warn them also that they might receive a longer sentence in the Crown court than in the magistrates court. When people heard all that advice and chose to go to the Crown court for their trial, even though they risked serving a longer time in prison if they were convicted, they were choosing the right of a trial by jury ahead of that risk.

I come to the Government's difficulty on reputation. Clearly, in the original Bill they accepted that people with an unsullied reputation who were faced with an offence of dishonesty ought to have a trial by jury. They tried to accommodate that in the first Bill by allowing people to be excepted, on the ground of reputation, from the magistrates' decision that they should have a summary trial. That proposal has rightly been thrown out because it would provide a two-tier system of justice, in that some could go to the Crown court for a jury trial and others could not.

The Government are now trying to justify a Bill that does not protect people with reputation. That shows that the Government cannot win on this issue because the removal of access to a jury trial is wrong however it is dressed up. On this occasion, the third way really is the right way; the third way is to retain trial by jury.

Even the previous Government balked at making such a change—but they wanted to stamp out the perceived abuses of the system, so they made other changes. In 1994, they introduced a more overt system of discounted sentencing for an early guilty plea. They introduced plea before venue only from October 1997, but those changes are making a difference. In the 1990s, the number of accused electing to go to the Crown court for trial fell.

The Government understand that there are many ways to continue trying to stamp out abuses of the system without withdrawing wholesale the right of people in either-way cases to have a trial by jury. That is why Lord Justice Auld was asked to report this year on changes that could be made. Interestingly enough, he will investigate, among other things, the composition of courts, including the use of juries and of lay and stipendiary magistrates. As these matters will be dealt with by the end of the year, why rush into making one judgment ahead of those?

Yes, jury trials are expensive, but they have a value beyond money. They contribute to the stability of our constitution and to the trust that we have in our institutions. The existing right to withhold our consent to summary trial by magistrates in either-way cases is a safety valve. Perhaps some eccentrics and some incorrigible rogues will withhold their consent when magistrates could easily try their cases, but they must be a small minority of the 18,000 who each year exercise their right to withhold their consent to summary trial.

I believe that, overwhelmingly, that right is exercised responsibly. Those who are to be denied a jury trial by the Bill may hold a grievance for a long time afterwards. Other citizens who thought that the right would have been available to them if they ever needed it will feel discontent. Confidence and trust in our legal system will be diminished.

9.31 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): This has been a thoughtful debate, during which we have heard many good speeches.

I start by declaring an interest as a former member for a number of years of the practising Bar, who appeared on many occasions in both Crown courts and magistrates courts. Although I am not currently in practice, I believe that I speak from some experience, but not as much experience as many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to the debate.

Reading the debate on the first version of the Bill in another place, I was struck by the words of a distinguished member of the Bar, not of my party, which rang particularly true. On 20 January this year, the noble Baroness Mallalieu said:

> The truth is that the jury system has the confidence of ordinary people because they believe that it is the fairest system of trial.

She went on:

> If I were accused of an offence which I had not committed I would want to be tried by a jury, if at all possible, and I would know that I would have a substantially higher chance of being found not guilty. I would want 12 minds to look at the evidence and 12 fresh minds, not one, two or three people who had already heard many similar cases. As a lawyer, that is the advice I would give in almost every case where I considered my client had a good defence.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1260.]

Those are wise words, which hon. Members in all parts of the House should take to heart, from a distinguished and senior member of the Bar who has also sat for many years as a recorder.

I am surprised to see the Home Secretary being so disingenuous when he comes to the House with his No. 2 version of the Bill, having been defeated on the No. 1 Bill, with so many of his noble Friends having spoken against him. He says that he has changed his mind, as though that made everything all right.

The Home Secretary has a charming way of coming disingenuously to the House, as he has done on many previous occasions, and saying, "In the past we were wrong, but now we are right." In the time that he has been Home Secretary, he has done that on so many issues connected with law and order.

The Opposition think that both the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor have had their minds changed for them. We believe that they have been strong-armed by the Treasury. It is the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury who are really behind the Bill, as has been said repeatedly by so many hon. Members attacking the Home Secretary with so-called friendly fire from behind him.

The score in tonight's debate is that only three of the Home Secretary's hon. Friends on the Back Benches have been prepared to support him, whereas no less than five have attacked him. It is much the same picture as in the other place on the No. 1 Bill. The hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews) in a superb speech, and the hon. Members for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore), for Leeds, North–West (Mr. Best), for Stoke–on–Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) have all attacked the Home Secretary.

The only three hon. Members who have been prepared to support the Home Secretary are the hon. Members for Bristol, East (Jean Corston), for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) and for Salford (Ms Blears). I believe that they would find it uncomfortable to return to their constituencies and tell their activists that they had attacked the arguments of organisations such as Justice, Liberty, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, the Society of Asian Lawyers and the Society of Black Lawyers. Even the Home Secretary's few supporters will find it difficult to explain why all those organisations, which have a proud record of supporting civil liberties, are wrong.

The hon. Member for Bristol, East rightly paid homage to those who had taught her in the past, such as Lord Runciman and Professor Michael Zander. However, in an interesting passage in a good and thoughtful speech, she said that she would vote against the Bill and support the hon. and learned Member for Medway if she believed that it would increase the scope for wrongful convictions among ethnic minority communities. She referred to research by Dr. Bonny Mhlanga. However, she may not have read the debates in another place because Lord Dholakia—again, not a member of my party—used the research to support the opposite case and attack the Home Secretary. In a powerful passage of his speech on 20 January in column 1278 of *Hansard*, he said that Dr. Mhlanga's research led to the conclusion that the hon. and learned Member for Medway presented. I hope that the hon. Member for Bristol, East will reflect on that, examine the debates in another place and decide that we and the hon. and learned Member for Medway are right.

In a powerful speech, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) reflected on the time when the original proposals were put forward by him and considered for consultation without commitment. He made it clear that if he had continued to

[Mr. Nick Hawkins]

be Home Secretary after the last election, he would have tried to persuade other Conservative Members to go ahead with some sort of proposal, but not the Government's measure, for reasons that he wisely set out.

Despite my enormous respect for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, he would not have succeeded in persuading me to accept such a proposal. Throughout my legal career, I have strongly supported the right to trial by jury. My right hon. and learned Friend's attacks on this Bill are especially accurate.

The hon. and learned Member for Medway, who has been a practising barrister for 33 years and a recorder for 18 years, pointed out that even St. Paul on the road to Damascus to conduct public prosecutions without a jury, did not undergo the same sort of conversion as the Home Secretary. He pointed out that the proposal had been brought from the Home Secretary's hutch in the Home Office, and was not a manifesto commitment. When the Minister winds up for the Government, I hope that he will make it clear that, if the Bill is defeated tonight or in another place on a subsequent occasion, the Government will decide that, because the measure was not mentioned in their manifesto, it would be wrong in principle to try to railroad it through another place. It would be right for the Government to accept defeat, crawl away and lick their wounds.

The hon. and learned Member for Medway rightly pointed out that the costs of the appeals could amount to £6,700,000. He said that the Bill will not achieve the savings about which the Treasury has persuaded the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor. It will cost more money.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke of the importance of not proceeding with piecemeal change to the law. He correctly said that we should wait for Lord Justice Auld's committee to report. In a powerful speech, the hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) rightly pointed out that, when considering the civil liberties aspect of trial by jury, we should take account of the cry of freedom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), who is a practising lawyer, a recorder and an acting stipendiary rightly said that the Bill was shameful and shoddy. He comprehensively demolished the Government's arguments on cost saving and the time of appeals. He also pointed out that Crown court delays are not as great precisely because of the reforms that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe introduced when he was Home Secretary. I was a member of Committees that scrutinised the Bills that introduced many of those reforms and a lot of the Home Secretary's arguments undoubtedly fall away when we consider the recent speeding up of Crown court trials. The plea-before-venue system has saved a lot of time.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) half said that she had come to the House specifically to bury lawyers, not to praise them. She indulged in the conventional rhetorical trick of erecting an argument that nobody was making—an alleged attack on the lay magistracy, which the hon. Member for Leeds, North–West moderately said that he had heard nobody make—and then said that we must defend the lay magistracy. We on the opposition Benches are proud of the lay magistracy and its work, but one does not have to be an attacker of the lay magistracy to be against the Bill, which is flawed in its own right for reasons unconnected with the lay magistracy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) correctly dismissed the Scottish experience—as the Home Secretary has pointed out that he had considered it—and said that the Home Secretary had made the provisions worse since the failure of the first Bill. The hon. Member for Leeds, North–West referred to the common-sense justice that is founded on trial by jury, which he was taught at Meanwood county school, and rightly said that he had not heard any attack on magistrates.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell)—a former Attorney-General—rightly complimented the lay magistracy on all its work and said that the Bill would achieve no cost savings. The hon. Member for Stoke–on–Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) made two good points: he said that no one ever writes to him or to any other Member of the House to complain about the right to trial by jury and the Home Secretary is required to prove beyond reasonable doubt—the usual standard of proof in criminal courts—that the Bill does not attack civil liberties. He concluded that the Home Secretary has failed to reach that standard.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) spoke as a libertarian, against the Treasury. He said that it is important to try every other mechanism to improve our criminal justice system first and that we must not throw away fundamental civil liberties. In a speech that can be described only as somewhat egregious in its loyalism to the Millbank spin doctors, the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) said that the organisations on which I challenged her, such as Justice and Liberty, are motivated by self-interest and dominated by lawyers. I suspect that she will have cause to regret that, and her speech could be described as selling her civil libertarian soul for a mess of pottage in the Bill.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) gave the House the benefit of his sharp-end experience and pointed out everything that could go wrong if the Bill become law. The hon. Member for Stafford, who has extensive practical experience of the magistrates courts, made a brief but well-observed contribution and foresaw many difficulties with the Bill.

The hon. and learned Member for Medway quoted the leading work on the history of trial by jury, which was written by Sir Patrick Devlin, who became a most distinguished Law Lord. Like most lawyers of my generation, I was brought up the words and judgments of the late Lords Denning and Devlin. The hon. Gentleman missed out some of what Sir Patrick Devlin wrote. He concluded his book on trial by jury with these words, quoted from Sir William Blackstone:

> So that the liberties of England cannot but subsist so long as this palladium—

he meant trial by jury—

> remains sacred and inviolate; not only from all open attacks . . . but also from all secret machinations, which may sap and undermine it; by introducing new and arbitrary methods of trial; by justices of the

peace, commissioners of the revenue, and courts of conscience. And however convenient these may appear at first (as doubtless all arbitrary powers, well executed, are the most convenient), yet let it be again remembered, that delays and little inconveniences in the forms of justice, are the price that all free nations must pay for their liberty in more substantial matters; that these inroads upon this sacred bulwark of the nation are fundamentally opposite to the spirit of our constitution; and that, though begun in trifles, the precedent may gradually increase and spread, to the utter disuse of juries in questions of the most momentous concern.

9.45 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I agree with the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) that this has been a good debate, enlivened by some excellent speeches. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, East (Ms Corston), for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) and for Salford (Ms Blears), but I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), who made well-considered speeches, albeit opposing the Bill.

We heard 19 speakers, 14 of whom—more than 70 per cent.—were barristers or solicitors. That constitutes a significant watering down of the lawyer content since the debate in the other place. A number of serious points were made. In an intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) asked my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to what extent cost was a motive. That was raised in a number of other contributions, which asked questions about, for instance, the legitimacy of the estimates. All those were fair enough points, but I emphasise that none of our case rests on the cost savings that may arise from the Bill—it derives entirely from the need to create a more transparent, clear and fair criminal justice system. That is why the Bill is before us, and that is its intention.

The law requires us to make an estimate of the cost savings involved, and we have set out those savings in the Bill to the best of our ability. I acknowledge that many of the points made about cost savings are fair, and that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating; but those points are not germane to the central issue, which is whether we want to enact a measure to modernise the criminal justice system and to make it more transparent. That, in fact, is the entire motivation behind the Bill.

Mr. Burnett: The Minister says that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Would it not be wiser for him to look before he leaps, and to arrange an independent scrutiny of the figures that the Government are using to justify their actions?

Mr. Clarke: There are many scrutinies of the figures, but the hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. My point is that cost issues, significant though they are, are not the central motivation behind the Bill. The central motivation is the need to secure a modernised, efficient and effective criminal justice system.

I pay tribute to all who have spoken. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East observed, much of the discussion outside the House—certainly that in the other place—has tended to demean the role of the magistrates courts, but that has not been the tenor of our debate. The hon. Member for Woking, for example, said that it had nothing to do with the suggestion that one court was better than another, and many others have made similar points. Some outside and in the other place have rested their whole case, in an arrogant and sneering way, on the proposition that justice in the magistrates courts is somehow less worth while than that in the Crown courts; but no such suggestion has been made today, and I am glad that it has not. It is, of course, important that that should be the case, given that more than 95 per cent. of cases are resolved in the magistrates courts.

A number of Members made the point that this was a matter of balance and judgment. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) made it when he said that it was not an open-and-shut case. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) made it when he said—in response to an intervention from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—that the issues depended on the balance of judgment, and lay on the margins.

It is a question of balance and judgment, but the issue is clear: we are seeking to achieve a transparent and clear criminal justice system.

Mr. Bermingham: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Clarke: I shall not at this stage.

A number of the arguments against the Bill have been somewhat overblown. The facts are that there are cases that go automatically to the Crown court, where the venue is clear, there is no choice for the defendant and the situation is set out—there are 24,000 on average every year; and there are cases that go automatically to the magistrates court—there are about 1.4 million every year—where, under current legislation, there is no choice for the defendant to go to the Crown court. The position is simple: they go straight to the magistrates court.

Some say that no question of reputation is involved. The list of cases considered in that summary way includes assault on a constable, common assault, brothel keeping, cruelty to animals, cruelty to or neglect of children, aggravated vehicle taking, indecent exposure, and driving after consuming alcohol or drugs. Those are serious offences, where a serious issue of reputation is involved. All are decided in the magistrates court today, without any question of the defendant or anyone else deciding that the matter should go to trial by jury—to a Crown court.

It is a substantial point: a significant list of offences goes at the moment directly to summary court and summary judgment, without anyone suggesting that they should go to the Crown court. It is important to place on the record that no one in the debate has suggested that we should change the law so that, in the sort of cases that I have mentioned, the individual has the automatic right to choose trial by jury.

We have talked about each-way cases: there are about 465,000 every year, 400,000 going to the magistrates court and 65,000 going to the Crown court. Those are the overall figures.

It is important to put the debate in perspective. As I say, today more than 95 per cent. of cases are judged automatically by the magistrates courts. Many of those cases include serious offences involving reputation in a variety of ways.

[Mr. Clarke]

The simple issue on each-way cases is: does the prosecutor, the defendant, the magistrate or the court decide, subject to appeal? Many international comparisons can be made. All the systems are entirely different in their character, history and orientation, but it is true that the English and Welsh system is eccentric in that it permits defendants to choose. In general in the rest of the world, either the court decides or, in some cases, which are equally eccentric, the prosecution decides. It is eccentric for the defendant to be given the right to decide. What is universal is the right of everyone to have a fair trial, whether in the magistrates court or Crown court.

Mr. Bermingham: Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we took away the right of the defendant and left it to the Crown Prosecution Service to decide the level of charge, those that it considered merited a sentence of six months or less could go to the magistrates court and those that it considered merited a sentence of six months or more could go to the Crown court? In that way, we would get rid of that argument and solve the whole problem.

Mr. Clarke: I am familiar with the idea. I have seen the correspondence that my hon. Friend has had with the Home Secretary. There are interesting arguments in the debate in relation to reclassifying some of the offences in different areas. Many issues arise.

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: On the subject of eccentric systems, what are the other systems in the world where there is a right of trial by jury—let us forget Scotland for a moment—and where that right is not exercised by the defendant? Let us have a list.

Mr. Clarke: I will let my hon. and learned Friend have the list, but I do not regard Scotland as an eccentricity in any respect whatever. No Labour Member could possibly do so.

The change that we have proposed is significant and important. It is focused on reducing opacity in the system—on increasing its clarity—and on reducing abuse.

Mr. Garnier: That is the third time that the Minister has mentioned either transparency or opacity. In what way is the current system lacking in transparency?

Mr. Clarke: I should be very surprised if the hon. and learned Gentleman does not see many cases in his surgery, as I do in mine, involving victims, criminals or jurors, for example, who say that they do not understand how the legal system has worked for them or that they have not had justice from the system. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford made an excellent speech containing some very specific examples showing why people might feel that way. I do not think that the criminal justice system does very well in those spheres.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No. I shall not give way again, as I am near the end of my speech and have to finish it in four minutes.

The Bill, for the reasons eloquently stated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East, is supported by the royal commission, the Lord Chief Justice, magistrates and police. The matter involves a balanced judgment. Although I hear what the Bar Council and the Law Society had to say, I also know that there are divided opinions on the matter within the legal profession. It is important to stress that the case is very clear and straightforward. We need to change the criminal justice system—to modernise it and to take it forward—and that is what we are doing.

Mr. Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, but I shall deal with the points that the hon. Gentleman made. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] No. With three minutes to go, I shall not give way but try to deal with the points that have been made in the debate.

Mr. Marshall–Andrews *rose—*

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Clarke: No, I shall not give way.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey asked about establishing a Special Standing Committee on the Bill. We shall not take that course, but consider the Bill properly in the normal course of events. We promised to do that, and that is what we shall do.

Various hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, the hon. Member for Woking and my hon. Friend the Member for Salford, made the important point that some people play the system to their advantage. The point has been made clearly, and we should deal with it.

The issue of effect of plea-before-venue was raised by various hon. Members, but particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher). We do not accept the view that plea-before-venue is reducing the number of elections and makes the Bill redundant. Plea-before-venue allows those who wish to plead guilty to do so in the magistrates court, which was not possible in directed cases prior to implementation—

Mr. Marshall–Andrews: Will the Minister give way?

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Clarke: In 1999, the number of elections increased by 3.6 per cent., to just under 19,000.

The issue of appeal was raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) and the hon. Member for Woking. It is open to the party to request an oral hearing and to the judge to accede to that request, but it is at the judge's discretion. We expect most appeals to be dealt with on the papers and most appeals to be dealt with within 48 hours.

The matter of reputation has been dealt with at great length in the debate. As I have said very clearly, regardless of whether a case is to be committed to summary trial or to each-way trial, very many cases may

have an effect on the reputation and integrity of all types of individuals. Such cases may profoundly affect individuals—whether Members of Parliament or anyone else—and even damage their lives. It is absolutely clear that magistrates courts give a fair trial, and that they will continue to give a fair trial. We should defend that very important principle.

I ask all my hon. Friends to vote on the Bill's merits and to modernise the criminal justice system—taking into account the considered view of police, the legal system, the royal commission, the Lord Chief Justice and magistrates, and in the interests of victims and witnesses. Our constituents want a modern criminal justice system that will serve the needs of all our society and not only the needs of the band of lawyers who are seeking to protect their own interests.

We have to safeguard the interests of every citizen. That is our duty. That is why this matter is being dealt with in this Chamber—the elected Chamber—where we all have our responsibility to safeguard those interests. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 214, Noes 315.

Division No. 94] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Flight, Howard
Flynn, Paul
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McDonnell, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sedgemore, Brian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wise, Audrey
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Kidney and
Mr. Harold Best.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Battle, John

Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheerman, Barry
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*

Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Don Touhig.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 315, Noes 188.

Division No. 95] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Ptaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheerman, Barry
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen

Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Don Touhig.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kidney, David
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63(2),

That the Bill be committed to a Special Standing Committee.—[*Mr. Simon Hughes.*]

The House divided: Ayes 181, Noes 325.

Division No. 96] **[10.25 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter

Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wise, Audrey
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and Mr. Bob Russell.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia

Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheerman, Barry
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Bill committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

PARLIAMENTARY CONTRIBUTORY PENSIONS FUND AND HOUSE OF COMMONS MEMBERS' FUND

Resolved,

That,

(1) in pursuance of Section 1 of the Parliamentary and other Pensions Act 1987, Mr. A. J. Beith and Mrs. Sylvia Heal be appointed Managing Trustees of the Parliamentary Contributory Pensions Fund in the room of Dr. Vincent Cable and Ms Gisela Stuart; and

(2) in pursuance of Section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 1939, Mr. A. J. Beith and Mrs. Sylvia Heal be appointed Managing Trustees of the House of Commons Members' Fund in the room of Dr. Vincent Cable and Ms Gisela Stuart.—*[Mr. MacGregor.]*

Phoenix Companies

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McAvoy.]*

10.38 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): May I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise what is—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Would hon. Members leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that we can proceed with the Adjournment debate?

Mr. Willis: May I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise an important issue at what I hope is not too late an hour?

Phoenixism is the name popularly given to cases where the assets of an insolvent business are reacquired by its former management or closely connected parties. Many small traders who are owed money by companies that go into liquidation are often quite rightly outraged to find that the directors of those companies suffer little personal loss and are able to start a new business in the same sector almost immediately. Indeed, those small traders often find that assets have been transferred to the other company before the first company has gone into liquidation, so as to put assets beyond the reach of creditors.

To a certain extent, that is a logical consequence of the limited liability laws. For the purpose of the law, a company is a separate legal entity if it trades with limited liability, and its directors or shareholders do not usually retain liability for the company's debts if it becomes insolvent. Legally, there is nothing to prevent a director of a company from running a number of businesses simultaneously. Equally, there is nothing in law to prevent a director of an insolvent company from starting a new business overnight, provided that he has acted properly in managing the first company before and during its insolvency.

If, however, the owner of an insolvent company has deliberately acted to the detriment of the company's creditors, action should be taken against him under current legislation. That action should result in administrators reporting unfit conduct to the Insolvency Service, or in a court, under section 6 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986, ordering a disqualification order of between two and 15 years for unfit conduct as a director.

Clearly, when the Government came into office in 1997, they thought the present system wholly inadequate. The then Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), launched a blistering attack on rogue companies. In his press notice of 30 July 1997, he said:

> I am particularly infuriated when one of these bad companies goes into liquidation and then starts up again with the same directors and with almost the same name, same staff and equipment and then carries out the same or similar business with a blatant disregard to creditors so that further failure is inevitable—this is the "phoenix" company and the cowboy director.

The hon. Gentleman was very strong in his determination to drive such practices out of our system. Six months later, he launched a 24-hour hotline to allow members of the public to report disqualified directors who continued to trade. A press release by the present Minister reported that, in the hotline's first year,

> Insolvency Service investigators have received 1,200 calls with each one carefully followed up.

How many of those calls resulted in a rogue director being taken to court? What is the percentage increase in the number of directors disqualified in the past three years compared with the previous three years?

If, as I suspect, very few directors were disqualified as a result of the hotline, the Minister's boast that the latest disqualification statistics confirmed

> the effectiveness of the Government's approach to tackle rogue directors and phoenixism

will have a hollow ring.

That boast certainly has a hollow ring for my constituent, who has brought a case of flagrant abuse, duplicity and possible fraud to the attention of the Department of Trade and Industry, the hotline, the Insolvency Service, the fraud squad, me, and the Minister, with little if any satisfaction. If his case is typical of the way genuine business men are treated when faced with phoenixism, the Minister has a lot of work still to do.

My constituent entered into a 15-year agreement to lease land and buildings to Pallet Ancillary Management Services Ltd.—PAMS—of South Kirkby in Pontefract. That company had a sole guarantor—William Melvyn Jones. Despite the fact that Mr. Jones had previously gone bankrupt, my constituent was prepared to enter into a lease in good faith. Sadly, Mr. Jones went personally bankrupt once again in 1993, and proceeded to threaten to close the company if he had to pay any further rental payments under duress. For Mr. Jones, duress meant the bailiffs coming in, as they had 17 times in the previous eight years to obtain the rent that he had agreed to pay.

During the next three months, PAMS was systematically stripped of its assets, which were effectively transferred into a phoenix company, of which the directors were the man's son and daughter. Meanwhile, the original company was being run by the same son and daughter, but with Mr. Jones effectively managing the operation, despite the fact that he was a bankrupt. He attended rent review meetings with my constituent's agents. He even wrote letters threatening to close down the business. All that was in clear breach of the company and insolvency law. All the evidence was presented to the relevant authorities.

What action was taken? To stop further transfer of assets, my constituent attempted in vain to persuade the official receiver not to discharge Jones from his bankruptcy and allow him to use the transferred assets. The official receiver failed to act, failed to instigate a public inquiry and discharged Mr. Jones from bankruptcy on 3 October 1996.

At the date of his bankruptcy, Mr. Jones owed £489,073, of which £362,000 consisted of income tax and VAT. How, I ask the Minister, could such large debts be allowed to accumulate on such an allegedly small turnover? Why, when the suspicion of fraud was presented to the official receiver, was no further action taken?

Undeterred, however, my constituent approached the trustee in bankruptcy, who openly conceded that Mr. Jones had failed to co-operate and that the trustee's office had found Mr. Jones's behaviour unnerving, if not frightening. Again, no action was taken.

[Mr. Willis]

My constituent then brought the matter to the attention of the Department of Trade and Industry investigations and enforcement directorate in October 1996. That directorate is supposed to adhere strictly to a code of practice outlined in "Investigations: How they Work", but it refused to investigate the claims and instead made an unprecedented attack on my constituent.

The directorate criticised my constituent for not taking better precautions when setting up the lease; it cited someone who had made a similar complaint, whose lone crusade had resulted in his requiring protection from two SAS officers; it mentioned that an action would be expensive and no results would ensue; and it suggested that my constituent should simply forfeit the lease and walk away—all that, rather than instigate a proper investigation of his complaints.

Still undeterred, my constituent sought support from the Insolvency Service prosecution unit. He provided clear evidence that Mr. Jones was operating the company while an undischarged bankrupt—again, no joy, because the DTI had previously considered the case, hence the prosecution unit should not do so.

To leave no stone unturned, my constituent then approached the West Yorkshire fraud squad. There was clear evidence that the company was divesting itself of assets, yet despite the fact that my constituent brought the matter to the police in October 1996, an investigating officer was not appointed until February 1997. The police then informed my constituent that the case was of little interest to them, and that investigating Mr. Jones had to be weighed against the public demand for catching real criminals, such as drug dealers.

A whole year later, the preliminary examination was concluded and the case dropped, on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence to justify further police inquiries.

PAMS, of course, has now ceased trading. My constituent has lost thousands of pounds, which should have been invested in his pension fund. Mr. Jones has taken over the phoenix company run by his daughter and son, carrying on the business as before, so that he can start all over again, leaving misery, frustration and debt in his wake.

Meanwhile, the system has failed my constituent—and many like him, I suspect. It seems that, despite the Minister's proud boast, a clever rogue director can still take the system to the cleaners, because there are too many loopholes.

The official receiver was unable to withhold Mr. Jones' discharge because of a failure by the trustee in bankruptcy to declare him unco-operative. The Department of Trade and Industry has no authority to make inquiries of a discharged bankrupt. The Insolvency Service has no power to investigate live companies. The police investigate according to budget constraints, not the pursuit of justice. How can an honest business man who is systematically defrauded hope to gain justice? What can the Minister say to my constituent that will convince him that the Government care about his plight and are interested in stamping out rogue directors?

I owe the Minister a debt of gratitude for his courtesy in responding to my constituent's complaints promptly and effectively. However, that is frankly not good enough. I support the Government's broad aim of creating an entrepreneurial culture in which people of all ages and backgrounds start their own businesses. I agree that, as a society, we are afraid of failure, especially in business, where there is a fear that failure will create a lasting stigma. Investors are often not found when they are needed to support marginal businesses; banks are often too anxious to limit possible loss, and a lack of venture capital and of capitalists hampers business development for individuals who have little or no collateral.

Liberal Democrats largely support the Government's proposals in their competitiveness White Paper, which was published in December 1998 and entitled "Our competitive future: building the knowledge driven society". In June 1999, the Minister issued a press release, which stated:

> For enterprise to flourish and grow in the United Kingdom, entrepreneurs, business and the public must be confident that directors who deliberately set out to disadvantage their creditors or abuse their limited liability status will be disqualified.

I believed that that was the Minister's intention. However, it is not the reality.

Some so-called business men and women are extremely entrepreneurial. They milk the system for all it is worth, leaving a trail of debt, desperation and frustration behind them. Those people are little more than criminals, and they must be fought with the determination with which we fight criminals. Indeed, many people believe that the Insolvency Bill, which is in another place, will simply create another rogues' charter.

Do the Government seriously believe that rogues such as Mr. Jones, who operate at the margins if not beyond them, will submit themselves to voluntary undertakings that would have the same legal effect as a disqualification order made by a court? It should not be up to "The Cook Report" to expose such people; the Government should protect honest business men who simply want to make a living.

10.53 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) on securing the debate. I listened to his speech carefully. It was well delivered and constructed, and he presented a compelling case. I am sure that his constituent, Mr. Whitaker, will be pleased with that.

The case is especially difficult for technical reasons, which I shall try to tackle. William Melvyn Jones was made bankrupt on 4 October 1993. He was involved, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said, in a company called Pallet Ancillary Management Services Ltd. or PAMS. The hon. Gentleman's constituent, Mr. M. J. Whitaker, alleged that Mr. Jones was active in the management of PAMS while he was an undischarged bankrupt. That is at the heart of the case.

Mr. Jones received automatic discharge from bankruptcy on 3 October 1996. Mr. Whitaker is the trustee of a pension fund, which manages a property at Lidgate crescent in South Kirkby. PAMS is a tenant of the property and Mr. Jones is a personal guarantor.

It was alleged that property belonging to PAMS was transferred to two other companies, as the hon. Gentleman said, and that its directors included Susan Wood, Mr. Jones' daughter. Mr. Whitaker made several

complaints between August 1996 and September 1998. The first was to the official receiver in Sheffield, who reported an allegation under section 11 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. As PAMS was a live company, the complaint was forwarded to the companies investigation branch with a view to making an inquiry under section 447 of the Companies Act 1985. The case was vetted by the CIB in February 1997 and turned down.

Mr. Whitaker provided additional information in May 1997. The matter was reconsidered by legal services prosecutions and referred to the CIB, which vetted the case in June 1997 and sent for a section 447 inquiry. However, the decision was reversed in October. Mr. Whitaker used the telephone hotline in August 1998 to repeat his allegations. The case was reviewed again by the Insolvency Service, legal services prosecutions and the CIB, but it was decided that no further action would be taken.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, Mr. Whitaker's Member of Parliament, requested the Secretary of State to use his statutory powers to investigate the company. Perhaps I should explain them. The Secretary of State has a range of investigatory powers under the Companies Acts 1985 and 1989 and the Financial Services Act 1986. Most often used are those that enable confidential inquiries. The start of those inquiries is not announced and they do not lead to a publishable report. Section 447 of the 1985 Act enables the Secretary of State to direct a company to produce specified documents and to authorise an officer of his or any other competent person to require a company or a person who appears to be in possession of specified documents to produce and explain them.

Those statutory powers are discretionary. They are invoked when, as the statute says, there is "good reason" to do so, which is taken to mean primarily grounds to suspect fraud or misconduct. Investigations are not undertaken on the basis of unsubstantiated rumours—not that these matters are unsubstantiated rumours. I want to make that very clear. The then Government's response to the Trade and Industry Committee report on company investigations published in 1990 included the following statement:

> The Government are always ready to act in suitable cases. But it needs to be recognised that the powers conferred on the Department by Parliament are exceptionally strong and should not be abused. Each of the Department's powers of investigation require certain statutory conditions to be met before they can be used. It is important that these strong powers should only be used where statutory conditions are met and where their use is the appropriate means of getting the further information which will allow action to be taken should that prove to be required.

Section 447 enables the Secretary of State, in pursuance of his regulatory functions, to investigate and ascertain what has happened with a view to deciding whether further regulatory action—including, where appropriate, the prosecution of crime—should be taken by the Secretary of State or whether information should be disclosed to other regulators for action. Although the use of section 447 powers can be triggered by suspicion of dishonesty and although such an investigation ultimately may lead to a criminal investigation and prosecution, the investigation is not a criminal one that itself leads to a decision whether to prosecute. Nor is it an alternative to private litigation. Those considerable powers are for use in the public interest and Parliament has prescribed the other bodies that may receive the confidential information that may emerge from such inquiries. They do not include creditors, who have their usual remedies.

Unless there is evidence of non-co-operation by a bankrupt during his bankruptcy, the court will not suspend his discharge from bankruptcy. As the hon. Gentleman has told us, following the report of non-co-operation—perhaps owing to an administrative error—William Melvyn Jones was automatically discharged on the third anniversary of his bankruptcy order, as the court was not convinced of the non-co-operation.

Let me now deal with the methodology behind criminal investigations and prosecutions undertaken by my Department in relation to companies in insolvent liquidation and in relation to bankrupts, which have a particular bearing on the case that concerned the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

The Secretary of State is also a prosecuting authority, and the majority of offences prosecuted by the Department arise under the Companies Act 1985, the Insolvency Act 1986 or the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. When the Department receives allegations of criminal offences—in the majority of cases, they come from the Insolvency Service—a lawyer will consider whether a criminal investigation should take place. Any criminal investigation will be carried out by one of the Department's own investigation officers, who are experienced fraud investigators, mainly with a police background. No statutory powers are available to such officers when they are carrying out criminal investigations. At the conclusion of the investigation, the case will again be considered by a lawyer who will decide whether criminal proceedings should be instituted.

The code for Crown prosecutors is issued under section 10 of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985, and applies directly to all prosecutors in the Crown Prosecution Service. In common with other public prosecutors, the Department applies the code so that it can make fair and consistent decisions about prosecutions. The code explains that there are two stages in the decision to prosecute, and that the first stage is the evidential test. Crown prosecutors must be satisfied that there is enough evidence to provide a "realistic prospect of conviction" against each defendant on each charge. They must consider what the defence case may be, and how that is likely to affect the prosecution case. A realistic prospect of conviction is an objective test. It means that a jury or bench of magistrates, properly directed in accordance with the law, is more likely than not to convict the defendant of the charge alleged.

When deciding whether there is enough evidence to prosecute, Crown prosecutors must consider whether the evidence can be used and is reliable. There will be many cases in which the evidence does not give them cause for concern, but there will also be cases in which it may not be as strong as it appeared at first. The Crown prosecutors must ask themselves whether the evidence can be used in court, and whether it is reliable.

The decision on the sufficiency of the evidence must be made by a lawyer, with the benefit of advice from an independent practitioner such as counsel where appropriate. As the code makes clear, the "realistic prospect of conviction" test is an objective one. That does not mean that there is not room for differing views on whether the test has been passed, but it does mean that the margin of appreciation is relatively small.

[Dr. Kim Howells]

When the decision on whether to start a criminal investigation is under consideration, regard will be had to the two tests laid down in the code for Crown prosecutors. For example, if it appears unlikely that an investigation will be able to obtain sufficient evidence to meet the evidential sufficiency test, an investigation will not be started.

The Department takes its enforcement responsibilities seriously, and is aware of the need to strike a proper balance between protecting the rights of creditors and protecting those of insolvent companies and persons. Prosecution is an important weapon in enforcement, and the Department will prosecute whenever it is satisfied that the evidential sufficiency test has been met, and that the public interest requires a prosecution.

Mr. Whitaker, the hon. Gentleman's constituent, complained to the Insolvency Service in 1996 that an undischarged bankrupt had, from December 1993 until October 1996, acted as a director of Pallet Ancillary Management Services Ltd. without leave of the court, in contravention of section 11 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. There were also allegations about the improper transfer of assets to successor companies. Those allegations were repeated in a complaint by Mr. Whitaker to the hotline in August 1998.

Because those allegations touched on the affairs of a live company, they were referred to the companies investigation branch of the Department to consider whether the use of statutory investigation powers was appropriate. Officials concluded that it would not be appropriate. The question of whether to start a criminal investigation was considered on both occasions. On each occasion, the view was taken that there was insufficient evidence for a criminal investigation to be launched.

Courts can disqualify directors for between two and 15 years if they are unfit. Phoenix companies are particularly targeted. The courts take such cases very seriously. The Insolvency Service has sufficient resources to pursue all identified cases of serious misconduct. In the past two years, more than 2,800 directors have been disqualified.

The business sector that is most affected, although it will not concern the hon. Gentleman, is the clothing industry, or the rag trade. The Government have been concerned at possible delays in all disqualification proceedings and will introduce a fast-track system of disqualifying directors, which will cut out the courts and dramatically reduce the time that it takes to conclude disqualification.

The hon. Gentleman said that there was a danger that the legislation would become a rogue's charter. I do not think that it will be a rogue's charter. It will help us to disqualify more of those people and to do so more easily. I am sorry that the evidential test does not seem to have applied in that case and that the good case that the hon. Gentleman made on behalf of his constituent could not be pursued any further. If there is fresh evidence, I will look at it. If I can take the case forward, I certainly will.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered further on Wednesday 15 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister was asked—

Public Appointments

1. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What recent representations she has received on the criteria used for making public appointments. [112254]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): My right hon. Friend occasionally receives representations on the matter. To my knowledge, she has received no such representations in the past six months.

Mr. Amess: Will the Minister confirm that there is no political bias whatsoever in health authority appointments? If there is no such bias, will he explain to the House why, when Southend primary care trust was established against doctors' wishes, we were presented with a choice between two Labour activists to serve on the trust, and that the Labour activist who was appointed happened to be the chairman of South Essex health authority, which had been the subject of a critical report? Will the Minister also explain why the Government have allowed Thurrock community trust to take over the Southend trust—again allowing the appointment of a chairman who suits the Government's agenda?

Mr. Stringer: I can confirm that appointments to NHS bodies are made solely on merit. I find the hon. Gentleman's comments absolutely astonishing. He is a representative of the Conservative party whose spokesperson said, when it was in government, that she had never knowingly appointed a Labour person to any body. That is one reason why we have a transparent system and people are appointed on merit.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Will my hon. Friend also confirm that one of the substantial differences in appointments to public bodies under this Administration is the significant increase in the number of women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds who are now represented on such bodies?

Mr. Stringer: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I can confirm that, at present, 50 per cent. of the new appointments to non-departmental public bodies are women. That has led to an increase in the proportion of women on all bodies from 34 to 39 per cent. The number of people from ethnic minority communities who are being appointed is now at 12.5 per cent. of all appointments. That means that, in the total composition of the bodies, their number has gone up from 4.7 to 8.5 per cent. That is in line with the Government's commitment to increase the diversity on non-departmental public bodies.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I listened to the Minister's comments, but was there anything in the Nolan report that criticised the process of selection and appointment to health bodies?

Mr. Stringer: I assume that the right hon. Lady refers to the latest Neill report. Under the previous system, independent assessors were not within the remit of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. In future, independent assessors, who were not part of the Nolan procedures, will come under the guidance of Dame Rennie Fritchie.

Anti-drugs Strategy

2. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What role the drug action teams are playing in the delivery of the Government's anti-drug strategy. [112256]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): Drug action teams have a crucial role in the delivery of the national drugs strategy. They consist of agencies, such as probation, health, education, police authorities and local authorities, and they are the main mechanisms for delivery on the ground.

All drug action teams are required to plan and deliver an effective programme of anti-drug activities in their area that is in line with the national strategy.

Dr. Iddon: In the Bolton drug action team area, the community drug team has been hitting a target of four weeks waiting lists. Unfortunately, the waiting list has increased to six weeks because of a difficulty in recruiting staff, and, of course, waiting times in other DAT areas are much longer. What are the Government doing to ensure that more trained staff are made available, especially in view of the new demand expected from arrest referral schemes?

Mr. McCartney: This week, advertisements will be placed in a range of the press in Britain for applications to be made for the 300 new personnel to work at a local level. In addition to that, my hon. Friend's borough, Bolton, has benefited from an allocation of resources for the new arrest referral schemes. A total of £20 million has been allocated nationally and £1.3 million has been allocated for Greater Manchester. A range of schemes is

also in place, including an aftercare programme in Bolton, for those who need to reintegrate into the community as they recover from drugs misuse.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Does the Minister agree that politics should not be involved in dealing with such a pernicious scourge to the nation? Is it not strange that a Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive was not prepared to preside over a meeting of agencies because the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which has done such a splendid job in dealing with drugs misuse, was present?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman is right about the need for a non-partisan, non-political approach. I say that each time I come to the Dispatch Box both at Question Time and in Adjournment debates. I concur with that.

In relation to Northern Ireland, it is our job to encourage all UK agencies to co-operate with the police, the health and probation services, community groups, local authorities and parent organisations to ensure that we have a co-ordinated approach in the prevention of drug misuse and to bring to justice, and have jailed, those who sell drugs to our young people.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): The Opposition welcome the apparent fall in the number of young people taking drugs following the successful foundation of drug action teams, which were a primary feature of the White Paper, "Tackling Drugs Together", introduced by the then Leader of the House, Tony Newton, who is now in the other place. Will the Minister confirm that, while that trend is encouraging, there must be no let up in drug prevention efforts? Will he outline what action is being taken to support drug action teams in the nationwide introduction later this year of drug treatment and testing orders?

Mr. McCartney: I, too, welcome the figures from Exeter university, but we should be cautious because much more needs to be done. However, they are another welcome sign that the 10-year strategy is beginning to bear fruit. We must now build on the clear indication that, although young people are more likely to be approached about drugs, there is a growing awareness among them about the dangers of drug abuse, which should be welcomed by all. We shall shortly make an announcement about measures to ensure that each drug action team correlates with its local authority area, and we shall be making decisions about cross-cutting and funding, which I think the hon. Lady will find satisfactory and will support.

I make this commitment to the hon. Lady: drug action teams are at the heart of our planning and decision making to ensure that the referral schemes are successful. I invite the hon. Lady to meet me to discuss our decisions on funding and cross-cutting issues.

Business and Civil Service Secondments

3. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If she will make a statement on progress in temporary secondments of *(a)* people from business and industry to Government Departments and *(b)* civil servants to business and industry. [112257]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): The "Modernising Government" White Paper and Sir Richard Wilson's recent report to the Prime Minister on civil service reform made it clear that the Government are keen to promote the exchange of people and good practice between the civil service and other organisations. Such opportunities can take many forms, ranging from temporary secondments, to short-term attachments, to job sharing and joint training.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Will the right hon. Lady confirm that the initiative has been gathering pace year on year since at least the mid-1980s? In accepting that the country can benefit from the exchange of ideas and experience between business and the civil service, will she consider the possibility of making it the practice that civil servants above a certain grade should be seconded, as a sabbatical, to industry or business, if not for a year every seven years, at least for three months?

Marjorie Mowlam: The scheme has been running since the 1970s and recently we have done what we can to expand it because there is no doubt about the advantages that it brings in terms of the exchange of ideas, creativity and a learning process from which all can benefit. We have recently tried to expand it beyond the business community, which has been the focus of the scheme since the 1970s, to include all groups represented in the community, such as the voluntary sector and trade unions, so that there is a greater exchange of ideas and practices between bodies across our communities.

The idea of a sabbatical has potential and I shall consider it, but, at the moment, we are considering inequalities in funding between exchanges which limit many in the voluntary sector from benefiting from such a scheme. However, we shall include the idea in our consideration of the expansion of the programme.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that our manufacturing sector still has a great role to play in the creation of wealth, even though that was not accepted in the Thatcher era? Is not it important to ensure that there are more secondments in that area so that civil servants understand the problems facing manufacturing industry?

Marjorie Mowlam: There is no doubt that manufacturing industry did an enormous amount for this country in the 1970s and we owe it a great debt. We will benefit from exchanges in the manufacturing, retail and voluntary sectors, because only through the exchange of ideas is progress made. The numbers are increasing in business and the voluntary sector, and trade unions have made an important contribution, with discussions between the National Audit Office and the Trades Union Congress about the possibility of exchanges. We look forward to further progress. I concur with my hon. Friend's sentiments.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Will the Minister ensure that when there are secondments or short-term contracts for appointments in the civil service,

the question of compromising the duty under "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" that public resources should not be used for party political purposes will never arise?

Marjorie Mowlam: I am not sure what that has to do with secondments, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that public resources are not used for political purposes, as has been made clear time and again from the Dispatch Box.

Mr. Lansley: How then can the Minister reconcile that duty with the appointment of Mr. Joe McCrea, who was for eight years special adviser to the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) as the head of the so-called knowledge network inside the Cabinet Office? Will she undertake to ensure that in that role and with his responsibility for other permanent civil servants he will play absolutely no part in the London mayoral election campaign? Will she ensure that no material produced by that unit in the Cabinet Office will be used in that campaign, or that if London material is produced it is all published on the internet between now and 4 May?

Marjorie Mowlam: All the work done in that unit will be put on the net so there will be no question of work being done that even the hon. Gentleman will not see. Whatever individuals' past may be, and whatever political party or business they may have been involved in, we will work by the recruitment procedures outlined in the Civil Service Commissioner's recruitment code: for secondments of more than 12 months, there has to be a field of candidates; all secondees are told that they are subject to the Official Secrets Act; all secondees are required to observe the civil service management code, including the code of confidentiality; and consideration will be given to any potential conflicts of interest, and if there is any suspicion of such a conflict, the secondment will be abandoned.

Performance and Innovation Unit

4. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): What action she has taken, pursuant to the report of the performance and innovation unit about cross-cutting in Government. [112258]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): Action is being taken on the report, "Wiring it up: Accountability and Incentives for Joined-up Government", and implementation will be monitored by the modernising government project board, chaired by the permanent secretary in the Cabinet Office. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I will report on progress across the whole broad front early next year.

Mr. Chope: Does not last week's shambles over Mozambique expose the whole myth of joined-up government? Over two days, two Departments were arguing over £2 million at the same time as the Government were announcing that they had spent £92 million of taxpayers' money on their own advertising last year. Does the Minister agree with the conclusion of the leading article in *The Times* on Saturday, which says:

> This clash of budgets and egos cost lives that speed could have saved . . . The No. 10 boast of fast delivery rings hollow.?

Marjorie Mowlam: No, I disagree, for the simple reason that the Government have succeeded in doing more, faster, than any other in terms of giving aid to Mozambique, getting real help to the people there. The most important thing was to get the most help possible to the people who needed it quickly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development made it clear from the start that we could get more help quickly to the people in the region by using helicopters hired in the region. Subsequently, further help has been dispatched, and the detail has been in the papers about what we have done in water purification, sanitation and temporary housing. The reality is the exact opposite of what the hon. Gentleman has said. We have delivered real help in a pragmatic, practical way.

I am not ashamed of what we spent on advertising. We have advertised policies that will make a difference to people's lives and we want to ensure that people know what is happening so that they can benefit.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Does my right hon. Friend agree that her visit to the glorious city of Lancaster only a couple of weeks ago was the epitome of joined-up government, because she met people who are bringing excellent education, health and economic development policies to bear on most socially excluded communities in the city, in line with excellent Government policies to reduce unemployment? All that is aiding the city enormously.

Marjorie Mowlam: It was an enjoyable visit to Lancaster, not least because it showed that when a community buys into the changes that have been proposed—I met people from the business community and the voluntary sector, local politicians and trade unionists to see how best the policies could be implemented—it has a real chance of succeeding.

Civil Service (Disabled People)

5. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): If she will make a statement on the progress being made in the achievement of civil service recruitment targets for people with disabilities. [112260]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): The Government are determined to tackle the under-representation of disabled people in the whole civil service. To that end, the Government have set a target to have people with disabilities comprising 3 per cent of the senior civil service by 2005.

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and I welcome the fact that a target of doubling the number of people with disabilities in the senior civil service has been set for the next five years. To my knowledge, there are no senior civil servants based in my constituency, but there are civil servants, and people with disabilities are conspicuous by their absence from their ranks. Does my hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to increase

the proportion of people with disabilities at all levels in the civil service? Can he give an indication of when the commitment to require Departments to set targets at all levels, which was set out in chapter 6, paragraph 25 of the White Paper, will be achieved?

Mr. Stringer: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to improve the representation of disabled people throughout the civil service. At present, all Departments and the lower echelons of the civil service are setting targets that will be achievable by those Departments, and those targets will be made public in the near future. To encourage a positive attitude to people with disabilities, the Government are supporting the two ticks symbol, which has been awarded to the Cabinet Office today.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that sufferers from multiple sclerosis are today staging an important rally in Parliament, backed by—among others—the all-party group on the subject, will the Minister take this opportunity to confirm that the victims of that appalling degenerative disease will invariably find Government Departments to be model employers?

Mr. Stringer: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I can confirm that there is no sense in the Government setting targets for disabled people within Departments without having the will and the money to adapt offices and machinery to enable disabled people to work there. That certainly applies to people who are suffering from multiple sclerosis.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Will my hon. Friend consult the Disability Rights Commission, whose presence we all welcome, for practical advice on issues such as hearing loops, Braille and physical access? Will he seek to ensure that Government Departments become a beacon for best practice for the whole of British industry and commerce, in both the private and public sectors?

Mr. Stringer: I agree with my right hon. Friend that the Government should be a model employer to set an example to the whole employment sector. There is often much good will towards people with disabilities, but employers do not always know how to make it possible for people with disabilities to enter the work force.

Although the Disability Rights Commission will not be up and running until 1 April, we shall certainly be taking advice about adaptations, as my right hon. Friend suggests.

Correspondence

6. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What progress is being made on reducing the time taken by Ministers to respond to hon. Members' letters. [112261]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): The Government are determined to improve the response time to letters from hon. Members. We are making steady progress to that end. Within the next month, a table will be published that compares the timing of departmental replies against the targets set for each Department.

Mr. Bruce: The Minister will know that every table on the subject published by the Government shows that things are going backwards, not forwards. I am sure that every hon. Member will recognise the example that I shall give. A Mr. Newsham of Weymouth wrote to me on 9 January 1999. I sent a two-page letter off to him on 11 January, and I also sent a copy to the Minister, which was acknowledged on 14 January. A delegation—

Madam Speaker: Order. That is enough of the example. The hon. Gentleman should now ask the Minister how long it took to reply to the letter. That is the bottom line.

Mr. Bruce: The target is 20 days for a reply, but in this case we are at 424 days, and counting. When will the Government do something about a reply?

Mr. Stringer: If the letter is as long as the question, it is probably still being read. The hon. Gentleman said that matters are going backwards. I think that he will be pleasantly surprised when he sees the tables to be published later this year. I think that he will be pleased at the progress being made.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am sure that the Minister will accept that hon. Members of all parties have similar horror stories, and I shall not quote another to him. However, does he accept that being encouraged to table parliamentary questions is not a satisfactory alternative when the delays in answers to letters are so long? Hon. Members are put in an invidious position. I have figures showing the number of written questions on a named date that are answered in time. Responses are getting distressingly late. Although only a third of Cabinet Office responses are late, the figure is two thirds for both the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry.

Does the Minister accept that, although some Departments have made some improvements, the general position is deteriorating?

Mr. Stringer: I do not accept that the general position is deteriorating. In fact, it is improving. However, I agree that the targets set by the Government are not being met at present. The Government are doing everything possible to improve response times.

Social Exclusion

7. **Mr. Neil Turner** (Wigan): What progress has been made in implementing the reports of the social exclusion unit. [112262]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): I can confirm that good progress is being made towards achieving the Government's targets on the four reports that have been published by the social exclusion unit. Those reports were "School Truancy and Exclusion", published in May 1998, "Rough Sleeping",

published in July 1998, "Teenage Pregnancy", published in June 1999, and "Bridging the Gap", published in July 1999.

A draft report for consultation, on the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, is due to be launched in early April.

Mr. Turner: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, and I am sure that we all look forward to the report coming out in April. However, does she accept that strategies by themselves are not enough, and that what is needed is action on the ground to deliver services? In particular, does she agree that, to deliver those strategies, we need the required investment, and the involvement with local communities of all levels of government?

Marjorie Mowlam: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. Change is effective only when people have ownership of it. That is why the new deal for communities is a key element in neighbourhood renewal. It will provide £800 million over the next three years to ensure that the pathfinder projects are in place. If communities buy into those projects, we will have a much better chance of achieving good success.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the social exclusion unit be turning its attention to the plight of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who has now been excluded from the Labour party, or to the plight of the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who is increasingly excluded from any possibility of getting Labour votes?

Marjorie Mowlam: Neither.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [112283] **Mrs. Helen Brinton** (Peterborough): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mrs. Brinton: Is the Prime Minister aware that one of the first 19 health service walk-in centres opens in my constituency on 10 April? Furthermore, will he take this opportunity to agree that such town and city health centre provision not only helps make health care more accessible but is a very good first step towards reducing health inequality?

The Prime Minister: National health walk-in centres are a very important innovation in making the health service more accessible to people. It is all part, of course, of the extra money that we are putting into the health service. We are going to build on the success this week of the 2,000 nurse recruitment campaign which was launched last week. It will become a permanent feature of the national health service. I can tell the House that, as at noon today, almost 15,000 calls had been taken by the national health service careers line from nurses who want to work in the national health service.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Will the Prime Minister give the latest figures for the fall in police numbers in London and the rise in street crime in London since he took office?

The Prime Minister: The strength of the Metropolitan police fell by more than 2,000 between 1993 and 1998. It is correct that there has been another slight fall between then and now, but I am pleased to say that the Metropolitan police force has been allocated additional funds from the crime fighting fund which will enable it to recruit some 1,100 new officers over the next three years.

Mr. Hague: The actual fall in the number of police officers in London is 792 since the right hon. Gentleman took office. Police numbers rose by 16,000 under the previous Government. Metropolitan police studies show street crime up by 50 per cent. It does not take a genius to work out the link between the two. Was not the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) right for once when he said:

> The real deterrent to crime is police on the streets, and we have less police on the streets today than the day Labour was elected.

And he knows, because he has had something stolen from him. Will the Prime Minister now give us the forecast change in the number of officers in the Metropolitan police force for the next three years?

The Prime Minister: I have just said it. As a result of the funds from the crime fighting fund, we can now recruit an extra 1,100 officers. As for the quotation from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), it is pretty obvious whom the Conservative party is supporting, and it is not its own candidate.

Mr. Hague: It is pretty obvious that the Prime Minister is not even able to give a factual answer to a factual question. He should have another look in his folder—this is not under F for falsehoods but under D for disasters.

The actual numbers were given by the Home Secretary in parliamentary answers last month. Some 2,800 officers will be joining the police force in London in the next three years and 3,900 will be leaving. That is the Home Secretary's own expectation. Burglary in London is up by 5 per cent., car crime is up by 9 per cent., street crime is up by 50 per cent. and ballot rigging is up by 100 per cent. Is not this appalling situation the direct responsibility of a Prime Minister who is, yet again, all mouth and no delivery?

The Prime Minister: First, let me correct the right hon. Gentleman on the numbers when he was a member of the Conservative Government: police numbers fell rather than rose, and crime in London doubled during the time of that Government. It is correct that without the additional funding we would not be able to recruit additional officers, but the right hon. Gentleman's party is opposed to that extra funding. As for crime and street crime, his party is opposed to the tough measures on drug offending that this party is introducing in the teeth of Conservatives'

opposition. If his party were to support the Bill that the House considered last night, we would have an extra £120 million to fight crime and recruit police officers, but he prefers to spend it on lawyers instead.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on his plans to meet farmers' leaders? When he does, will he give special attention to the unsubsidised pig and poultry sector? The sector's high-quality standards, such as those at Premier Poultry and many pig farms in my constituency, are being undermined by the strong pound and the cost of BSE precautions.

The Prime Minister: Of course the pig farming industry is in serious crisis, and there are a number of problems, not the least of which are BSE-related costs. Another problem is the additional cost of high animal welfare standards: for example, pig tethering. That was introduced in a Conservative private Member's Bill. It was a perfectly justifiable measure; but when we hear that the Leader of the Opposition is going to the National Farmers Union complaining about BSE costs when his lot gave us BSE, and complaining about pig tethering when he voted for it, we know where true hypocrisy lies.

I am meeting the farming industry. We are going to sit down and work out a short-term plan to get the industry through its immense short-term difficulties and a long-term plan so that we do not carry on simply giving out more subsidy without its being tied to a proper strategy for the future.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Is not the fair conclusion to draw from the events of the past few days that far from the Prime Minister being a control freak, he is in fact a control failure? The Leader of the Opposition asks him which of the candidates for London mayor he supports. Assuming that the Prime Minister is supporting the Labour candidate, to whom is he inclined to give his second preference vote?

The Prime Minister: As I am confident that we will be winning the campaign, we do not have to offer a second vote to anybody.

Mr. Kennedy: It is a sure sign that a Government are on the skids when they start to ignore the opinion polls. Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that both the Labour candidate and the independent candidate voted in the Division Lobby for the Government's plans for the tube, and that Steve Norris, the Conservative candidate, has expressed some sympathy with them? Now that we are on to the issues of the election, is it not fair for Londoners to conclude that if they want a bond issue and a continuing legitimate public stake in a modernised tube, the only candidate who has put that forward is the Liberal Democrat, Susan Kramer?

The Prime Minister: To be blunt, I do not think that the opinion polls are particularly in favour of anyone on either side of the House. On the public-private partnership, surely the best plan is to get the private sector to do the construction work and the public sector to run the trains and be responsible for safety. That is why the PPP is sensible, and I could not put it better than this:

> The Docklands Light Railway Extension, financed through a public-private partnership, was completed early with no cost overrun. That shows that PPP can work.

That was my candidate in the London elections.

The alternative is what Norris, the Conservative candidate, was in charge of during the four years he was Minister of Transport in London—the Jubilee line, which had an £1.5 billion overrun and was two years late. Only the Liberal Democrats could be silly enough now to be supporting it.

Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): I am sure that you, Madam Speaker, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister are aware that today is international women's day; I trust that all hon. Members will join me in celebrating the contribution of all women to our societies, communities and families. Will my right hon. Friend welcome today's target, published by the women's unit and Ministers for Women, of 50 per cent. representation of women in public life? Does he agree with the comment of the chairman of Unilever that any woman who has brought up any children is one of the most experienced project managers? Is he surprised, therefore, that the Opposition's document "Clear Blue Water" suggests scrapping the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Equal Opportunities Commission and all other fair pay provisions? Is that not utterly out of step with today's society?

The Prime Minister: What I heard of my hon. Friend's question, I agree with. She is absolutely right. One thing that has of course changed is that, whereas there were only 19 women in Parliament in 1979, today there are 121, of whom 101 are Labour. We recognise, as others do, that there is still a long way to go, and we intend to get there.

Q2. [112284] **Mr. Crispin Blunt** (Reigate): Why are the people of Reigate and Banstead and their elected councillors unfit to decide how many new houses should be built in their borough?

The Prime Minister: It is not that they are unfit to do that. We must respond, under normal procedure, to the plans that have been put forward—both the Serplan and the independent consultants'. The Deputy Prime Minister's statement was a very sensible way through, which allows us to increase brownfield building. It makes allowances for the fact that we are to have more housing in the south-east, but does so in a sensible way that allows us to match and monitor it as years progress.

It does no good for Conservative Members to think that, if they were in government, they would be coming up with a solution that entailed no new homes in the south-east. It would not be like that at all. We must balance the need for more homes with the need to protect our countryside, and I think that the Deputy Prime Minister has achieved that balance.

Mr. Phil Sawford (Kettering): Would my right hon. Friend consider a visit to Rothwell, in my constituency? Is he aware that, following 18 years of government by the Conservative party, it was possible for children in that

town to spend their entire school life in a mobile classroom? By the end of this year, however, owing to the policies of this Government, no children in that town will be taught in a mobile classroom.

The Prime Minister: More than 300,000 five, six and seven-year-olds are in classes of under 30, and as a result of the new deal money, thousands of schools have had the additional classrooms that they need. There are still, however, schools that require more work, and we hope to get there as soon as we possibly can.

Q3. [112285] **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): To return to health, is the Prime Minister aware that waiting lists in the south-west are now worse than on the day he was elected? Does he know that one cannot get an NHS dentist for love or money? Does he know that there are fully equipped wards, such as one in the Verrington hospital in my constituency, which have been closed since Christmas because they cannot get staff? Does he realise that people believe what they see and not what he tells them? Is it not time for a Budget that forgets the spin and is squarely aimed at putting the NHS back on its feet?

The Prime Minister: Let the hon. Gentleman not pretend that the Liberal Democrats could fund all the promises that they make on schools, hospitals, pensions, local government, industry and whatever comes into their minds from a 1p increase in taxation, because that is not true. Yes, there are hospitals that need more nurses and staff. That is why we have launched the recruitment campaign and why there are now 4,500 more nurses and midwives in the health service than when we took office. Latest figures show an 80 per cent. increase in those registering for training. Over the next few years, as those recruits come through, there will still be wards that need more nurses, but nurses are being trained, they will get there and the health service will be rebuilt.

Q4. [112287] **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): Although the threat of drowning has receded for the people of Mozambique, the dangers of starvation and economic instability certainly have not. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that this Government will do all in their power to alleviate those longer-term problems and urgently consider the cancellation of Mozambique's debt?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the Chancellor has given the commitment to 100 per cent. cancellation of the Mozambique debt. The lead that he has given on debt relief throughout the developing world is appreciated in that part of the world. In respect of Mozambique, we have acted more quickly and given more than probably any other country—not only £8 million in direct emergency aid, but more assistance. Both the United Nations emergency co-ordinator, Ross Mountain, and President Chissano of Mozambique, have paid tribute to this country's efforts. However, I should like to pay tribute to our service people and aid workers who have performed heroically in difficult and harrowing circumstances.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): When the Deputy Prime Minister told the *Financial Times* yesterday that he was not a fan of directly elected mayors, was he making a statement of Government policy?

The Prime Minister: I think that that is hardly news, but my right hon. Friend is perfectly entitled to his view. However, I believe that a directly elected mayor for London is the right course.

Mr. Hague: First, will the right hon. Gentleman remind the Deputy Prime Minister, who says that he is not a fan of the idea, that he is introducing the Bill bringing it in? *[Interruption.]* Well, at least he now knows that he is introducing that Bill. Secondly, before we set up more devolved institutions and positions, has the Prime Minister learned the lesson that it is totally pointless and ultimately self-defeating for the selections and elections to those positions to be rigged, manipulated and dictated from No. 10 Downing street?

The Prime Minister: We are the Government who have, in accordance with our manifesto commitment, given people the vote back in London. The right hon. Gentleman supported the party that took the vote away from them. As for procedures in the Labour party, I will be responsible for those, because I believe in being responsible for my party. It is completely pathetic that the right hon. Gentleman, as Leader of the Opposition—leader of the Conservative party—is driven, first, to support Lord Archer; then, when he cannot get Lord Archer, Mr. Norris; and, now that he cannot get Mr. Norris elected, Ken Livingstone. What a comment on his leadership of the Conservative party.

Mr. Hague: What a comment on the right hon. Gentleman's leadership that he has obviously learned nothing from what has happened. Only a Prime Minister of breathtaking arrogance could have learned nothing from what has happened. He imposed on Wales a First Secretary whom nobody wanted in the job, including the First Secretary himself. He has imposed a stooge candidate in London, then tried to deny free post to candidates so that he can impose the stooge candidate on everybody else. Now we hear claims that Lord Rodgers, the Liberal leader in the House of Lords, was offered more Liberal peers in return for a pledge of good behaviour. Are not the Government creating a rotten political culture of cronyism and rigging? Does not the responsibility for that rest with the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Oh, I see—having backed the independent candidate for London mayor, the right hon. Gentleman is now backing the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords. May I point out the figures? The previous Prime Minister gave the Liberal Democrats 13 peers in seven years. I have given them 24 in two and half years—what generosity.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): More, more.

The Prime Minister: I know they want more. The thing about the Liberal Democrats is that they always want more.

As for democracy, we have given the Scots a Parliament and the Welsh devolution; the Leader of the Opposition opposed that—[HON. MEMBERS: "We?"] Yes, we, the Labour Government, have given them democracy. We have given people back the vote in London that the Conservatives took away. Who are the democrats? The ones who scrapped the Greater London council and took away the vote, the ones who refused devolution in Scotland and Wales, the ones who never introduced change in the House of Lords—or the ones who have made our constitution fit for the 21st century?

Q5. [112288] **Ms Claire Ward** (Watford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that today is national no smoking day? It encourages people to quit smoking and is supported by many national newspapers and the BBC. Does he agree that the most important priority is to stop children starting to smoke, as more than 500 under-age boys and girls every day take their first puff? By the age of 20, more than half of them will be hooked. Does my right hon. Friend have a plan?

The Prime Minister: As someone who gave up smoking, I thoroughly applaud national no smoking day. Smoking causes some 46,000 cancer deaths a year, and more than 120,000 people a year in the UK die from smoking-related causes. Smoking costs the national health service £1.5 billion a year, which is the equivalent of 15 new hospitals. When we rebuild the health service, it is important that we also take the measures on prevention and public health care which allow us to put the resources into the health service where they are really needed.

Q6. [112289] **Mr. Stephen Day** (Cheadle): On 5 December 1999, the Prime Minister said that the north-south divide did not exist. Yesterday he denied that he had said that, and claimed that it did exist. That is par for the course for the Prime Minister. If he had spent more time in Sedgefield and less in Chequers and Islington, where he no doubt spends his time seeking ways to do over members of his party who have the courage to disagree with him, he might have come to that fairly obvious conclusion somewhat earlier.

The Prime Minister: The premise of the hon. Gentleman's question is wrong. When I issued the north-south report—*[Interruption.]* When was I last in Sedgefield? Last weekend. As for the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question, it is wrong. I did not say that the north-south divide did not exist. I said that the disparities within a region are as great as, if not greater than, the disparities between regions.

In respect of the region that the hon. Gentleman represents, what would a Government who cared about such matters do? They would introduce the new deal for the unemployed, because the region contains areas of high unemployment. What did the hon. Gentleman do? He opposed the new deal. Such a Government would introduce the working families—*[Interruption.]* No, the hon. Gentleman will have to listen now. Such a Government would introduce the working families tax credit for low income families, to make work pay. What did the hon. Gentleman do? He opposed the working families tax credit.

We introduced the development agency for the north-west that allowed us to bring in business investment. What did the hon. Gentleman do? He is committed to scrapping the north-west development agency. Finally, we introduced the minimum wage for low-paid workers and he opposed it.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On Monday night, some 5 million or 6 million of our fellow citizens watched a programme produced by John Pilger, showing horrendous scenes of what was happening in Iraq. Can we be happy to pursue a policy for nine years that has such an effect?

The Prime Minister: No, we cannot be happy to pursue such a policy at all. We are not happy to pursue it, but the way to get the sanctions lifted is for Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq to come into line with UN resolutions, and stop trying to develop weapons of mass destruction.

This Government have taken the lead in the United Nations in trying to find a better method of ensuring that food and medicine get through to the Iraqi people. The opportunity exists for Saddam Hussein to feed his people and to provide them with medicines. He has billions of oil dollars that he could use for that purpose, but he does not. He uses the money to prop up his regime, and spends it on weapons of mass destruction.

If my hon. Friend wants to help the people in Iraq, I urge him, as I have urged him often, to help put pressure on the Iraqi regime and Saddam Hussein to fulfil their humanitarian obligations. The way to end sanctions is for them to come into line with the United Nations resolutions. If they do that, no one will be more pleased than the Government.

Q7. [112290] **Sir Archie Hamilton** (Epsom and Ewell): Now that the Deputy Chief Whip has joined the ranks of Labour Members who send their children to selective schools, will the Government drop their ideological hostility to selection?

The Prime Minister: People are perfectly entitled to send their children to whatever school they wish. However, if they send their children to selective schools, the taxpayer should not subsidise them. The difference between us and the Conservative party is that the Conservative party would reintroduce the assisted places scheme. That would mean that, for the sake of a few children who are able to get into a private school, hundreds of thousands of kids in primary schools would be in larger classes. People are entitled to spend their money however they wish, but the state should spend its money on state schools.

Q8. [112291] **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): When every Member of Parliament has young constituents whose lives are blighted by drugs, will my right hon. Friend applaud the initiative taken in Scotland, and will he give a positive lead in Europe to fight the scourge that blights so many lives and knows no national boundaries?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend entirely and I welcome the drug enforcement agency in Scotland. It plays a major part in Scotland's fight against

drugs. As my hon. Friend knows, it is vital that the United Kingdom work together on the matter. When I speak to the Scottish Parliament tomorrow, I shall set out the ideas that we have been developing with Keith Hellawell, who is in charge of the Government's drugs programme, to take forward the war on drugs on an international level to deal with drug dealers and break the drug chain.

As the European Union enlarges, such co-operation will become increasingly important. Scotland needs to work with England in the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom needs to work with Europe and Europe needs to work with the rest of the world.

Q9. [112292] **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley** (South-West Surrey): In a prosperous country with a modern health service, it is unacceptable for people who have seen a consultant to wait more than a year for treatment. The Prime Minister knows that since he took over stewardship of the health service, the percentage of people who wait more than a year has doubled. My constituents were mesmerised by the Prime Minister speaking on the Frost programme and on "Newsnight", because one in 10 of them has to wait more than a year for treatment, yet in the Prime Minister's constituency, the figure is only one in 100. People who live in TS21 or 28 receive over £115 more for their health care than people who live in GU7 or 8—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady must put her question.

Mrs. Bottomley: Does such a system put an end to the lottery of care or tackle inequalities?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady certainly gets the award for brass neck, given her stewardship of the health service. Yes, we want to reduce waiting lists. Waiting lists and waiting times have been reduced, but they have much further to fall. The only way to reduce them and keep them down is through additional investment in the national health service.

Mrs. Bottomley *indicated dissent.*

The Prime Minister: She may shake her head, but it is true. We need more resources, and change and modernisation in the health service. The Labour party is committed to that; the Conservative party is committed to cancelling it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not unfortunate that the person who made the programme that has been mentioned and which was broadcast on Monday night minimised the responsibility of the criminal dictator of Iraq for the suffering of the people there? In acknowledging the necessity for sanctions, is it not important to try to find ways in which to assist the children who urgently need medicine, while bearing it in mind that the criminal dictator has never shown the slightest interest in the people who live in that country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If Saddam Hussein co-operated with United Nations resolutions, money could go into Iraq to feed his country; the sanctions would be lifted and there would be no difficulty. However, he refuses to co-operate with the inspectors of weapons of mass destruction or to get money to his people through the oil for food regime. It is a tragedy; what is happening in Iraq to children and their families is terrible, but the answer is to ensure that Saddam Hussein comes back in line with international law. If he does not, the money will go to him, not to families in Iraq. It will be spent on weapons of mass destruction and we will be back where we were a few years ago.

Instead of producing a programme that presented only one point of view, the makers of Monday night's programme should understand that the international community is desperate to get help to families in Iraq, but that we cannot do it at the expense of allowing Saddam Hussein to develop weapons of mass destruction.

Q10. [112293] **Mr. James Paice** (South-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Prime Minister recall coming to Cambridge during the election campaign and promising to reform the area cost adjustment, bearing in mind the fact that next year Cambridgeshire will spend £4.7 million above its education standard spending assessment and £8.4 million above its social services SSA to maintain current expenditure? It is absolutely clear that there will be no change in the formula this year, so what is his excuse for that broken promise?

The Prime Minister: The area cost adjustment was the system that Conservative Members were perfectly happy to support for 18 years, but now we are getting extra money into social services, extra money into education and extra money into local authorities and health. I remind the hon. Gentleman, as I remind every Conservative Member present, that they oppose that additional investment and the extra spending—they call it reckless and irresponsible. With typical Tory opportunism, they call for tax cuts and more spending at the same time. There is only one way that would lead—to boom and bust and cuts in services.

Protection of Human Genetic Sequence

3.31 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to give protection to the human genetic sequence; to prevent the patenting of human genes; and for connected purposes.

There is a great deal of debate about science, including genetics, in the media at present, which makes the Bill somewhat topical. That topicality has been reinforced by the submissions that I have received since proposing to introduce it. I thank all those who have supplied me with background information to prepare for the debate, including the BioIndustry Association, which made its arguments on behalf of the industry. Although it may disagree with some of the points that I want to make, I appreciate it putting its case to me.

In 1996, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology produced a useful report entitled "Patents, Research and Technology", which kept ahead of the debate at that time—I recommend it to hon. Members—and the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) has tabled the very good early-day motion 298 on the subject. I agree with its sentiments entirely. However, some of the media debate can be disturbing in respect of the assumptions being made, especially about the public understanding of public policy issues in science and genetics in particular.

It is clear that the public contribution to the debate often lags behind the discussions in scientific and sometimes even political circles. That leaves many members of the public with the real worry that deals have already been done, which in turn leads to wider opposition and the polarisation of views. That was very clear in the debate about genetically modified organisms. My concern is that the gene patenting debate may represent a real risk of significant future public anger if we do not have a more comprehensive discussion now. That is part of my motivation for introducing the Bill to the House today.

Some of those who talk about science policy seem to think that only those with the relevant qualifications can understand and that ordinary people should be left out of the debate. Such a position is offensive in a democracy, as we shall all have to live with the results of decisions taken in science public policy. It also seriously underestimates most people's interest in, and understanding of, those issues. That attitude is more likely to generate an anti-science mood as people respond negatively to what they perceive to be scientific and technological arrogance.

The citizens of this country—men, women and children—are perfectly able to participate in the debate and will do so. We need to look for ways to improve public participation and to involve them better, rather than seek to restrict decisions to committees of experts. Some coverage does not help by referring to absurd examples that owe more to science fiction than science fact. For example, the debate about genetic patenting has been expressed in terms of private companies owning the biological material that is inside all of us so that, somehow, we would have to pay royalties to produce new cells containing those genes. That is no more the real issue than that the human cloning debate should be about brainless automata being created to donate their organs to the rest of us, although, when one listens to the questions in Prime Minister's Question Time, one wonders whether the Government already have the job of creating automata in hand.

The heart of the debate is about how to create the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people from the incredible potential that is now being realised by our ability to decode the human genetic sequence. Patent law is difficult to grasp, and the uncertainties will keep lawyers happy and well fed for many years to come. It is based on certain key principles that we established through legislation and through our international agreements, especially at European Union level, but increasingly at international level.

The most relevant legislation is the 1998 EU directive on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions, article 5 of which states:

The human body, at the various stages of its formation and development, and the simple discovery of one of its elements, including the sequence or partial sequence of a gene, cannot constitute patentable inventions.

It goes on to say:

An element isolated from the human body or otherwise produced by means of a technical process, including the sequence or partial sequence of a gene, may constitute a patentable invention, even if the structure of that element is identical to that of a natural element.

Hence the work created for lawyers in this area. The directive leaves major room for debate about what should constitute a patentable invention. There is some uncertainty about whether sequences can be patented, or only their specific applications.

The view of Myriad Genetics is that it can patent the genes, which is why it has attempted to secure patents on the breast cancer susceptibility genes BRCA and BRCA2. That has caused much of the current debate. Other companies are similarly seeking exclusive rights on particular genes through the EU patenting process. Their argument is that the only way to keep research going is by generating income from the results. I would argue that the rewards can instead come from the proper patenting of specific applications of the technology without granting patents on the genes themselves.

The analogy of a mousetrap patent has been used. It is better for a company to secure a patent on a mousetrap design than on the process of killing a mouse. However, I would argue that the patenting of human genes is equivalent to securing a patent on dead mice, rather than on a mousetrap. If that patent were secured, the dead mouse patent holder could seek royalties from anyone else who invents other methods for killing mice. It is that exclusivity over the material rather than the applications that is the major source of concern.

There will be some serious implications if we allow such an environment to develop. What will the costs be to the health service if the costs for genetic testing have to include royalties to the holder of the patent for that gene? What will be the effects on public research if the incentive to develop novel applications is tempered by the knowledge that those applications cannot go to market or be used for the public good in the public domain without negotiating with, and making payment to, the gene patent holder?

There are real ethical considerations. Although I do not subscribe to the notion that this will lead to the ownership of bits of our cells, there are nevertheless genuine concerns about where the commercial exploitability of such material should begin and end.

In September last year, the Government sent out signals that they were looking to defend the public interest on this issue. It was reported that the Prime Minister was holding discussions with United States President Bill Clinton. When I recently asked the Prime Minister a question in the House, I was a little surprised to hear him say that no negotiations were taking place. I find it difficult to square that response with the report in *The Guardian* of 20th September 1999 entitled "Blair and Clinton push to stop gene patents". The report states:

> Tony Blair and Bill Clinton are negotiating an Anglo-American agreement to protect the 100,000 genes that control the human body. . . . The extraordinary deal—initiated by Mr. Blair—aims to prevent entrepreneurs profiting from gene patents and to ensure that the benefits of research are freely available.

Reports of discussions have been released under US freedom of information legislation, but the Government have gone strangely quiet since then.

There is an urgent need for a debate about our approach to the use of human genetic information. This urgency is reinforced by Tuesday's report in *The Guardian*, headed "Protocol on gene research is at risk as firm demands exclusive rights". Dr. John Sulston, the well-respected director of the Sanger Centre—one of the leading research institutes in the world and a proud British institution—has said of the US company Celera:

> The emerging truth is absolutely extraordinary. They really intend to establish a complete monopoly . . . on the human genome for . . . at least five years."

Dr. Sulston says:

> People ought to know about it.

I think that people are becoming aware of it, and that that awareness is growing daily. I believe that the Government can no longer refrain from making their view clear, and that they should, on an urgent basis, make progress with the negotiations begun so admirably in, I believe, September 1999—although that is now denied by the Prime Minister. I urge the House to demonstrate that it, too, takes the issue seriously by supporting the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Richard Allan, Dr. Ian Gibson, Mr. David Heath, Dr. Brian Iddon, Jackie Ballard, Mr. Norman Baker and Dr. Jenny Tonge.

PROTECTION OF HUMAN GENETIC SEQUENCE

Mr. Richard Allan accordingly presented a Bill to give protection to the human genetic sequence; to prevent the patenting of human genes; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 24th March, and to be printed [Bill 84].

Opposition Day

[7TH ALLOTTED DAY]

The National Health Service

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.41 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I beg to move,

> That this House deplores HM Government's clinical and financial mismanagement of the NHS; condemns the distortion of clinical priorities resulting from the Prime Minister's refusal to abandon the Government's flawed waiting list initiative, which is described by the medical profession as anathema to them and which has resulted in some of the sickest patients waiting longer than necessary for treatment; notes the financial chaos in Trusts and Health Authorities as a result of ministerial incompetence; and deprecates the misleading of the public about funding as a result of the Treasury's culture of repeatedly re-announcing financial decisions, and the practice of using the NHS as a means of providing publicity and photo opportunities for Ministers, putting political priorities before the morale of dedicated and hard-working NHS staff and to the detriment of patient care.

When the Government came to office nearly three years ago, their message was that there was nothing essentially wrong with the model of the national health service, but that the Conservatives in government had not wanted it to work properly, and that therefore it had not worked properly. The message was "Vote Labour and save the NHS", and a great deal of the Prime Minister's personal prestige was invested in that pledge. Huge expectations were raised about what the Government would be able to do, and on what time scale they would be able to do it. Today, we shall ask where those expectations are now and what has become of the NHS under Labour management.

Most countries are grappling with the health care debate, and our debates here resonate throughout Europe and the rest of the western world. Most western countries generally accept some form of mixed health provision, and engage in relatively mature debate. Our Prime Minister says that he has no ideological problem with the private sector, but the Secretary of State has. We have financial mismanagement, with repeated announcements of funding to secure headlines for Ministers. We have, at the centre of the Government's plans, a waiting list initiative that is almost universally condemned by the medical profession, which considers that it distorts clinical priorities. We have a system of management and a culture that are corroding the system from within, eating away at morale in the NHS and destroying the considerable good will, which, it must be admitted, the Government enjoyed when they came to office.

We intend today to examine the questions of finance and the waiting list initiative in detail, but first I want to deal briefly with the Government's style of management and the organisational structures. The last Government abolished a tier of NHS management to give more autonomy to trusts. We now have, roughly, an 80:1 management ratio, with 80 trust chairmen reporting to one regional authority. This Government, however, have insisted on a highly centralised style of management, involving a flood of policies, targets and directives that are entirely beyond the capacity of trusts. The result is poor communication, with a devolved structure of management but centralised control of management from Whitehall.

[Dr. Liam Fox]

We are seeing a non-stop series of knee-jerk reactions. It seems that, in the case of the present Government, the best way in which to get anything done—the best way in which to secure any new initiative—is to embarrass the Prime Minister, either in public or, especially, on television. The Prime Minister's embarrassment fund seems to be a bottomless pit: it is necessary only to ask him a difficult question on "Newsnight" and throw him a few embarrassing statistics, and he will have the Secretary of State running off to the next Department on Monday morning with a new initiative, pledging money—probably the same money that has been pledged before, but money none the less. We therefore have a fragmented finance process with arcane bidding mechanisms, in which no one really knows what is going on. The losers are the patients. Morale among staff is reduced. I hope that the Secretary of State will deal with the problem of morale among general practitioners.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): My hon. Friend mentions problems of morale in the NHS. Is he aware that the head of staff recruitment at Victoria hospital in Lichfield has told me that it is virtually impossible to recruit nurses to the hospital as, for the first time, its future and its services are under threat? Does he agree that that is appalling? For 18 years, the future of the Victoria and Hammerwich hospitals was assured. Now, both hospitals and their services are under threat.

Dr. Fox: I am more than happy to take my hon. Friend's word about the problem of recruiting nurses. The more general problem is retaining them once they have been recruited. We have been over the factors involved in the House: pay; conditions; lack of professional esteem from other colleagues, and sometimes from the public; and shift patterns in the NHS, which do not entice many who would like to stay in nursing. I am sure that my hon. Friend is more than capable of making sufficient political capital out of the difficulties in his area.

GPs throughout the country have complained about their loss of status, the steady erosion of their position in the medical profession and, in particular, the loss of their role of gate-keeper, which many were developing very well, especially towards the end of the previous Government's term of office.

GPs feel, for example, that there is a complete lack of co-ordination between NHS Direct and the rest of the primary care system. The many problems with NHS Direct are increasingly showing up. It is expensive, and consultants have complained that it is stripping nursing staff, especially from accident and emergency departments. We are at the ridiculous stage where nurses who are part of NHS Direct are pretending to be answerphones and being caught out only because they happen to cough. That is indicative of the ridiculous system that the Secretary of State is forcing through at pace. However, the morale problem among GPs will inevitably result in reduced patient care if the Government do not address it. Will the Minister mention that in particular when he replies?

Let us look at finance. We have two questions to ask: what is really happening to finance in the NHS and how is it affecting health care? The NHS Confederation says that 2000–01 is likely to be one of the toughest years on record. There are several reasons for that. The first is the front-loading of the comprehensive spending review. The rise in NHS spending is 4.7 per cent. in real terms in 1999–2000, falling to 4.5 per cent. this year and to 3.9 per cent. next year. However, we then have the unfunded pay awards. Although those are entirely laudable and I am sure that no one would object to any NHS staff receiving higher remuneration, as the average trust pay bill is rising by about 4.2 per cent. this year—not the 3.5 per cent. that the Government predicted—and as funding is likely to go down, as predicted, over the next three years in real terms, the recurring cost of the awards can be met only by a reduction in patient care. That is not a political judgment, but simple arithmetic. The Government will have to tell health authorities and trusts how to deal with that; otherwise, there will be a reduction in patient services.

Health authorities and trusts are being asked to deal with additional financial burdens. The European Union working-time directive is one. Holiday pay, for example, will cost more. Nurses will have to be paid the average rather than basic pay for nursing leave. Again, no one would begrudge nursing staff that, but it will be an extra financial burden on health authorities. Prescribing budgets in primary care will rise, with the drugs budget perhaps up by 11 per cent. this year.

Structural deficits are carried over from year to year. They are increasing and make the first claim on funds that are available in April. For example, I shall randomly pick hon. Members and look at the deficits that their health authorities face. It is predicted that the deficit of the health authority that serves the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), will be £8.5 million. The health authority in the constituency of the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), has a deficit of more than £1 million. The deficit for the health authority in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is predicted to be more than £5.5 million.

Those Ministers will be pleased to know that—by complete coincidence—the one member of their team whose health authority is not facing a deficit is that of the Secretary of State. Although I am sure that hon. Members will agree that the location of health authorities among constituencies is entirely coincidental, not all hon. Members—not even all health Ministers—have been able to obtain such privileged funding for our own health authorities.

What does the funding problem entail for a typical trust? Ministers say that they have been extremely generous in providing a 6.7 per cent. funding increase, which includes the extra allocation made at the end of last year, but basic inflation has been running at 2.6 per cent. If we add to the inflation figure the effects of superannuation, the working-time directive, reduced hours for junior doctors and capital charges excess, the 2.6 per cent. figure increases to about 5.78 per cent. If we add to that the costs of clinical governance and increases in drug costs, the figure increases by another 0.5 per cent. If we add to it the costs of dealing with the maintenance backlog, winter and ensuring a nursing skill mix, the figure increases by about another 1.8 per cent. Finally, if we add the 3 per cent. deficit, it becomes clear that, before we treat another patient or

increase any type of patient care, there is 10.5 per cent. in extra costs. However, only 6.7 per cent. extra has been provided. That is not generous.

People will be wondering why the extra £21 billion that the Chancellor announced for NHS spending is not being spent on patient care. They will be wondering where all that money has gone. I am grateful to Peter Kellner for his very simple analysis of the matter. After inflation, the £21 billion—of which England is receiving £17.6 billion—yields a real increase, over three years, of £10.9 billion. We must then subtract from that figure the costs of unfunded wages, more elderly patients and the drug budget—in short, the costs of medical inflation—which yields an increase of only £5 billion over three years.

If we also take into account the deficits, we can appreciate why Lord Winston came to the view that the national health service was being starved of funds. Health authorities are beginning the year with negative funding.

Ministers try to pretend that they have provided much more money to the NHS than they have, but I caution them about that. In future, the public will not believe them when they promise—like the boy who cried wolf—more money for the NHS.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I have written to the chairman of Worcestershire health authority to raise precisely the point that my hon. Friend is making. Although she could not give me a substantive reply, when I asked her about all the costs that my hon. Friend has mentioned so far in his speech, she could not assure me that there would be one extra penny for improved patient care for anyone in Worcestershire. The situation is shameful. I am awaiting a further reply from the chairman.

Dr. Fox: The shame is not that the money is not available—although all hon. Members are worried about the lack of expansion in patient care—but that Ministers pretend that more money is being made available than they are providing. People find unacceptable the essential dishonesty of the process. My hon. Friend has described a part of the pattern of constant re-announcements and the distortion of information that is at the heart of the culture of the Government.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North) *rose—*

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): A moment ago, the hon. Gentleman said that he thought that 6.7 per cent. was not generous. What sum would he consider to be generous, and what would Conservative Members do, if they were in power, to provide the increased funding for which he seems to be calling?

Dr. Fox: I did not say that the settlement was not generous, but that it was insufficient. I said that, given the added pressures that the Government have introduced—including the working time directive and all the other costs that I mentioned—extra pressure is being placed on the NHS budget. The Government are being dishonest with us. Although they say that they are providing a real increase, we all know that it is not a real increase. Across the country, people are asking why they are not seeing that extra money.

As I said, the Government came to power by raising expectations to a level that they themselves knew they could never fulfil. That promise of improving the situation far beyond what they knew they could accomplish has diminished the standing of politics in society and resulted in, for example, lower turnouts at elections.

Helen Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: I may give way in a moment.

There has been a pattern of distortion and reannouncements. For example, this week, the Secretary of State has talked about an increase in the number of cardiologists. On "On the Record", John Humphrys said:

> The point is they are there, they're waiting, they're registrars, senior registrars or whatever. Professor Alberti—

the Government's adviser—

> himself the source on these matters says they are there, but there is not the money to create the consultancy posts.

The Secretary of State replied

> But that isn't true . . . That simply isn't true.

He has been taking lessons from the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's Question Time. When confronted with a fact that they do not like, they simply deny that it exists.

Yesterday, I received a letter from a cardiologist who wrote as a result of comments that the Secretary of State made on the BBC. The cardiologist wrote:

> He claimed that an expansion of consultant cardiologists could not take place immediately because it would take time to train such specialists. He stuck to this view despite the comments of Professor George Alberti to the contrary.
>
> As a trained cardiologist looking for a consultant position, I take great issue with these comments because they are incorrect. There is in fact a surfeit of trained cardiologists in this country compared to consultant posts arising and projected to arise. It is estimated that there are about 50 trained cardiologists currently seeking consultant posts. I am one of three fully trained cardiologists . . . who face unemployment in the next few months following termination of our training posts under the new Calman scheme . . . On the 21st January, I met with my local MP—

A Labour MP—

> . . . to discuss the situation. I provided her with the above information, which she immediately relayed to Alan Milburn's department for comments. One would assume therefore that he was aware of the situation when he made his comments on the Today programme.

I do not know whether he was aware of that information or whether it was passed to him, but, as Secretary of State, I would expect him to know about it.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The hon. Gentleman mentioned Professor George Alberti. I wonder whether he has seen the statement issued, I think, today by the Royal College of Physicians. It says that

> the College does not expect there to be any fully-trained unemployed cardiologists by the end of 2000 and indeed there are several unfilled posts at present.

Dr. Fox: Time will tell what will come to pass. I take the Secretary of State's comment to be a pledge that all those who are trained in cardiology will be found consultant posts by the end of the year. If any trained cardiologists have not been given new consultant posts created by the end of the year, we will know that what he has just said are simply words to get him through the debate and not a serious matter of policy.

[Dr. Fox]

The Secretary of State told us to judge him on his record. In October 1999, he said that a £50 million boost to cardiac surgery was there to increase the number of operations by 10 per cent. over the next two years. However, of course, that was not new money as he was forced to admit later. He said that it was part of the extra £21 billion that the Government were putting into the NHS. It seems that the words "new" and "extra" in the Department of Health mean the same as the Home Office's use of the word "extra" in relation to policemen.

When the Secretary of State spoke about consultants, he said that there would be an increase in the number of heart specialists by more than 400 in the next six years. However, Dr. Peter Hawker of the British Medical Association's consultants committee said:

> The 400 additional heart specialists announced today are already in the NHS as specialist registrars on the training ladder.

The Secretary of State is trying to create numbers that do not exist. That can lead only to the dashing of the expectations of those who work in the medical profession and the patients who would be treated by them.

The Government's greatest trick is to reannounce. When one makes one announcement, one might as well make it many times. Let me give the House an example. On 29 September 1998, the Government announced—it was a welcome announcement—£30 million to modernise 50 accident and emergency units. On 28 October, they announced that there would be £30 million extra for A and E and, on 17 November, that there would be £30 million extra to fund A and E. On 16 February in the following year, on 15 March, 15 April, 7 May and 28 May, they announced each time that an extra £30 million was being made available for accident and emergency units.

Anyone outside the House might believe that if one announces seven times that £30 million extra will be spent on A and E in the NHS, that means that one is spending more than £200 million. However, in fact, only £30 million will be provided. That is the elastic arithmetic of the Government and a total inversion of the truth.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Is my hon. Friend aware that, on 21 July, the Prime Minister said:

> We are renovating every accident and emergency department in the country?—[*Official Report*, 21 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 1188.]

In reality, my constituents have found that the accident and emergency department serving them in south Shropshire is being scaled down.

Dr. Fox: If I may, just for once, be fair to the Prime Minister, I think that he said that every accident and emergency department that needs it will be upgraded. What beats me is where we can find the criteria by which "needs it" will be judged. Throughout Britain, many departments that I would regard as needing improvement do not seem to be eligible for the magical £30 million that the Government are bringing forward. It would be entirely justifiable if my hon. Friend were to table parliamentary questions to discover those criteria. I wish him good luck, because we have not been able to discover them.

Helen Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: I shall give way to the hon. Lady in a moment because she has already tried to intervene twice.

What we see in terms of waiting lists is probably the greatest deception of all. Again, in "On the Record" this week, the Secretary of State said that, as everyone knows, waiting lists had peaked but were coming down, yet last month his Department announced a 36,000 rise, and the waiting list for the waiting list has more than doubled since Labour took office. Only the Government, with their Alice in Wonderland interpretation of data, could regard such figures as going down.

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman talks about spending plans and the information given to the public, but who should the public believe—the hon. Gentleman when he says that Government spending plans are insufficient, or the former shadow Chancellor who said that they were reckless?

Dr. Fox: The lap dogs are all out today. I should have expected that, by now, the Labour Whips would have done a little work and got some new interventions.

The amount of money that has been made available, although described as "generous", is nothing of the sort. In fact, the money announced by the Government is not the amount that has been given to health authorities. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Government have perpetrated a con trick on the health authorities and the trusts, and on patients in Britain.

Miss Kirkbride: I share the accident and emergency department referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill). The Government talk about changes and improvements to such departments, but at Kidderminster general hospital and the Alexandra hospital in Redditch, those departments are being downgraded to minor injuries units, which is why money is being spent on them.

Dr. Fox: That is an example of something else that the Government do continually: regrade things and give them a different title so that we are supposed not to notice that we are being given an inferior level of service. They must think that the public are as gullible as their own Back Benchers if they think they will get away with that for any length of time.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: No, I have just given way three times.

I come to clinical priorities. This is probably the most serious part of today's debate. The Government were warned at the outset by the Conservative party and, to be fair, the Liberal Democrat—the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey)—and the medical profession, that its waiting list initiative was dangerous. Last week, Dr. Peter Skolar described it as complete anathema to the medical profession. Increasingly, that is how it is. It is dangerous because, with its obsession with numbers, it treats all patients as having equal clinical weighting, which is unfair. It is a manipulation of clinical priorities because, by penalising health authorities for not bringing numbers down quickly enough, health authorities are being encouraged, within any one given budget, to treat more minor conditions to satisfy the political masters, rather than treat them according to clinical priority. That is an unethical, unfair and immoral way in which to run a health care system.

Dr. Peter Wilde confronted the Prime Minister last week on "Newsnight" and said that, as a cardiologist in Bristol, he believed that patients had died unnecessarily waiting for cardiac surgery. The scandal lies in the fact not simply that patients were waiting too long, but that the health authorities were still treating minor conditions while those patients were waiting for more serious surgery. That distortion of a simple clinical priority is the ethical flaw in the Government's policy.

There is still time for the Government to abandon that policy. I have no intention of raising individual cases of patients who have suffered, but surely we can all see that it cannot be right, in any medical system with finite funding, to ration on the basis of getting the numbers down quickly rather than treating the appropriate patients and ensuring that the sickest are treated first.

Surgeons throughout the country tell us that they are under pressure from their managers to get the numbers down quickly to avoid being penalised financially by the Government. We most object to the culture that is driving the process. There is a corrosive—and, I believe, disreputable and dishonest—code driving not only the policy but its presentation. That is partly because the Government have no coherent philosophy. The Secretary of State told managers when he was a junior Minister that he would come down like a ton of bricks on anyone who dealt with the private sector, but the Prime Minister said on "Newsnight" that he had no ideological problem with the private sector.

There was no adequate consultation to avert the winter crisis. From April, employers who dare to give private sector cover to their employees as a benefit will be subject to a new tax. Hon. Members may want to know that yesterday the Fees Office said:

> I am writing to confirm that there will be a National Insurance liability on Health Care payments . . .
>
> All such payments should go through the payroll and will incur Employer's NI at a rate of 12.2 per cent.

Any Members of Parliament who dare to give their secretaries or researchers health perks will be taxed by a Government who do not have a problem with the private sector.

It goes to the root of the Government's culture that they say one thing and do another. They would say black was white if they thought they had to. They are so duplicitous that they would not ask for water if they were thirsty. What is more, they can never be wrong. The Secretary of State said last week that Professor Alberti—his own adviser—Stephen Thornton of the NHS Confederation, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Rabbi Julia Neuberger of the King's Fund were all wrong. On "Newsnight", the Prime Minister said that the managers, the doctors and the public were wrong, and moreover that the media were to blame.

The Government have no core values and exist only to be in office. We have the sad spectacle of Back Benchers, rather than holding the Executive to account, worshipping at the altar of the Prime Minister's ego. If one statement said it all, it was when the Prime Minister was asked whether the distortion of clinical priorities by the waiting list initiative should be changed. He said:

> If we abandoned waiting lists, you guys—

the press—

> would come down on us first and then patients would come down on us.

That means that Ministers' reputations come first and patient care comes second.

We have a health care system run by politicians for politicians, not by doctors for their patients. On health care, the public expected much from the Government, but have been bitterly disappointed. The Government have replaced ethics with spin, hope with cynicism and dedication with dismay. The great Labour lie has turned into the great Labour betrayal.

4.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

> "welcomes the Government's modernisation programme for the NHS and the reduction in waiting lists and times that are being achieved through the dedication and hard work of NHS staff; notes the progress being made on recruiting more doctors and more nurses, building more hospitals, treating more patients and modernising more services; applauds the Government's decision to make tackling cancer, coronary heart disease and mental illness a priority; believes that financial provision for the NHS would be reduced as a consequence of the Conservatives' Tax Guarantee and that clinical need would be abandoned in favour of ability to pay under the Conservatives' health plans."

I apologise at the outset for the fact that I will not be here for the winding-up speeches, as I have a prior speaking engagement.

The Opposition have called for a debate on financial provision and clinical distortion in the NHS. I am pleased to tell the House that financial provision for the NHS has never been greater. The NHS is now benefiting from the largest cash injection it has ever seen. I am also pleased to tell the House that the assault on clinical distortion caused by the postcode lottery of care has never been greater either: the failed, disastrous, divisive internal market in the NHS has been consigned to the dustbin of history, where it belongs.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: Yes. I believe that the hon. Gentleman was a supporter of the internal market.

Mr. Burns: If everything is so wonderful for funding in the national health service, why is it that, this financial year, the Mid Essex hospital trust will have the largest deficit it has had in its history, and three wards, containing 84 beds, will be closed?

Mr. Milburn: I do not know about that particular case, but the hon. Gentleman was a Minister at the Department of Health in 1996–97 when the NHS ran up a combined deficit of £459 million. He shares at least some of the responsibility for that, as I am sure he accepts. By the beginning of this financial year, that deficit had come down to £18 million, so we will not take any lectures from the hon. Gentleman or the Conservative party on deficits in the NHS.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): If the Secretary of State could not answer the previous question, perhaps he can answer mine. In November last year, his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), opened a brand new breast

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

cancer unit at the Glenfield hospital in Leicester. That unit was opened thanks to private subscriptions and was not funded by NHS money. It will now be closed. Why?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. and learned Gentleman is talking about the Leicestershire area and he will be aware that consultation is still taking place about some of the proposals. There are always difficult decisions to make about health care funding and services, and that is as true for this Government as it was for the previous Government. The consultation continues and I urge the hon. and learned Gentleman to take part in it.

The Conservatives' motion condemns financial mismanagement when the Conservatives are past masters of it. I remind the hon. Member for Woodspring (Mr. Fox), who was rattling on about financial mismanagement, that it was his Government who managed to spend a small fortune on financial mismanagement in the NHS, including more red tape and bureaucracy than it has had in its history. This Government are taking £1 billion out of red tape to put directly into front-line patient services. We are doing that because it is the patients' priority, the staff's priority and our priority. Needless to say, the hon. Gentleman and his party oppose it.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The Secretary of State referred a couple of moments ago to the ending of what he called the postcode lottery. Can he explain to me, so that I can explain to those of my constituents suffering from multiple sclerosis—some of whom are now in Westminster Hall—why one of my constituents from Hampshire is unable to obtain beta interferon and will have to wait 18 months, while another person from Surrey is able to obtain it immediately and tells me that it is down to the postcode lottery? Rather than going back to the past, will the Secretary of State recognise that people want to know what the Government whom they elected are going to do to improve their health care instead of making it worse?

Mr. Milburn: I shall tell the hon. Gentleman precisely what we will do about it. Every hon. Member is aware of the situation in relation to beta interferon, and the first thing to say is that nobody should hold out beta interferon or any such product as a cure for MS. It is not a cure, because there is no such cure. However, this Government recognise that there is a lottery of care—unlike the previous Government who denied it—and, what is more, we are taking action to tackle it. That is why the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is considering beta interferon. I want to see a fair system of care that does not depend on where someone lives, or who their GP happens to be. Care should be determined according to clinical need. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the current guidance on beta interferon, which will be superseded once NICE has reported, is guidance that the Tory Government issued in 1995.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): My constituent Stephanie Millward will be keen to hear when NICE is to report. If the Secretary of State is happy about the treatment of MS, will he explain why the Government spend a laughable £640,000 a year on research into the causes of MS? That is a ridiculous sum, so will the Secretary of State commit himself to increasing it?

Mr. Milburn: There are always many demands on the NHS research and development budget—including for research into prostate cancer. We try to ensure that the R and D programme is best geared to meet patients' interests. We will, of course, look at the resources devoted to MS research. With regard to beta interferon, I can tell the House that we expect NICE to report in late summer or early autumn. We will try to make that report available to the national health service as quickly as possible, as we all have a shared interest in getting the matter right. I am afraid that, in the past, the problem has been swept under the carpet.

The Conservative motion also complains about

> using the NHS as a means of providing publicity and photo opportunities . . .

The hon. Member for Woodspring has been caught short once already, so he ought to check his facts more carefully, especially with regard to photo opportunities. For some time, the BBC's "Panorama" programme has been contacting NHS hospitals up and down the land asking if filming could be conducted on their premises. At least 23 hospitals have been contacted, including Basildon hospital, Kettering general hospital, the Princess Royal hospital in Telford, the Royal Shrewsbury hospital, and Kidderminster general hospital. One might think that there is nothing unusual in that, but the filming is not for a factual programme. It is for a fictional programme—the story of one man's experience as a television extra.

I have a copy of the fax from the BBC about the programme, dated 20 January this year. Given the concern expressed in the motion about photo opportunities and the misuse of the national health service, I am sure that the House will be interested to know the proposed star of the extravaganza. The fax states:

> William Hague has agreed to be filmed in a variety of situations.

There is more to the story than that. According to the fax, the Leader of the Opposition is to

> take on a role in the hospital for half a day; a porter's job or something similar.

I suppose that we should at least be grateful that he is not going to masquerade as a brain surgeon. So much for the Opposition's complaint about photo opportunities: the hon. Member for Woodspring should check his facts before he comes before the House.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: In a moment, as I have given way six times already.

Mr. McLoughlin: Will the Secretary of State give way on this point?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman, who is a Whip, should sit down. I might give way to him later—if he learns to behave himself.

I shall deal with each of the claims in the Opposition motion, and I shall start with the question of financial provision for the national health service—a subject that we are more than happy to debate.

Over the period of the comprehensive spending review—that is, this year, next year and the year after—the NHS is experiencing average real-terms growth of about 5 per cent. In the present financial year, real-terms growth is actually around 6 per cent. Health authorities are getting cash increases that average 6.8 per cent.

Let me put that in context. The average real-terms growth for the NHS over the full 18 years of the Conservative Government was around just 3 per cent—half the growth in this financial year. During the previous Conservative Government's final five years in office, they did not even manage 3 per cent. growth. They averaged growth of only 2.6 per cent. per year in that time.

It is little wonder, then, that the NHS that this Government inherited had too few doctors and too few nurses; that three quarters of accident and emergency units needed modernising; that the NHS was crying out for the biggest hospital building programme in its history; that waiting lists were too long and were rising; and that our country's record on coronary heart disease and cancer lagged so far behind that of other European nations.

It is also little wonder, after those 18 years of neglect and mismanagement, that we inherited an NHS that was on its knees. We intend to get it back on its feet, but of course that will take time. We will not be happy until it is up and running again as the pride of Britain and the envy of the world. Conservative Members want always to run down and talk down the national health service, but the Government are making progress towards "making political capital" out of the NHS, to borrow the graphic phrase used by the hon. Member for Woodspring.

There are 2,000 more doctors in the national health service than there were when we came to office. We are beginning to turn the corner, too, on nurse shortages. There are 4,500 more nurses in the NHS than there were a year ago, thanks in part to the largest real-terms increase in pay that nurses have had in a decade and a half. It was paid in full—without staging, as happened under the previous Government. The biggest hospital building programme that the NHS has ever seen is under way. Every casualty department that needs it is being modernised.

The hon. Gentleman was talking about difficult decisions. For the first time, we have a means of setting national standards, through the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, to tackle precisely the lottery of care that the Conservative created and connived at. We have also, for the first time, a means of monitoring and inspecting those standards through the Commission for Health Improvement.

Miss Kirkbride: The Secretary of State has mentioned NICE a number of times, and its views on beta interferon. He will be aware that many people in Westminster Hall right now are very concerned about that. In Worcestershire, only two people out of hundreds with multiple sclerosis are receiving beta interferon. If NICE agrees that beta interferon is a cost-effective treatment, as the right hon. Gentleman's Government would put it, does he promise that everybody in Worcestershire who is able to benefit from receiving beta interferon will have it, and will he make up the shortfall in Worcestershire health authority's budget as a result?

Mr. Milburn: We have NICE for a very simple and straightforward reason. As both the hon. Lady and I know, different health authorities take different decisions about prescribing important drugs and making available different forms of treatment and intervention. We want to put that right, because we believe in a fair system of health care in which care is made available according to clinical need and not any other factor. When NICE produces its guidance, we expect health authorities, primary care groups, doctors, nurses and others to take full account of what it says.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): Does that mean that, should NICE decide that beta interferon is not cost-effective and clinically effective, patients who currently receive it can anticipate ceasing to have it in the future?

Mr. Milburn: That is not the position. We have discussed this issue with NICE, which is under an explicit instruction to look at the ramifications of any decision that it takes—for example, if it decides that in future a drug that patients currently receive is not cost-effective or clinically effective. The important thing about NICE is that it does not substitute for doctors or for other clinicians' decisions. It is there to help and support them and make their job easier. Ultimately, the individual clinician dealing with the individual patient will have to decide. Frankly, I cannot decide that; neither can the hon. Gentleman—and neither, with the best will in the world, can the NHS Executive or the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. It is a clinical decision, but it must be an informed clinical decision, based on what works and what does not, on what is effective and what is not.

Dr. Fox: It is a very important point that there is a distinction between cost-effectiveness and affordability. Although it might be a legitimate role of NICE or any similar body to examine the cost-effectiveness of any treatment—an aim which I am sure is widely shared—the decision on affordability should not be left at arm's length, but should rest with Ministers. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that if NICE agreed that beta interferon was a cost-effective treatment—especially, as seems increasingly likely, in the early stages of multiple sclerosis—Ministers would not stand in the way by saying that it was not affordable to the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: There are clearly two separate sets of decisions to be made. One is about effectiveness. It is right and proper that NICE should look at clinical and cost-effectiveness side by side. That is the right thing for it to do; and it is best equipped to do it. The national health service has never had an independent means of considering those matters and it seems sensible to have one if, as Conservative Members claim—I am sure they are genuine in this—they want to deal with these problems.

There is a separate set of decisions which, in the end, I take. I take decisions about affordability. Those are my decisions. That is right and appropriate, and I will be held to account for them. When NICE comes up with its recommendations, we will of course consider what it says. That is the right thing to do.

I can tell the House that there has been no greater clinical distortion than allowing the NHS, as the previous Government did, to provide the lowest level of cardiac services in precisely the areas where coronary heart disease is highest. That is what we inherited, and that is

[Mr. Milburn]

what we are trying to change. We shall improve the health of the population as a whole, but we shall improve the health of the poorest fastest.

Yes, there are many things wrong in the health service, but there are many things that are going right. Slowly but surely the expansion of the NHS is under way. It is underpinned by the extra resources that we have committed to the service. Of course, it takes time to deliver results and they are always dependent on what we can afford, but we have achieved 5 per cent. funding increases on average during the current spending review. If we continue to manage the economy successfully, we can be confident that we will be able to make the sustained increases in funding that our health service needs, and get up to the European Union average.

The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) has said that none of that is certain. One thing is certain—the Conservatives would not and could not match our commitment to the NHS. The first reason for that is that Conservative Front-Bench Members have already condemned Labour's investment levels as reckless and irresponsible and as madness. Secondly, the Conservatives' tax guarantee, far from delivering the growth in NHS capacity that the service needs, would result in

swingeing cuts in the health service.

Opposition Members shake their heads, but those are not my words; they are the words of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

Opposition Front-Bench Members cannot have it both ways. They cannot bemoan the improving financial position of the health service while proposing swingeing cuts. They cannot complain about NHS deficits while threatening to make them worse. What the Conservatives propose is not so much a tax guarantee as guaranteed attacks on the future of the NHS.

That is not what the NHS needs. It needs more investment and more reform. The only guarantee is that it will get neither from the Conservative party. The hon. Member for Woodspring says that, philosophically, the Conservatives have moved on from the NHS. The Government believe that the principles of the NHS are right, but we believe with equal passion that its practices have to change fundamentally.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that to say that waiting lists are unethical is to say that minor ailments should always be trumped by major ailments, and that under Tory rule someone with a cataract would never have treatment? Does he agree also that to say that a 6.8 per cent. funding increase is not sufficient and yet not to pledge any more is to open up the hidden agenda of privatisation behind the tax guarantee?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am coming to precisely those points.

The Conservatives cannot have their cake and eat it. They cannot have the tax guarantee and then complain about lack of investment in the NHS. That will open them up to the charge of hypocrisy, and that charge will stick as we go into future general elections. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) and her colleagues on the Back Benches, who complain that there is not enough money going into the NHS, ought to take up their complaint with the new shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition because their policy, the tax guarantee, places an artificial straitjacket around NHS spending.

Our view is straightforward: we want to invest more in the NHS. We know that more investment is needed in the NHS, and that is precisely what we intend to provide.

Dr. Fox: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Milburn: One more time, and then I want to get on to clinical distortion.

Dr. Fox: It surprises me that the Secretary of State wants to get on to that subject. On taxation, he makes the ridiculously simplistic argument that it is impossible to reduce the burden of taxation and increase expenditure on the health service. In the 1980s, the NHS saw its biggest funding expansion in history, at the same time as the tax burden diminished. If the right hon. Gentleman asserts that that is impossible, how does he reconcile his two statements today about increasing and improving NHS funding and the Government's reduction in the standard rate of tax by 1p next month?

Mr. Milburn: I presume, therefore, that the hon. Gentleman disagrees with the right hon. Member for Huntingdon. Is that right? Does he agree or disagree with what the former Prime Minister had to say about the tax guarantee?

As the Prime Minister has said many times, cutting income tax rates is the right thing to do—not least to compensate for other changes in the tax system. We can do that precisely because we are giving the NHS the biggest cash injection in its entire history. Let us not forget that the hon. Gentleman and his party opposed that at the time, and do so now, but do not have the guts to say so.

On the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), clinical need drives our determination to speed up care. Faster care means better health. Let us be clear: the NHS is expected to treat all patients according to their clinical priority. Emergencies should be treated immediately, and urgent cases should rightly be given top priority. Our determination to get waiting lists down has not changed that one bit, and the figures prove it.

Compared with 1997–98—these are complex procedures; precisely the sort that the hon. Member for Woodspring says are not happening in the NHS because of all the toes and nails that are being done—last year, there were more than 6,400 additional hip replacement operations, more than 4,700 additional knee replacements and more than 1,400 additional coronary heart bypass grafts. Let us have no more of the argument that clinical priorities are distorted by waiting lists. Waiting lists are down, and we will go on to meet our manifesto commitment. What is more, we have turned the corner on out-patient waiting, too.

The hon. Member for Woodspring says that the lists are not coming down. Over Christmas and new year, hospitals rightly prepare to deal with the inevitable rise in attendance that extra winter pressures cause. This winter

was no exception. We saw a rise in the number of people waiting for in-patient treatment in December. We will probably see a further rise in the January figures.

Imagine what a performance there would have been from the hon. Gentleman if those waiting lists had not risen this winter. He would have endlessly repeated the charge that waiting lists had distorted clinical priorities. Indeed, December must have been the only month of the year when he wanted waiting lists to go down. I am sorry to have disappointed him. The NHS did the right thing this winter. It put emergencies before elective cases. In the process, it has given the lie to those who claim that cutting waiting lists distorts clinical priorities. It has not, it does not and it will not in the future either.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In responding to my hon. Friends the Members for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), the Secretary of State wriggled like a belly dancer. For the benefit of the 1,000 multiple sclerosis sufferers and their supporters congregating this afternoon in Westminster Hall, will he tell the House in the form of a simple yes or no answer whether he stands by his statement that

> No one will be denied the drugs they need. That is guaranteed . . . ?—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 143.]

Yes, in all circumstances, or no?

Mr. Milburn: That is precisely what we want to do and that is precisely why we have established the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which the hon. Gentleman opposed. I can therefore only presume that he and his hon. Friends are quite content, apart from specific instances of drugs and treatment, to let the lottery of care continue. I say one thing to him: we are not. Yes, we want to ensure that people receive the treatment that benefits them most. That is precisely what NICE will do.

What the NHS did not do was turn people away because they had the wrong sort of illness, or expect them to take out private medical insurance for a range of conditions deemed by politicians to be no longer necessary on the NHS. To do so would genuinely be to distort clinical priorities and put political priorities ahead of patient need. That is precisely what the hon. Member for Woodspring and the Conservative party propose to do.

Dr. Stoate: My right hon. Friend has told the House how many more hip and knee replacements were carried out on the NHS last year. Will he tell me what would have been the increased burden on an average family, especially a pensioner family, had those treatments been carried out in the private sector with private insurance?

Mr. Milburn: I was coming to precisely that point. I think that the average cost of a hip replacement on the NHS is about £5,000, and that of a cataract operation is about £2,000. Those are NHS costs, and the NHS is cheaper than the private sector.

My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. To an overwhelming extent, cataract operations and hip and knee replacements are the operations of old age. Why, on 16 January, did the hon. Member for Woodspring tell *The Sunday Times* that private medical insurance companies should cover conditions such as

> hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations

leaving the NHS to do other things? It was not a slip of the tongue: later that month, on "Sky News", the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made it absolutely clear that, under Conservative plans, people would look to the NHS

> when they had serious life-threatening conditions and would look to their private insurance to help them

with the rest.

There is no ambiguity and no weasel words—the message could not be clearer. Conservative policy is to reduce the NHS to a core service for life-threatening conditions, thereby leaving other conditions—such as hip and knee replacements and hernia and cataract operations—to the private sector. Surely, there can be no greater distortion of clinical priorities than the Conservatives writing off the 300,000 people—many of them pensioners—who rely on those operations every year. Pensioners are the people who most need health care and can least afford private health insurance. The Conservatives' policies amount to no more and no less than a new Tory tax on old age.

Dr. Fox: The right hon. Gentleman should read more than a few misquoted columns in *The Sunday Times*. Had he read this week's newspapers, he would know that I stated explicitly last week that, for many reasons, a core model NHS could not work in the United Kingdom. However, does he accept that if we do not have a core model, any rationing in the NHS has to be done by means of waiting times and proper prioritisation of cases? Does he also accept that if people were encouraged to take out greater private coverage, either individually or through their employer, it would reduce pressure on the NHS and produce an expansion of total health care, which would help to achieve the outcomes that everyone wants?

Mr. Milburn: The last time the hon. Gentleman and I had exchanges about *The Sunday Times* article, he said that he was going to write to the newspaper to demand a retraction.

Dr. Fox *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Milburn: Yes he did—it is in the *Official Report*. Has he written that letter or not? If he has not, I can only assume that the article was an accurate reflection of what he told *The Sunday Times* about Conservative party policy.

Dr. Fox: Ridiculous.

Mr. Milburn: If it is ridiculous, the hon. Gentleman should send *The Sunday Times* a letter demanding a retraction two months after the publication of the article in question. In fact, he knows that I am telling the truth—that is the Conservatives' policy.

If individuals want to take out private health insurance, that is a matter for them, but the idea that that could be a panacea for our health care system is fatuous. There is no army of unemployed oncologists—or, according to Sir George Alberti, unemployed cardiologists or cardiac surgeons—waiting for the private call to arms.

An expansion of the private sector must inevitably mean a contraction of the public sector. We have been down that route. We tried that model of care during the 1990s.

[Mr. Milburn]

The then Conservative Government spent £150 million a year subsidising old people to take out private medical insurance. It did not make a jot of difference to the numbers taking out private health insurance. The idea that that somehow acts as a safety valve for the national health service is simply wrong and fatuous.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, I am not giving way.

The contrast could not be clearer. Yes, the NHS needs modernising, which is what the Government are doing, but no, the NHS does not need privatising, which is what the Conservatives propose to do. Conservative health policy would indeed distort clinical priorities and mean financial under-provision for the NHS.

No one pretends that everything in the garden is rosy. It is not, but step by step we are making the NHS better. It takes time, but we are making real progress. The country and the service will recognise that. There are more doctors, treating more patients in the NHS; more nurses, training and working in the NHS; new hospitals beginning to be completed for the NHS; modern casualty units coming on-stream throughout the NHS; and fewer in-patients waiting and more out-patients being treated.

That is our record so far, but it is only the start. There is a lot more to do, but I say to the hon. Member for Woodspring and the Conservative party that we have only just begun and we intend to finish the job, because it is what patients and staff want. They want a national health service modernised and reformed, and that is what they will get with this Government.

4.42 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on securing an opportunity for another debate in the House about health care provision. I agreed with a number of the points that he made. As he explained, the arbitrary waiting list initiative and the targets that were set have in many instances distorted clinical priorities, despite the protestations to the contrary from the Government Front Bench.

Anyone who visits hospitals and speaks to representatives of the professional organisations in the NHS knows that every time hospital managers are called upon to make decisions and set priorities, they are not making the decisions or setting the targets that they would otherwise have done, because they have to meet the waiting list targets.

Mr. Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes much of priorities, but is he aware that the National Audit Office found that last year the NHS performed an extra half a million operations? Will he give a big clap to the NHS, irrespective of priorities, for the fact that the overall amount of treatment is escalating rapidly, and we are committed to keep it going up?

Mr. Harvey: I congratulate NHS staff on achieving the objective of performing more operations. It is entirely right that they should do so, and they deserve congratulation. However, there are still more people waiting longer for operations.

In its 1997 general election manifesto promise, the Labour party stated:

> The Conservatives have cut Government spending . . . by the equivalent of more than £3 billion as spending on the bills of economic and social failure has risen. We are committed to reversing this trend of spending. Over the course of a five-year Parliament, as we cut the costs of economic and social failure we will raise the proportion of national income"

that is spent on health.

That was a sensible and laudable aim, but, despite the fact that extra money has gone into the health service—a matter to which I shall return—it was clear that demand would continue to rise over time. It always does. If the Government did not anticipate that the number of people needing those extra operations would rise, it was extremely shortsighted of them to frame the policy commitment in that way. The hon. Member for Woodspring was right to say that, from the outset, warnings were given about that. In the Liberal Democrat manifesto our policy commitment was measured on the length of time that people had to wait, not on the number of people on the waiting list.

The number of other people on the list is of relatively little interest to people who are in the unfortunate position of waiting for an operation. They want to know for how long they will have to wait. It would have been more sensible of the Government to set themselves targets on the length of time that people have to wait. People are having to wait longer.

I am slightly puzzled by the Opposition's political objectives in choosing the subject of this afternoon's debate. They have made some important, serious points, but none are new. The ground has been fairly well covered. If the hon. Member for Woodspring hoped to secure news coverage, he would have aroused more news interest if he had told us more about the Conservative policies that he was distilling, and especially the role that he envisages for the private sector. I suspect that more journalists would have been in the Gallery, waiting to hear that. We await more information with interest.

In the rush to get people off in-patient waiting lists, the number of people on out-patient lists has increased. It has more or less doubled since the election from 250,000 to more than 500,000. Although a small downturn occurred recently, the number of people on those lists has increased massively. That more than compensates for the Government's limited progress on the objectives that they set themselves of trying to reduce in-patient waiting lists.

The Secretary of State made a fair point in his speech when he said that we should not be too carried away by figures that appear over a couple of months, especially if they cover the mid-winter period, because authorities and trusts will set different short-term priorities to cope with winter pressures. He is right. However, the overall trend has been upwards for the number of people who wait for unacceptable lengths of time.

It is interesting to consider regional variations. In the south-west—my region—there has been an overall increase in NHS in-patient lists, never mind out-patient waiting lists, since the general election. In the last quarter of last year, 159,000 patients waited more than 26 weeks for an appointment with a consultant after a written

referral by their general practitioner, compared with 149,000 in the previous quarter. Even before the Christmas problems and the winter worries, matters were deteriorating.

It should be no surprise that the winter pressures caused such havoc in the health services. Despite promises, and the analysis made in the Labour party manifesto commitment that I quoted, the vast, generous allocation of funding that the Secretary of State describes is not being made to the health service. In a Liberal Democrat Opposition Supply day debate, I said that the Government's methods of accounting are, to put it mildly, unusual.

Those methods have never been used previously, in other walks of life or in other countries. However, as a doctor put it to me, "If my child grows 3 inches in the first year, 3 inches in the second year and 3 inches in the third year, surely the child has grown 9 inches, but under the Government's accounting methods, the child has grown 18 inches." That is the truth about the £18 billion that has gone into the NHS.

I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Woodspring, who, assisted by interventions from his colleagues, went through some of the difficulties that the health service faces. He referred to those that the NHS Confederation had mentioned, and explained how they wiped out some of the money that appears to have been put into the health service. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that several important points needed to be made, not least on pay awards and the costs of coping with improved working rights and conditions, among others, that managers have to tackle. However, as he went through the list and as Conservative Members referred to the difficulties that those issues cause, I could not help but think back to the number of delegations of which I was a member during the previous Parliament that pressed Ministers for more funds on behalf of local education authorities, local councils and health authorities.

In those presentations, we invariably said to the Conservative Ministers facing us, "Look at the terrible pressures that the authority will face, not least funding pay rises." Unfortunately, I do not recall the provision of more cash ever being part of the response. I recall their saying, "These are simply the facts of life and local education authorities and the like are no different from businesses. Everybody has to face those additional costs." Although I very much agree with what the Conservatives have said today, on that particular aspect there seems to be a marked distinction between what they are saying in opposition and what I recall even the kindliest Conservative Minister saying in government when one petitioned for more cash.

The Secretary of State made the point that part of Government policy has been to set about a modernisation programme. In general terms that must be right and, indeed, in some specific terms it has headed in the right direction. We have detailed points of dispute with them over a number of changes, but their reforms of primary care, the introduction of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Commission for Health Improvement, and the development of national service frameworks are all sensible policies that move in the right direction. However, the danger is that they will convince themselves that modernisation is in some sense an alternative to putting additional funding into the national health service. The reality is probably the reverse.

If the modernisation policy works as well as I hope it will, it will result in an improving NHS that will probably cost even more to run. I remember the Conservative Government setting about the process of introducing care in the community. The only thing that was wrong with what otherwise seemed to be an entirely laudable policy objective was the belief that it would somehow cost less. Anybody could see that closing down those appalling old mental asylums and putting people into care in the community was entirely right, but it was a banking certainty to cost a lot more money. We have found precisely that in practice.

For the first two years of this Parliament, the Government decided to saddle themselves with the spending objectives left in place by the previous Conservative Administration. Only in the last three, under the comprehensive spending review, have they started to load significant sums into public services. The result will be that, by the end of this Parliament, they will struggle to convince the electorate that they have expanded health service funding by any more than their Conservative predecessors. Were the election to be called next spring, which seems to be a fashionable bet in some quarters, they would have had only a four-year Parliament of two lean and two slightly better funded years. They would not even have achieved a real-terms increase year on year as great as that managed by the previous Conservative Government.

Unless the Government take radical action pretty quickly, they will face the electorate in May next year having to explain why their increases in health service spending have not even kept up with those of the Conservatives. With the Budget only three weeks away and the comprehensive spending review to be published in July, I can only hope that they find extra money that goes some way to meeting the objective—which the Prime Minister seemed to come up with on the hoof a few weeks ago—of trying to achieve average European Union health spending within five years.

That commitment does not stand close scrutiny because the EU's membership might change considerably over the next five years, the economic cycle could make average EU health spending a completely different proportion of gross domestic product in any or all EU countries and exchange rate fluctuations could completely distort the figures in any event. The United Kingdom, as one of the largest EU countries, will push the European average up as the situation here improves, so we would be chasing a target that got further and further away.

It would be helpful if the Government nailed down what the Prime Minister meant, what they are seeking to achieve and over what period. If they were seriously to achieve the objective of getting up to EU average spending within five years, it would begin to address the serious funding and resourcing problems in the health service. The measure of success will be whether they achieve the objective that has been set.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): Bearing in mind the fact that this Opposition day debate was mounted by the Conservative party, does the hon. Gentleman share my surprise and concern that only two Back-Bench Tory MPs are present to discuss these issues?

Mr. Harvey: It seems surprising that, having chosen this subject for debate, there are not more Conservative

[Mr. Harvey]

Members wanting to participate in it. I am not sure how they will keep it going until 7 o'clock, but I suspect that some of them are frantically running round the Tea Room. I suspect that they are relying on me to keep it going. Other than that, we are looking forward to a long contribution from the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). I shall see what I can do to help her.

Miss Kirkbride: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Harvey: I shall give way to help out in these circumstances.

Miss Kirkbride: In the interests of fairness, the hon. Gentleman may like to know that many of my hon. Friends who were present during the speeches of the Front-Bench spokesmen are now downstairs in Westminster Hall seeing off the multiple sclerosis sufferers who came to lobby Parliament. Labour Members were absent from that lobby.

Mr. Harvey: It is correct that a lobby on behalf of MS sufferers is taking place today, and I am sure that hon. Members from both sides of the House will want to hear what they have to say and to play a part in that.

Funding for the coming year will be hard for many authorities and trusts, which carry the deficits that have accumulated in previous years. The Government, the public and the media are expecting more and more of the national health service. If authorities and trusts are to achieve what everyone wants them to achieve, they will have to have more money than they are getting at the moment. We shall have to wait and see what the comprehensive spending review comes up with, but we hope that the method by which calculations are made in that review and the sums that the Government are able to announce will be clearer and more transparent than they have been to date.

The Secretary of State referred to spending announcements. I looked into 63 spending announcements during 1999, which emerged in the form of Department of Health press releases. Umpteen were already covered by earlier announcements—fair enough, we have got used to that—but several were straightforward repeats. The distance and time that the Government allowed to elapse before reheating the old spending announcements varied from two months at the cheekiest to about eight months, when they hoped that enough people had forgotten about it.

We need to see real money, calculated in a universal fashion that everyone understands and that bears historical and international comparison. When the comprehensive spending review comes out, it is essential that the laudable goal of getting up to the EU average within five years that the Prime Minister has mapped out can be achieved.

Dr. Stoate: The hon. Gentleman has made a number of comments about funding, and I share his concern that we must ensure that the health service is properly funded. He claimed that the £18 billion that we promised for England does not add up, but were we to put in £6 billion in each of three years, he would have to agree with me that that would mean no growth in the second and third years.

Time and again, the Liberal Democrats have asked for money for the health service—there is nothing wrong with that—but they have not explained how they would fund the NHS, and have not said how much money they would put in. I have heard nothing from the Liberal Democrats that makes me feel happy that they have a viable alternative to the vast sums of money that Labour is putting in and will to continue to make available in the future.

Mr. Harvey: I have a sneaking suspicion that the hon. Gentleman will never be entirely happy that the Liberal Democrats have a solution to the problems of the health service. Nevertheless, we shall continue to do our best to persuade him that that is so. We had a costed manifesto at the last election, which promised real-terms increases far in excess of what the Government have achieved, and we explained how those would be paid for.

Each time there has been a Budget we have produced an alternative Budget, and we shall do so again in a couple of weeks' time. After the July comprehensive spending review, both opposition parties will be able to take stock of the state of the nation's finances, and will begin the process of explaining to the nation before next spring's election what our spending priorities are and how we would pay for them. We will take those policies into an election next spring to try to convince the public that there is a better way of doing it. If the hon. Gentleman will hold his breath for a couple of weeks, he will be able to see our alternative Budget.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that last week we debated why the Government had decided on a tax cut this April, although all the polling evidence suggested that people did not want it. According to the polls, at least 80 per cent. said that they would prefer the money to be spent on public services. The Bank of England is raising interest rates almost every month because it is worried about a consumer boom, yet the Chancellor is considering putting the extra money into the pockets of consumers who do not even want it. It is a bit rich for the hon. Gentleman to claim that Liberal Democrats do not say how things should be paid for, just when we are saying that £2.6 billion could easily be found for the purpose.

The long and the short of it is that health service professionals, health authorities and trusts continue to struggle with adverse circumstances. Patients can see the state of hospitals: they can see that there is a lack of staff and that the staff who are there are so overworked that they are having to rush around like scalded cats, and they find it unacceptable that more people are still waiting for longer than they were at the time of the last election.

The Government have introduced some policy initiatives, which we applaud, but those initiatives are no substitute for adequate funding of the health service. The Prime Minister has now set an ambitious goal; we await the Budget and the July comprehensive spending review to see whether the Government are sincere and serious in their attempt to achieve it.

5.1 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I realise that not many Conservatives wish to speak—although their numbers have doubled in the past few moments: four Tory Back Benchers are now in the Chamber, which is encouraging—but several of my hon. Friends want to say a word, so I shall be brief.

This morning I read a piece in the paper—I cannot remember which one—by some learned professor who argued that the ablest Conservatives were now leading a move back to the centre ground. I have observed no move in that direction on the part of Conservative Front Benchers today. There has been no departure from the clear commitment to a move towards a privatised system that we have heard consistently from successive Tory health spokesmen since the election. Significantly, however, the motion makes no mention of the Tories' privatisation solutions.

Mr. Burns: That is because we are not going to privatise.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I have a degree of respect for the hon. Gentleman, who, like me, is a member of the Select Committee on Health. He works hard on the Committee, and understands some of the issues—not all, but some. However, I have read statements made by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) in *The Sunday Times*, which we discussed during our last debate. Those statements make clear the direction in which the Conservatives intend to go, and, although this is not in the motion, it has been made clear again from the Front Bench that they see the NHS as a core service to deal with serious conditions, and expect people to seek private treatment for conditions that are less serious.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): At 2.40 pm, the hon. Gentleman and I engaged in a debate on "Westminster Live", in which I plainly stated that both my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) had said explicitly that the Conservative party would not privatise the NHS. My statement could hardly have been made more recently; I hope that it was clear.

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): Playing with words.

Mr. Hinchliffe: Indeed it is. The Conservatives say that they will not privatise the NHS, but the hon. Lady's colleagues say that a number of patients will be encouraged to seek a private alternative to the NHS. That is on the record, and has been on the record consistently throughout all our debates in the current Parliament. It is the Conservatives' clear commitment. The point that I am making is that their motion makes no mention of any of their policies. In a sense, it treats the House with contempt to table a motion that simply comments on Government policy and sets out no alternative whatever. It has happened before. More than halfway, possibly, through the Parliament, the public deserve some explanation of what the Opposition stand for. The picture that we get is that they stand for moving away from the state health care system.

Miss Kirkbride: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: No. I want to make some progress.

As I have said, the debate on 18 January focused around the interview in the latest edition of *The Sunday Times* with the hon. Member for Woodspring and his detailed thinking on the future direction of health care under the Conservatives. I made a point of mentioning one specific part of the article. I did not quote his words out of context; I quoted them exactly within the context of the article. It quoted his views on the direction of Conservative policy:

> The Conservatives are no longer concerned with the maintenance of the NHS as the primary provider.

There was a clear message there.

There was some mumbling from the Front-Bench team at that time. The Secretary of State said that the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman intended to write to *The Sunday Times*. I have read it every week since. I have seen no corrections. I have seen no suggestions from the Conservatives in the letters column or elsewhere that it was a misrepresentation, because it is exactly what the hon. Member for Woodspring said. The key point that the Secretary of State made is that the tax guarantee will reduce public funding. Clearly, the expansion of private health care is allied to that.

The problem that the Tories face—they have never answered the question, although I have raised it in every health debate since the last general election—is that, if they expand private health care, where will the staff come from? They will come directly from the NHS, so it is their policy to expand the private sector—whether we call it privatisation or peripheral—with people being encouraged, as they have been today, to take out private insurance and use the private sector for hip replacements, cataract operations or whatever. The purpose is to expand and increase use of the private sector.

The Tories do not seem to understand that the private sector does not train its own staff. It recruits them directly from the NHS, so their policy is all about robbing the NHS of its staff and skills.

Mr. Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: No. I want to carry on because many Members want to take part in the debate. I have taken one intervention. I hope that I responded to the point that was made.

The simple political fact is that the Tory party has given up on the NHS. I made the point during the speech of the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey): two Tory Back Benchers were in the Chamber for a Tory debate. That shows their commitment to discussing concerns about the NHS. If they are getting hammered by their constituents about problems in the NHS, look at the Tory Benches: there is no one there. That shows that they are doing nothing but going through the motions. They see the private sector as the way forward. It is no surprise because, as we all know, the Conservative party has never believed in the NHS.

Mr. Burns: May I try to put the hon. Gentleman out of his misery? I know that he is keeping to a script that he obviously wrote some hours ago, but just to reassure him: Conservative Members do believe in the NHS, free at the point of delivery. That is why we are so concerned on behalf of our constituents about what is happening with waiting lists, out-patient lists, ward closures and the lack of funding.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I am still mystified. If there is such concern, why do we constantly hear about the mixed economy? The first statement—I will check the record—

[Mr. Hinchliffe]

of the hon. Member for Woodspring was about that. That gives a clear message: the Tories want not the state health care system, but the mixed economy.

Mr. Burns: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: No. With the greatest respect, I have to make progress.

That has been the consistent message for nearly three years. It has not changed, so people understand the direction of Tory policy and will make up their own minds, as they did at the last general election.

I should like to deal specifically with the subject of this debate, as described on the Annunciator: the Government's waiting list pledge at the previous general election, and the alleged distortion of clinical priorities. I have long examined the issue, and I know that there are 101 ways of measuring activity and progress—or the lack of it—in the national health service. As I have said many times, I should not have chosen waiting lists as the best way of measuring progress made in the health service, but should have thought that progress in public health is the best overall guide in judging Government policy. Nevertheless, I accept that I was elected on that pledge, and I believe that I have a duty to ensure that the Government deliver it.

I recommend to hon. Members an exercise that I performed the other day—read the manifesto on which we stood at the general election. I re-read the manifesto that I issued at the election, and it included the pledge on waiting lists. It seems—looking at my picture on the manifesto cover—that I look younger now, under Labour, than I did then, but that is a separate issue. The point is that, with the exception of that one pledge, on waiting lists, we have delivered all of our promises, and I am damned proud of that. I also have a vested interest in ensuring that I can tick the last promise, on waiting lists. Although I had reservations about including the pledge, I believe that we have to deliver it, and that we will deliver it.

Is the pledge distorting priorities in the NHS? A couple of weeks ago, the Health Committee conducted a brief inquiry into the winter pressures initiative. The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) attended the inquiry, so I hope that he will concur on this.

At the inquiry, I asked a question of the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), which I couched in these terms: "If I were the chief executive of an NHS trust and I faced the dilemma of choosing between meeting the Government's waiting list target or treating people on the basis of clinical need, what should I do?" She was absolutely clear and categoric in her reply: "You treat people on the basis of need. The health service should treat urgent clinical needs first." The Secretary of State made precisely the same point today.

If hon. Members say that that is not happening in various parts of the country, I shall need to see the evidence of it. Although I have heard anecdotal evidence that urgent clinical priorities are not being treated first, I have not seen concrete evidence of it. I listen to people and, every day, I receive many letters from people who work across the NHS, but I have not yet received a concrete example of the practice. If I receive such an example, I shall examine it. I shall also say that the people in the health service who are involved in the practice have not been listening to the Government's statements, which have made it quite clear that urgent clinical needs should be treated first.

At that Health Committee inquiry, we also compared the performance of two acute NHS trusts, one of which was in the constituency of the hon. Member for West Chelmsford, in Essex, with the other in the north-west of England, in Cheshire. Allegedly, one of the trusts was failing, and the other was succeeding. What I learned in the inquiry—perhaps the hon. Member for West Chelmsford took from it a different message—is that, when we examined in depth the two trusts' figures, we were not comparing like with like. I also learned that one of the trusts was intervening earlier than the other trust in certain medical conditions, and that that practice was increasing its out-patient waiting list.

One trust gave the Committee the specific example of cataract operations. That trust tackled cataract cases earlier than it had before, on an out-patient basis, and did not leave them for the condition to worsen. However, the change in procedure increased the number of people on the out-patient waiting list. The size of waiting lists is, therefore, not the most reliable way of measuring local performance.

I hope that, at the next general election, we might consider including in our manifesto pledges on measurements other than waiting lists. Although I have no problem with including waiting lists, we should do so within the wider context of measuring progress, or lack of it, on other health issues, not only in the health service, but in public health.

As other hon. Members wish to speak in the debate, I shall make only one or two brief points on issues that the Government still have to address. I believe that the biggest distortion in clinical priorities has been caused by private medicine. Part-time NHS consultant status leads to a scandalous distortion, often placing treatment of those who are able to pay before treatment of those on NHS waiting lists who are in greater need. The same consultants are treating people in both sectors.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister whether the Government will consider conducting a sample audit of NHS and private operating lists of part-time NHS consultants and comparing the clinical needs of patients in each sector. I know for a fact that the outcome of such an audit will show that the clinical needs of those who are on NHS waiting lists are far greater than those of people being treated in the private sector.

The message that I want to give the Government is that the waiting lists problems that we are facing will be dealt with seriously only when moonlighting in the private sector is ended once and for all. We have faced that problem ever since the inception of the national health service, and it is about time the Government dealt with it seriously, on behalf of those—the vast majority of people—who use the national health service.

We could fund that solution by using within the NHS the money that is currently being spent by the NHS on buying care in the private sector. A lot of money is being spent on buying private sector care that could be devoted to the NHS. I hope that Ministers will consider doing that,

because such a change would fundamentally alter the treatment received by NHS patients waiting on NHS waiting lists.

I also hope that we shall make much better use of the scarce resources that we do have. When one has been an hon. Member as long as I have, one will—as the hon. Member for West Chelmsford is well aware—have heard it all before. We simply move to the Benches on the other side of the House and carry on dealing with the same matters as we dealt with before. The current Government are bolstering the health service with ever more money, just as the previous Government did. I am always mystified as to where all the money the Tories provided went. In my backyard, all I could see was things getting worse by the week. The money seemed to disappear into a black hole somewhere. There still seems, to some extent, to be a black hole.

We have talked about ending the internal market, which I fully accept. I have also commended the Government on ending competition, which is now officially gone, as the Health Act 1999 made absolutely clear. As an analogy, however, when I go to a market, I see various stalls selling similar products. In health provision, we still have a whole load of stalls that are selling very similar products. I should like some of those stalls to be combined.

I should also like us again to address the purchaser-provider split. I remain to be convinced, when I see what has happened in my own backyard, that such a split makes sense. I talk to people who know far more than I do about local operation of the NHS, and they think that there is huge duplication and a lot of money—which should be spent on patient care—being wasted. I hope that we will revisit that issue. I also urge Ministers to re-examine the framework, to make it more sensible and to cut more of the bureaucracy and waste still in the system.

It would not be a speech by me if I did not also argue that there has to be a much closer relationship between the NHS and local authority social services. I commend the Government on the way in which they have moved the two spheres much closer together. However, like many hon. Members, I fundamentally believe that there should be formal integration of the services. It does not make sense to keep the two systems separated.

I was struck by figures provided, a couple of weeks ago, in the conclusion to the national bed inquiry, showing that two thirds of NHS beds are occupied by over-65s. Since the mid-1990s, one half of the increase in emergency admissions has been of people over 75. Since the early 1990s, one half of the extra emergency admissions of over-75s have been for frailty, not medical need. The inquiry report, which was very comprehensive, provides concrete evidence showing that a substantial proportion of NHS admissions arise as a direct result of the failure to offer people alternative care in the community. In a previous health debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) gave an example of how he was able to provide such alternative care. We have to provide it, and combining the NHS with local authority social services would make it much easier to do so.

I am very proud of my Government's achievements on the NHS. I am proud that they are addressing the issue of quality, and that they are re-establishing public health as a key public policy issue. I am proud that, so far, they have managed to increase NHS funding, although I look forward to more funding. However, as I said, improving the NHS is not only about money, but about organisation. I am proud also that the Government have ended competition and restored to the NHS the philosophy of collectivism.

The hon. Member for Woodspring said that the Government have no core values. For goodness' sake, we represent the values of the vast majority of people in the United Kingdom. We believe in the values of the NHS that have stood this country in good stead since the 1940s. The NHS has an excellent future in the hands of the Labour Government.

5.20 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe). Like the Minister, I listened with great care—the Minister was probably a little aghast—to the hon. Gentleman's comments on what should happen to consultants. I hope that the Minister will fully answer the important points that the Chairman of the Select Committee made. Conservative Members will be fascinated to hear how much the Minister agrees with the hon. Gentleman.

It was also a pleasure in some ways to listen to the characteristically robust, but somewhat worn speech of the Secretary of State. In places, his speech was extremely interesting and non-partisan, and there were even points in it with which no fair-minded person could disagree. The trouble was that he, like many other Ministers in this Government, got hooked on the Millbank syndrome and had to repeat the same catch-phrases, buzz words and on-line messages that the Government try to get across to the country, regardless of whether they are based on fact. Sadly, the hon. Member for Wakefield could not resist clutching at the Secretary of State's coat tails. I refer in particular to the bogus argument about privatisation.

As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we were in government for 18 years. We did not, in any shape or form, in those 18 years seek to privatise the health service. In every year that we were in office, we increased the real-terms funding to the health service. Just to try to convince the hon. Gentleman, may I point out that I certainly believe passionately in the national health service? Under no circumstances would I tolerate its privatisation, in any shape or form.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I accept that the hon. Gentleman personally believes in the NHS. However, he supported and was a member of a Government who had a key fiscal policy of encouraging people to use the private health sector. His Government gave people tax breaks to do that. That does not suggest to me that they believed in the NHS. They wanted to get people out of the NHS and into the private sector, with a consequential drain on staff in the NHS.

Mr. Burns: The hon. Gentleman says that we encouraged people to use private health care. That may well be true in certain areas, such as tax relief on insurance premiums for the elderly, but it is not privatisation.

If one makes it attractive, through tax breaks for individuals, totally voluntarily to spend the money that they earn as they wish on private health care, that relieves the pressures on the national health service and must be beneficial to the people on waiting lists. I see no conflict

[Mr. Burns]

between the principle of a free national health service and some members of the public wishing to spend their own money to make their own provision. There is nothing wrong with that and it is not privatisation.

I do not want to speak at great length on this subject, but shall make one final point about it. The Government are not averse to using the private health care sector to treat patients, albeit, rightly, free at the point of delivery to those patients. One of the Government's cherished promises—which was that no one would wait more than 18 months for hospital treatment—was broken in my constituency at the end of November and the beginning of December last year. Fourteen people had waited more than 18 months for treatment and the trust picked up on that problem. It was so terrified that it had embarrassed the Secretary of State and that the Government's cherished promise had been broken that it wrote to all those people to say that they could have their operations as quickly as possible whenever they liked, and the private sector carried out the operations. I am delighted for my constituents, because they quickly received their treatment, having waited longer than the Government said they would have to wait. That shows that the Government are not averse to using the private sector when there are problems.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I do not want to pursue this point, but I want to try to get one thing on the record. The hon. Gentleman is probably a good deal brighter than the average Conservative Front Bencher, so perhaps he can answer a fundamental question that none of his Front-Bench colleagues appear able to answer. When one pushes people into the private sector and expands it, where do the staff come from to service the private sector? They come directly from the NHS; that is the central point.

Mr. Burns: The hon. Gentleman's question suggested that people are forced into the private sector. No one forces people to take out private health insurance or to use private health care. As he has alluded to, there were in the past encouragements through the tax system for the elderly, but no one forced them to use the private sector.

There are two ways in which staff can be trained for health care in this country. The first—it trains the largest proportion—is through the health service and the second is through the private system, which trains a much smaller proportion.

Dr. Stoate: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: No, I will not give way, because I want to finish my point.

The hon. Member for Wakefield raised the issue of consultants and seems to be obsessed by it. I think that I can anticipate the Minister's answer to his suggestion. He will say no, but the hon. Gentleman probably thought it was worth a try to raise the issue. It will reassure the profession and bring relief to the Government when the Minister says that he does not agree with him. Significantly, he did not mention general practitioners, who are all self-employed. It was interesting that he mentioned consultants, but did not, for some reason, refer to GPs. I assume that that was an omission and that he would like to include them in his system.

Mr. Hinchliffe: No.

Mr. Burns: The hon. Gentleman says no. That suggests that he has a contradictory view. However, I want to move on, or we shall get bogged down in what is a minor part of my speech.

I read the Government's motion with interest and I listened to the glowing picture that the Secretary of State painted of NHS funding. He suggested that everything was absolutely magnificent in the health service. I agree that some things are magnificent. The staff—the doctors, nurses, consultants and ancillary staff who deliver health care to all our constituents—are excellent. I also concede that the additional money that the Government, like the previous Government, have given to the NHS is welcome. As the country's financial position dictates, and when the economy is healthy and more money pours into the Treasury from tax receipts and other sources, I would like more investment in the health service. I hope that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's war chest for the general election is not squandered buying up different target groups of the electorate for polling day some time, presumably, next year. I hope that more money is given to the health service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said that the £21 billion over three years for the whole of the United Kingdom is not as spectacular as the headline figure suggests. He said that, once it is broken down and analysed, and if one takes into account the partial funding of pay awards and medical insurance, in effect, it works out at £5 billion. When the country can afford it—we are perhaps at a unique point in my lifetime because the country can afford it—I hope that substantially more money will be put into the health service. I say that because of what has happened in my constituency, which is causing grave concern to my constituents. Sadly, they have not enjoyed health care that is as good and glowing as the Secretary of State suggested was the case throughout the land.

I shall be fair and say from the outset that, under the Labour Government of the 1970s and my Government from 1979 until the early 1990s, health service spending was allocated under the resource allocation working party system down to the health authority, and what is now the health trust. RAWP was a crude and painful exercise for my constituents because we were part of the North-East Thames regional health authority, which lumped together places such as mid-Essex with Hackney, Tower Hamlets and other east London boroughs, which, to be frank, have worse social problems than mid-Essex. As a result, a disproportionate amount of health care funding, which, on a pound per head of the population basis would have gone to mid-Essex where the population was expanding, went to the east end of London. At the end of RAWP in 1990-91, it was calculated that mid-Essex alone had lost out to the tune of £15 million a year.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) abolished RAWP and, in crude terms, introduced a pound per head system. From 1990–91 until 1997–98, mid-Essex did much better on a pro rata basis and started to recoup some of the

£15 million lost as a result of RAWP. Unfortunately, one of the first things that the Secretary of State did as Minister of State when the Labour Government took office in 1997 was to tweak the funding formula. To be fair, it was only a small tweak, but it meant that more money went back into the east end of London and mid-Essex is losing about £1 million a year that it would have had under the system that existed in 1997–98. I regret that.

As I said in an intervention on the Secretary of State, at the end of this month the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS trust will have the worst deficit that it has ever had—£4.2 million. Last summer, when the trust believed that the deficit would be £1.8 million by the end of this year, it closed three wards. Owing to the community health council's representations that autumn, it agreed to keep one ward open and, subsequently, due to the winter pressures, it was forced to use part of a second ward, but that was guaranteed only until March. Since then, the deficit has exploded from £1.8 million to £4.2 million. Even the closure of all three wards will not meet the trust's deficit, because that was expected to save only £900,000. One wonders how on earth that deficit would be removed in a recovery plan without even more adverse effects on health care, unless the Government were to provide more money.

The Government's amendment says that my constituents and those of my hon. Friends should welcome the Government's

reduction in waiting lists and times that are being achieved through the dedication and hard work of NHS staff.

I wholeheartedly concur with the second half of that sentence, but the first half causes me problems. Once again, it is Government spin, which bears little relation to reality.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring said, the waiting list to get on to the waiting list has increased during the past two and a half years from 250,000 to just over 500,000. The Government have pledged to reduce in-patient waiting lists by 100,000 in the lifetime of this Parliament. We may have only 12 or 14 months to go, so they have an uphill battle. In the Government's first year, waiting lists escalated almost out of control. They then started to come down—to be fair, they came down to 50,000—then they rose again. The Government will say, with some credibility and accuracy, that that was due to winter pressures, but it remains to be seen in the coming months how much of that rise was due to winter pressures and how much to financial pressures and demand on patient care.

Sadly, we in mid-Essex have not shared in that so-called improvement. If only we had, my constituents would not write to me so often about their problems. In mid-Essex in March 1997, 8,361 people were waiting for hospital treatment. In December 1999, the latest available figure, it was 9,851. In March 1997, 104 people, and falling, were waiting 12 months or more for treatment. In December 1999, the figure was 1,060, and rising. We have the added indignity that, at the end of November, early December, the Government's most cherished promise that no one would wait more than 18 months for treatment was also breached, yet we had no apology.

On out-patient lists, the Government thought that they had come up with a wonderful little wheeze. Some bright spark, realising the problems faced by the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), because the figures were not falling and he had rashly said on the "Today" programme one morning that if they did not come down he would resign, decided to save the right hon. Gentleman's bacon—that was before the Prime Minister decided to save it for him by making him the Labour candidate for the mayor of London—by stringing out the length of time before anyone ever sees a consultant after having seen the GP, so creating a significant waiting list to get on to the waiting list for treatment. Nationally, that has been a disaster. The figure has risen from 250,000 to more than 500,000.

In my constituency, matters are even worse. In March 1997, a total of 555 people were waiting 13 weeks or more to see a consultant. Now, the figure is 3,699, which is unacceptable. That is why we need more money.

I come now to the distortion of clinical needs. The Secretary of State said that that does not exist and the hon. Member for Wakefield confirmed that. But, as Mandy Rice-Davies once said, they would say that wouldn't they? It is in their interests to try to spin that line. Unfortunately, to use a stockbroker term, what we are seeing is churning. If an operation is relatively minor, cheap and quick to do, it will be done more quickly than a non-emergency operation that is more complicated, expensive and time consuming, because of the pressures being placed on hospitals and trusts to deliver the Government's deadlines and targets.

As a general election approaches, the pressures will build even more, because the Government will have to show, by hook or by crook, that they have honoured their pledge on waiting lists. They may do it with mirrors or spin, but, whatever the real situation, they will claim to have achieved it because it would be too politically embarrassing for them to admit otherwise. People in the real world, waiting for treatment, will know what the Government are up to.

There is the further problem of trolley waits. Unison did a survey of my local hospital, Broomfield hospital, from 31 October to 5 December 1999. That end date is slightly before the problems of the winter pressures kicked in, so that cannot be used as an excuse. In that period, the number of people having to wait on a trolley from four to 12 hours for a hospital bed was 120. Even worse, the number waiting from 12 to 24 hours was 47. It is unacceptable to have people waiting around in A and E departments or elsewhere to get onto a ward.

Chelmsford has a problem that is shared throughout the country: the cancellation for non-clinical reasons of non-emergency treatment. A survey conducted at Broomfield between October and 22 December 1999—again, just before the winter pressures began to have a significant impact—showed that the number of people whose operations had been cancelled a month before admission was 118, but the number whose operations had been cancelled on the day of admission was 201.

Imagine being psychologically prepared for an operation, with the mental anguish and worry, and turning up at the hospital only to be told that, for non-clinical reasons, the operation has been cancelled. That is unacceptable. Everyone accepts that, if there is a major road accident or a disaster, operations will have to be cancelled to give precedence to emergency treatment, but for those 201 people, that was not the case. That is terrible.

[Mr. Burns]

The half-baked solution, which will not work, was to announce the closure of three wards in my constituency, with the loss of 84 beds. To be fair, part of the solution was to eliminate the problem of delayed discharge, and I welcome that, but the wards should not have been closed: they should have been used to bring down the waiting lists. I see the hon. Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson) nodding in agreement. I wonder whether he knows that, six months after the introduction of the policy of working with social services to eliminate the problem of delayed discharge patients in hospitals, the number of people in Broomfield as delayed discharges is 89.

Mr. Trickett: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Gentleman to filibuster the debate when many Back Benchers want to take part in this very important discussion?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): That is not a point of order for the Chair, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

Mr. Burns: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a sign of the hon. Gentleman's embarrassment that he has to call my speech a filibuster. He does not like to have to listen to what is going on in the real world, as it does not dovetail with the spin from Millbank. He should learn, because I cannot believe that his constituents do not write to him complaining about delays in their local hospital.

Everything is not as rosy in the NHS as the Secretary of State would have us believe. I am the first to wish him well, because we all want the most effective and efficient provision of health care for our constituents within the health service, for those who choose to use it. I only wish that, instead of trying to convey a situation that does not exist, the Government would be a little more honest and consider some of the tough decisions that will have to be taken to ensure that the health service continues to develop and improve, providing the health care that we all want for our constituents.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. So far, there has been no speech shorter than 18 minutes in this debate. I appeal to hon. Members to realise that shorter speeches make more friends.

5.46 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have told my Whip that if I take more than 10 minutes he must pull me down.

The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) said that his party was in power for 18 years and did not privatise the national health service. The reality is that it did. Anyone who knows how difficult it is for a constituent to get on an NHS dentist's list will realise that the Tories deliberately and cynically pushed dentistry out of the national health service. The vast majority of people who need dental treatment now have to pay for it. I needed dental treatment and refused to go private, but I had to wait three months for an appointment. That is what the Tories did: they privatised the NHS and they would do even worse next time.

Miss Kirkbride: Dream on.

Mr. Martlew: The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) encouraged his colleagues to make political capital out of the problems. The Conservatives are too stupid to realise that they cannot make political capital out of the NHS, because the public will not forgive them for the state that they left it in: there is nothing in it for them. They are a bit like a—*[Interruption.]* They are a bit—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have tried by silent entreaty to silence the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride). I must now tell her that I have had enough of her sedentary comments. They are delaying the debate.

Mr. Martlew: The Conservatives are a bit like a punch-drunk boxer: they do not know why they have come here—and most of them have disappeared. Politically, on the health service, they are brain-damaged.

The benefits of the £21 billion—the increase in nurses' pay, the increase in the number of nurses, and the increase in the number of doctors—are starting to show through. That may be even more the case in my constituency than elsewhere. In a way, that has been easy, because although I would not say that the NHS in my constituency was decimated, it was certainly starved of investment in the 18 years of Conservative Government.

Since we have had a Labour Government, we have closed the Victorian mental asylum and opened the brand-new Carleton clinic, which has provided an excellent service since opening last year. At the beginning of April, we will have a brand-new district general hospital—which we have waited more than 20 years for—under a contract that was signed after the Labour Government took over. Five attempts to build a new hospital were aborted under the Conservatives.

It may take seven years to train a doctor and three years to train a nurse, but under the Labour Government we have got a brand-new hospital in less than three years. It will be an excellent hospital, providing services—especially maternity services—that used to be on a split site. We have heard about various factors—lack of cardiac surgeons, for instance—that have led to the loss of lives. The fact that the paediatricians were on one site and the maternity unit on another cost babies' lives year after year—under the previous Labour Government, too, it must be said. The new hospital is coming and people are certain to see an improvement. That is why people will say that the Labour Government are doing their best. The NHS is like a supertanker, and turning it round has not been easy, but we are now seeing the effect of a good health service in Carlisle and the rest of the country.

NHS Direct will also come on stream locally in the autumn and provide an extra facility for my constituents. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) can pull faces about that, but the people who ring NHS Direct when they have a problem will be pleased by it.

There is no doubt that things are improving, but I cannot let the Secretary of State off completely. We still face challenges in North Cumbria. We have two district

general hospitals, one in Whitehaven and one in Carlisle, which are separated by 40 miles of very bad roads. The population of the area dictates that we should have only one hospital, but that is not feasible, sensible or practical. However, the funding formula used takes no account of the fact that we need two district general hospitals. We need to keep the facilities of a district general hospital on both sites.

The two existing trusts will be merged in the near future, and we will have one acute trust and two district general hospitals. However, services will not improve as they should unless the Secretary of State is prepared to accept that there are rural areas whose needs the Conservatives did not address in the past and this Government need to address in future. We need to take account of the fact that North Cumbria is a massive area that includes the lake district, not an urban area in which everyone lives near the hospital.

The situation is improving, but we face many challenges. We need more nurses in our area. A recent scare put out by Unison claimed that a move to a single site would cost 180 jobs. That created much distress among the nursing staff and for my constituents. They thought, "Here we have a Labour Government who said that they were going to improve the NHS, but they are going to sack 180 nurses." The story was a fabrication, and in reality those 180 jobs are safe—and we will take on extra nurses in the future.

The people of Britain have a choice. Do they want partial privatisation of the NHS by the Conservatives—I suspect that even their focus groups are telling them that people do not want to pay for private insurance—or do they want the Prime Minister's pledge that if the economy is going right—and it would be stupid to commit to spending the extra money if there is a slump—spending will be brought up to the European average?

People who work in the NHS in my constituency are looking forward to that extra spending. For too long under the Conservatives, NHS staff did not know where the money was coming from. They have heard the platitudes—we heard them today from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns)—about how magnificent they are.

Mr. Burns: They are.

Mr. Martlew: In that case, it is a pity that the Conservatives did not pay them properly.

Under the Labour Government, the nurses will get the best increase that they have had for 10 years. It is easy to say that the staff are magnificent, but the Conservatives never provided the resources to match their magnificence. A Labour Government created the NHS and we are committed to it. We will modernise it and we will give the people of this country the health service that they deserve.

5.54 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Above all else, this debate is about expectations—the expectations by the people of Britain of a decent and healthy life, and a good quality of life, and the expectation that Governments will do what they say they will do.

Unlike many of those who have spoken, I wish to start with the common ground between hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, which is that those expectations—the public perceptions of what they can expect out of life in terms of health—have changed and are changing. I do not want to become too philosophical in a debate on health—indeed, in any debate, that might be a disadvantage—but it may be true to say that as people have become less sure about their journey to the next life, they have become more interested in preserving this one for as long as possible. Certainly, the nature of people's expectations of their time on this planet is affected by whether they think they can look forward to going anywhere else.

It is also true that as ageing has changed—not just in terms of how long people live, but in terms of what they expect to do when they are older—that has altered people's expectations of health. It is said that in my grandparents' time people were regarded as old at the age of 50. Now my 83-year-old father looks forward to travelling across Europe at regular intervals—at considerably more regular intervals than I do—and expects to be able to do so in good heart and health.

All that is common ground because those problems would confront any Government of any political persuasion. My disagreement with Labour Members is that they do not seem to appreciate that Conservatives recognise that common ground and have, in their hearts, the same desire to see good health for all the people—not only for personal and familiar reasons, but because we care about the welfare and well-being of all our constituents. It is nonsense to pretend otherwise, and facile to have a debate about who does not care about public health standards. All hon. Members care about health—

Mr. Martlew *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but the reason why I care about health is that before we had an NHS, my grandparents and great-grandparents had to buy their false teeth, let alone their spectacles, second-hand from Woolworths. When my father was a boy going to school in London, there were children there with no shoes on their feet and with rickets. Conservative Members do care about decent public health for all, including working-class people, because many of us come from such backgrounds.

The difference between the parties is that we understand that if we are to address the changing expectations, we must do so with a coherent strategy, and that is incompatible with short-term political stunts and spin. That is what the Government's waiting list priority smacks of, not a long-term strategic view of requirements.

The second type of expectation is the expectation that a Government will do what they say they will do. I mean specifically the mismanagement of expectations—the cynical business of making the electorate believe before the general election that the problems could be easily solved. I refer hon. Members to the Labour party manifesto, which makes no judgment about the difficulties and gives no preamble about how hard the problems will be to solve. It says, in clear and specific terms, that the new Labour Government

> will do better . . . We will restore the NHS as a public service.

It pledges to spread best practice and ensure rising standards of care. Those are not guarded or considered words, but bold claims which—if they are not realised—will lead to disappointment and, ultimately, to despair.

[Mr. Hayes]

Labour suggested to the electorate, many of whom were fooled into supporting that party at the general election, that the problems would be solved in a straightforward, fast and simple way. If one sows seeds of hope of that kind, one harvests despair. When the Government consider their record on health over five years—perhaps four—there will be no point in their saying to people, "We couldn't do what we hoped to do or what we said we were going to do. We couldn't deliver on the pledges that the electorate accepted as straightforward and honest. We need more time." No Government can say that unless they are straightforward and honest when they make the initial claims and promises.

If the Labour party election manifesto had talked about strategic difficulties, long-term plans and matters that would not be dealt with in the lifetime of a Parliament by straightforward means, we might have some sympathy. It is possible that we would be less critical than we are obliged to be today, in the interests of our constituents and of our country.

I hope that the Minister of State, when he replies to the debate, will respond to five specific points that I shall make very briefly. First, will he ensure that new NHS treatments are not introduced at the cost of cuts in the existing health service? For example, a new drug that treats a particular condition should be introduced without a parallel decline in a traditional service such as nursing. The resonance of the old truth that people are nursed back to health should not be lost in the push for ever more sophisticated solutions.

Secondly, we must look again at the variety of health needs that are not currently identified as separate and distinct problems. I have a particular interest in acquired brain injury—head injury. The problem with acquired brain injury is not that people are not treated well and properly when the accident that causes the injury—it usually is an accident and one that requires intensive care and emergency treatment—nor that their neurological problems are not dealt with. The problem is that the patient's subsequent needs and treatment are not considered to be worthy of separate attention.

Injuries to the brain and head are not identified as a discrete and separate subject, with the result that many of a patient's subsequent needs are left to haphazard, piecemeal provision. That provision depends on the particular policy of the health authority, hospital or professionals involved.

Thirdly, I hope that the Minister will ensure that, when NICE studies treatments with a view to recommending a policy on them, the people already receiving those treatments will not be disadvantaged. No better example of that problem exists than the case of beta interferon. A number of people receive that drug already, and we know that there is an inequality about the way in which it is provided. However, we do not want those already receiving the drug to be disadvantaged by a new policy.

Fourthly, I am sure that aftercare services, such as convalescence services, will increasingly be moved into the community. When that happens, the Government must ensure that resources follow the patient. It is often more expensive to look after a person at home than it is in hospital, where economies of scale can be made. The small hospitals in many of our smaller towns and rural communities are disappearing, in accordance with the strategy of moving aftercare services into the community.

I do not necessarily disagree with that strategy, but I worry that the resources will not follow the patient, with the result that the funds devoted to such care will decrease over time, and that the quality of care will diminish accordingly. We need good liaison between social services and other agencies involved in that care and health authorities. If necessary, the structure for that communication and liaison must be formalised.

Finally, I hope that the Minister will reconsider the impact of sparsity on the delivery of rural health services. We must take on board the complaints of people who live in remote communities, such as my constituency. The Minister will understand that there is a difference between a sparse population and a scattered one. The degree of sparsity and scatter affects the ability of emergency services to respond to need, but it also impacts on less "glamorous" difficulties, such as those faced by people visiting relatives in hospital. For example, if an elderly spouse is taken into hospital, the healthy partner may have to make a round trip of 50 miles to visit. That problem may not be glamorous, but it is important to those whom it affects.

I have a letter from my constituent Mrs. O'Toole of Spalding, in which she makes the point about rurality. She tells me that, since the provisions in Spalding were reduced, her family has been forced to travel to Peterborough for casualty facilities, a round trip of 50 miles.

Two still more fundamental problems remain with the Government's approach. The first was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) in his opening remarks, and it concerns the difference between clinical and political judgments. I shall elucidate by identifying the differences between efficacy and priority, and between cost-effectiveness and affordability.

The second fundamental problem concerns the measurement of outcomes, alluded to by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe). He made two or three very good points, but unfortunately shrouded them in a good deal of prejudice and bile.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was pleased with me.

Mr. Hayes: My remark was kindly, an example of me at my most generous.

The Labour manifesto states:

> With Labour, the measure will be quality of outcome.

However, all hon. Members know that there is a tendency to measure expenditure and the numbers of people passing through the service. Those measures may be perfectly appropriate, but they do not measure the quality of outcome. We must differentiate between discussions of waiting lists, numbers and the amounts of money being spent, and the need to investigate how effectively money is spent, and how that is being delivered in terms of outcome.

The harvest of disappointment is turning into a harvest of despair. The Secretary of State said that urgent cases had been given priority over the winter. That is not the experience of all of my constituents, however. The daughter of a Mrs. Wendy Allen wrote to me to tell me

that her mother, who suffers from a serious condition, was admitted to Leicester royal infirmary on Tuesday 4 January to prepare for an operation to remove half of her liver the next day. However, on Wednesday morning, Mrs. Allen was informed that her operation could not go ahead due to a lack of intensive-care beds.

That is precisely the sort of case to which my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) referred in his remarks. It is not the experience of my constituents—and I believe that the same is true for the constituents of all hon. Members—that the prioritisation of urgent cases has been delivered in practice.

I do not fear what will happen politically if the Government do not address problems such as those I have described. However, as an honourable and dutiful Member of Parliament, I fear for my constituents, among whom not only cardiac patients will continue to regard the Government as heartless, and not only those seeking maternity care will consider them to be all mouth and no delivery.

6.8 pm

Mr. Stephen Hesford (Wirral, West): I shall begin with a word about the position adopted by the Liberal Democrats. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) asked the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) what the Liberal Democrats would do to fund their approach to the health service. As I sat in the Chamber listening to the debate, I noted the rather idiosyncratic response of the hon. Member for North Devon. Although he did not respond at the time, he wrote at least one cheque while the debate continued. That is a novel solution to the problem. I look forward to the cheque being cashed on behalf of the national health service, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) deserves congratulation for raising the matter of public health—a vital matter that needs to be emphasised at every opportunity. One of the sadnesses of the cycle of debates is that we never get on to such issues.

I come now to the subjects that Conservative Members seem not to want to mention. The debate has been about financial provision, but they did not mention the pledge from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that, over five years, the proportion of gross domestic product devoted to the NHS would reach the European average. They never mentioned that, yet it is a key issue. One reason for not mentioning it is their crazy tax pledge, to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred.

The Prime Minister's pledge requires, year on year for five years, stable and effective growth in the economy. The Tories do not want to discuss the issue because they cannot promise that. Their handling of the economy over 18 years was a cycle of boom and bust. They cannot promise that steady growth, which is why they will not talk about the proportion of GDP matching European funding.

Mr. Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hesford: If I must.

Mr. Swayne: Surely the hon. Gentleman recognises that the easiest way to achieve a proportion of GDP as a target would be to engineer an economic downturn. That would secure it quicker than any other method. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that at the current growth rate of 5 per cent. per year, as claimed, it will take us 19 years to reach the level of funding enjoyed by France, and 25 years to reach that enjoyed by Germany?

Mr. Hesford: I wish that I had not given way, but I am generous to a fault.

The other matter that the Tories would not discuss today was their approach to health insurance. It seems surprising in a debate on financial provision that they should say nothing about that. I call it their "one club" approach, and I suspect that they have begun to realise that they have been beating themselves over the head with it. Whether they have abandoned the club, I do not know. If they finally put away the nonsense about privatisation and health insurance, I would be the first to welcome their conversion. I suspect, however, that that is not the case. They privately harbour that wish, but have not had the courtesy or decency to mention it in the debate.

I listened to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) address a conference of general practitioners in Bristol. He was asked how far we could push the burden, and who would pay for the expansion of private health insurance. He said two strange things, which may explain why he will not talk now about this aspect. He was asked whether, if he were Secretary of State and he thought that people should take out private health insurance, he would he give all members of public sector services private health insurance. He burst out laughing and said no, he would not. Why would he not give that commitment if it is such a sensible way forward? The answer is cost.

More telling was the hon. Gentleman's remark that the burden should be put on to private business. That answer went against his own logic. Pressed on how far that could be taken, he said, "But not too much." He recognised the flaw in the argument—that lumping private health insurance on to private business would burden it with a cost that it does not now face. The Tories are seeking to impose burdens on the private sector business community. The hon. Gentleman had to say, in a lighthearted way, that the burden should not be put on too many companies. What does that mean? Who will pick up that bill? It is a chaotic approach.

Bearing in mind that the hon. Gentleman was addressing an audience of GPs, it is not surprising that he was asked from the floor, "If you want to bring private sector money into the health service, where does that leave us?" The hon. Gentleman said something like, "It's not for you; it would be too much trouble to introduce those arrangements for GPs." So GPs, who make up 90 per cent. or so of the health service in terms of seeing patients, would not be included in those insurance provisions.

When the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) spoke for the Opposition on health, she said:

> I think if someone wants to pay to see their GP, they should be encouraged to do so . . . The problem with the NHS is that we do not charge for much of what we do."

Which is it? Do the Tories really have no intention of funding visits to the GP by imposing charges?

Dr. Fox: I will put the hon. Gentleman out of his misery for a moment while he gathers his thoughts. It is

[Dr. Fox]

obvious that very few insurers offer any cover anywhere for general practice problems. It is common sense that any expansion of the non-NHS sector would be unlikely to focus on general practice. That is blindingly obvious to anyone—except, it seems, the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hesford: I am amazed by that intervention, which brings me to my next point.

Rather curiously, the hon. Gentleman also said at that meeting—and I have seen it reported elsewhere on a number of occasions—that the insurance sector, on his own estimation, is not up to the job. It is diabolical at the moment; it does not serve the public. When will it start serving the public? When will this be a credible policy? As the Prime Minister has said in Question Time, it is a Trojan horse. It is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield said, privatisation by any other name.

To paraphrase a former Member of this House, I say this to members of the public who take note of these debates, "Under the hon. Gentleman's regime, don't become elderly, don't need a hip operation, don't need a knee operation, don't need a hernia operation, don't need a cataract operation. If you do, they will make you pay for it, and if you can't afford it, you won't get it."

I want to discuss what is happening in my constituency. I cannot believe that Wirral is unique in this regard. It was interesting that in his opening remarks, the hon. Gentleman refused to go into detail or give any examples—I wonder why, considering that this is an Opposition debate. It may have been because of a lack of clear examples. I contacted the chief executives of my community trust, the health authority and the acute trust. I read them the title of the debate and asked them to comment on it in the light of their experience in Wirral.

The chief executive of the community trust said that he is satisfied with the current year's financial position. He went on to say that the trust has benefited considerably from the modernisation agenda, and gave the example of NHS Direct. I welcome the introduction of that in the Wirral.

The chief executive of the health authority said that there are sufficient resources to address the current programme and there is no evidence on the Wirral of a skewing of clinical priorities. He knows of no local consultants who are saying that such a distortion is happening. On the Wirral, local consultants with waiting lists and other priorities to take into account have been able to show sensitivity and flexibility and deal with each priority to the satisfaction of all concerned. The chief executive described that to me as a clinically sound case mix. Skewing clinical priorities is not an inherent part of the waiting list initiative, as is claimed by Conservative Members.

The chief executive of the acute trust, who is, perhaps, put on the spot more than anybody by the waiting list initiative, said that he has not been under any financial pressure at all in the current financial year, and in terms of capital investment this is the best year that the trust has had since its inception in 1991.

Mr. Hayes: As the hon. Gentleman is fond of quoting health professionals and their confidence in the Government's ability to deliver, will he reflect on the British Medical Association's view? It has written to the Prime Minister to tell him that the Government's habit of constantly reannouncing the same figures is making it impossible for the health professionals, whom the hon. Gentleman is quoting, to plan the effective delivery of the service. The BMA has not had a reply from the Prime Minister. Would the hon. Gentleman care to reply?

Mr. Hesford: If I may, I will leave that to the parties concerned.

I endorse the Secretary of State's remark in a recent speech in Birmingham:

> There is no funding system or health care system that is fairer or more efficient than the NHS.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call the hon. Lady—

Mr. Swayne *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call the hon. Gentleman.

6.22 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The greatest potential distortion of clinical priorities— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I might just say to hon. Members that it is as well to pay attention to the debate. If no one had risen on the Opposition Benches, an hon. Member on the Government Benches could have been called. I hope that hon. Members will concentrate and not spend too much time gossiping.

Mr. Swayne: I hope that your stricture was not aimed at me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for I am bereft of anyone with whom to gossip.

It strikes me that the greatest potential for distortion of clinical priorities lies with the very mechanism that the Secretary of State has set up to do away with those distortions: the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. When the Health Act 1999 went through the House, we were assured that the institute's terms of reference would be merely clinical efficiency and effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. In Committee Room 16 last July, the Minister introduced a change to those terms of reference, under which the institute had to consider also the overall affordability to the health service of any decision that it made. In other words, the Secretary of State would be able to hide behind the implications of any decision by NICE.

I welcomed the Secretary of State's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), when he said, "No, I will make decisions on funding and on whether to make provision for certain treatments." The exchange was about beta interferon, which is appropriate given the lobby today. I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State will make those decisions, but it strikes me as rather odd that he introduced the change last July.

It is, of course, appropriate that the question of whether a treatment should be available is one of overall funding to the health service. We have flogged the question of funding this evening, but it is only the Government who are to blame for the general lack of confidence in their figures. The fact that they claim to have provided an additional £21 billion for the health service in this Parliament was interestingly questioned by Mr. Kellner's article in the *Evening Standard* on 14 January. He said

that there had been a process of triple accounting, and the actual figure was nearer £5 billion. The fact that the Government's figures should be questioned in that way is a consequence of their own systematic spinning.

The hon. Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford) referred to the Government's latest pledge. They aspire to spend on health care a percentage of gross domestic product equivalent to the European Union's average spend on health care. That begs one or two questions. It is estimated that it will take us eight years to get there, at an annual increase of 5 per cent. in real terms, but by then the European average may have significantly increased, and I do not doubt that it will.

Why do UK patients deserve a lower level of health care outcomes than that enjoyed by patients in France and Germany? Those countries enjoy a much higher proportion of health care expenditure than the European average. As I said to the hon. Gentleman, the current aim of increasing health care expenditure by 5 per cent. in real terms each year means that it will take many years to reach the levels of expenditure in France and Germany—19 and 25 years respectively.

Mr. Hayes: I do not want to indulge in gossip, but will my hon. Friend illustrate his point by reference to beta interferon? The number of multiple sclerosis sufferers prescribed beta interferon in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Finland, Greece, Ireland and Turkey is considerably greater than in Great Britain. Perhaps that is why my constituent Mr. Kevin Keeble, of Roman Bank, Holbeach Bank, cannot get the drug.

Mr. Swayne: I have no need to illustrate the point because my hon. Friend has done it so effectively.

It is all very well saying that in a few years' or, indeed, in many years' time we will achieve European levels of expenditure on health care, because the crisis is happening now. It may be stretching the point to say that, in some respects, this country has a third-world level of health care, but anyone who read the series of articles in *The Daily Telegraph* just before Christmas about the level of treatment available to many of our elderly people would not think it an exaggeration. We have much lower levels of satisfactory health outcomes for critical diseases such as heart conditions and cancer care than in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, and that is not acceptable.

Returning to clinical distortion, we know that out-patient waiting lists have risen by 248,000 since the election. Even in-patient waiting lists—a higher priority target for the Government—rose by 36,000 in December alone. However, the greatest potential clinical distortion is the alarming growth in the number of patients waiting to get on to a waiting list, and who are awaiting their first appointment with a hospital consultant. That number has risen by some 500,000. Those people represent a clinical distortion because we do not know what is wrong with them and they have not been assessed by a consultant.

It is all very well the Secretary of State making a gibe at our proposals by saying about the winter crisis, "We wouldn't be guilty of turning people away because of the wrong sort of illness." The fact is that, at the moment, people with critical conditions are being turned away.

A constituency case was brought to my attention of an elderly lady who was seriously ill with bowel cancer. Her operation was cancelled because of the winter crisis. Last week, Dr. Peter Wilde, consultant cardiologist at the Bristol Royal infirmary, told the Prime Minister clearly that, if he had been able to operate on all the patients with heart conditions under his care, he would have saved the lives of half of them.

The Secretary of State and, indeed, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) have made it clear that there is no certainty of any relief from the private health care sector. The Secretary of State said that there was not an army of under-employed surgeons who could suddenly take up the slack. That is, of course, true, because often enough—in fact, usually—the very same people operate in both the private and public sectors.

However, it is monstrous to suggest that the private sector cannot provide some capacity. We all know—I certainly know, and I doubt whether I am the only person who has had this brought to his attention—that NHS operations are being cancelled because of cash shortages. Such operations could take place using resources available in the private sector—and they ought to do so. That was the basis of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), and it goes to the heart of our patients guarantee.

Our solution, which has of course been much criticised by the Secretary of State, is to provide a core NHS in which those with, let us say, Cinderella conditions such as hernias and in-growing toenails would be treated elsewhere and would pay for it. I reject any such suggestion. In fact, it strikes me as monstrous that any such health service could be devised. It is ridiculous to suggest that, for example, varicose veins would have to be treated outside the NHS because the condition was not critical or life threatening and therefore did not meet the criteria that might be devised for a core health service. Although a varicose vein might almost be a matter of cosmetic surgery to one person, it might be a life-threatening condition, causing severe ulcers, to another.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Will the hon. Gentleman help me and other hon. Members by giving his interpretation of the comments of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), a Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, who told "Sky News" that, under the Conservatives, people would look to the NHS

> when they had serious life-threatening conditions and would look to their private insurance to help them

with the rest? The hon. Gentleman seems to be arguing a rather different point.

Mr. Swayne: I do not think that that is so. I am not here to speak for my hon. Friend, but I shall honestly tell the Minister what I think my hon. Friend meant—I shall certainly tell him what I mean.

If we are honest and work within the same resource restraints, reprioritising the NHS so that the sickest patients are given the highest priority and treated first—I assume that that would be entirely reasonable to all people—will of necessity mean that people with less critical conditions will wait longer.

One problem that results from fixation with the overall size of the waiting list is that some people are not waiting long enough. Simple conditions are treated quickly to massage the overall figures while those with more critical conditions are waiting. If, as a result of a patients

[Mr. Swayne]

guarantee, the sickest patients are treated first, those with lower clinical priorities might consider other possibilities. That is, after all, the basis of freedom of choice. Such a structure would crystallise and focus the private insurance market, unlike the current position, and might result in the development of products that addressed many of our people's needs.

Mr. Trickett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Swayne: No, I am afraid that I do not have the time to give way.

In addition to prioritisation of existing resources, we must of necessity seek to increase such resources. Labour Members believe that spending in the existing NHS model, almost alone in providing for the health care needs of the United Kingdom, can reach the European average. I suggest that they look elsewhere in the world—they are alone. In no other nation is such a proportion of gross national product spent without a much healthier contribution from the private sector.

There has been much criticism of our ability to continue to fund the health service as in the past owing to our overall tax guarantee.

Mr. Trickett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Swayne: No, I will not give way; I have told the hon. Gentleman so.

It should have been obvious to anyone with experience of the 1980s that cutting the burden of taxation generates additional tax revenue.

6.36 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I appreciate that I do not have much time to speak, so I shall be brief and not indulge in too much rhetoric.

We have heard a great deal of rhetoric from Opposition Members—despite the fact that there have been only two to four of them in the Chamber throughout—but we have not heard anything approaching a policy. We have also heard much gloom, doom and despondency from them, which saddens me. Frankly, they need to get out more. They need to go to hospitals, to visit general practices, and to speak to nurses, doctors, health workers and, above all, patients. If they did so, they would find that most patients are very satisfied with the health service. Survey after survey has revealed a very high degree not only of satisfaction but of trust in those who provide health care—more than can be said of politicians.

It is obviously the job of the Opposition to rubbish the Government, and they are doing what they consider a good job—others may have other views and I could not possibly comment. However, it upsets me greatly when I hear the health service being run down. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), who is no longer present, said several times that we have the worst health service in Europe. The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) talked about the third-world status of our health service. Those are disgraceful comments, which I deplore. They drive down public confidence, morale and the standards that the 1 million people working in the health service strive daily to achieve for their patients. I shall give an example of that.

I recently visited a very elderly patient, of whom I do not see much—I still do some GP work, as hon. Members know. She asked me to look at a lump in her breast. When I examined her at home, I found that she had a fungating breast cancer, which is a very advanced form of cancer, unpleasant to deal with, a nasty thing to have and medically very bad news. I asked her why she had waited so long before calling me, and she said that she had discovered the lump only the week before. I said, "That is not true, is it?" She said that it was not but that she did not want to trouble me. I told her that I had known her for many years and that she knew that she was not troubling me. The truth was that she had read in the paper that elderly people did not matter in the NHS, and concluded that there was no point in calling me because there was nothing much that I could do.

What saddens me is that I know that, within two weeks of seeing that lady, I could guarantee that she would be seen by a cancer specialist in the local hospital's breast unit, where she would receive expert care. She had read in the papers not the good news that this Government have made cancer treatment a priority, so that people can be seen within two weeks of their GP referring them, but that elderly people did not matter. If we talk down the health service and those who work in it, we drive down patient expectation. People expect bad treatment before they even start.

Another patient whom I saw recently told me not to bother referring her because she would never get to the top of the queue of those waiting to be seen. That is not true; I know that my health trust has relatively modest waiting lists for her condition.

Opposition Members have every right to rubbish the Government—that is what they do—but they have no right to drive down the NHS and the morale of its staff, or to frighten patients. If they are to rubbish us, they should at least have the goodness and decency to come up with their own policies—which are lacking.

6.40 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): As a relatively new Member of Parliament, I am disappointed by the debate. We have again missed an opportunity to lay aside cheap political points and to debate health care in this country with honesty.

Criticisms of the Opposition motion overlook the fundamental point. The Opposition can, of course, choose what to put in their motion. Our last health debate, on 18 January, was held in close proximity to what the Government then described as a flu epidemic. I note that today the Secretary of State described the winter just passed as "no exception". That is what general practitioners told us at the time. The purpose of our motion on that occasion was to allow debate on the impact of the flu crisis. Today's debate is held very near the end of the financial year for health trusts and authorities, so it strikes me as perfectly sensible to make that the main focus of our debate. However, although the debate has ranged far and wide, it has not focused on the roots of the financial crisis facing the national health service, or on the impact on patients of the distortion of clinical practice.

Patients who have to wait and who have operations cancelled no longer feel that they come first. The Government's waiting list initiative has undermined

clinical priorities; and to those who have to wait, it appears that the Government's priorities come first. That is anathema to health professionals who are trained to treat patients according to clinical need: they are trained to be able to rush into casualty in time of crisis and to decide within minutes who should be treated first. That is what prompted GP Sharon Bennett to tackle the Prime Minister on "Newsnight". She pointed out that

> Most managers are under extreme pressure to reach the targets. Waiting lists are being manipulated and as a doctor I find that completely unethical.

Ask doctors to do the unethical and they soon become demoralised. Ask patients to submit to the unethical and they soon lose faith in the service.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) hit the nail on the head when he said that one of the main purposes of the debate was to tackle the issue of unrealistic expectations. The Government have raised expectations so high that they now fail even approximately to match people's experience. The extra billions that we have heard about mean nothing to the patients waiting anxiously for the treatment they need. It is as well if we as politicians remind ourselves of that. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) told us of 14 people who have had to wait more than 18 months. The extra billions do not appear to have reached them. To his information about cancelled operations, I should like to add that, in the last financial year, 57,000 operations were cancelled, and 9,000 of those who suffered cancellation were not recalled within a month. To them, some of today's debate will have been meaningless; they just want to get their treatment.

We as politicians and as the Opposition have the job of asking questions about the money that has been spent. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) for having summed up as neatly as anyone could the problem with the Government's elastic arithmetic. He did so in inches; as I see my children grow, I can relate to his methods. He said that if three inches, three inches and three inches are added together, the result is nine inches. That is pretty easy. In simple mathematical terms, three times three is nine. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) referred to Peter Kellner's article, which pointed out that the claimed £18 billion is more akin to £5 billion once general inflation has been stripped out. Lord Winston was right about that; he was also right to speak his mind.

From that £5 billion, we have to take the £500 million deficit accrued by trusts and health authorities. My constituency is sandwiched between Birmingham health authority, which, as we have already heard, has a deficit of £8.6 million, and Warwickshire health authority, which has a deficit of £8.2 million. Managers in both trusts have told me that the problem is not only money that is promised but never received or that fails to match spiralling costs, but the parcelling of money in a way that makes operating based on clinical priority far more difficult: attaching money to particular uses creates great inflexibility.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) is keen on surveys, so here is one for him. Last year, the NHS Confederation carried out a survey of trusts and health authorities. It showed that 64 per cent. of trusts were less confident about their financial position than they were 12 months ago, and the figures we have discussed today tell us why that is; 55 per cent. of trusts believed that income would exceed expenditure by up to £5 million—my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring showed how costs increase; 37 per cent. of trusts believed that they would have to make cuts in direct service provision during the coming financial year to balance their budget; 24 per cent. of trusts said that their financial position meant that they would have to postpone or cancel developments in the Government's priority area, mental health; and 20 per cent. of trusts said that their financial position meant that they would have to postpone or cancel developments in the area of reducing health inequalities. That all makes unattractive reading, but we are debating the financing of the NHS and whether or not it is in crisis, and that is the right debate to be having at this point in the financial year.

It does not help public confidence one iota to re-announce money. We heard about an especially bad example, in which £30 million spent on accident and emergency facilities was announced seven times—that is right over the top. The Government appear to have reached the stage of believing their own rhetoric. In one breath, the Secretary of State said of the £50 million boost to cardiac surgery that it was new, extra money; with the next breath, he said that it was part of the extra £21 billion that the Government are putting into the NHS. I guess that, if it is said enough times, even a Minister believes it. That sort of thing has undermined confidence in the Government's pledges. On the question of matching European funding for health care, even the Prime Minister is caught between a firm pledge and an aspiration. Everything depends on a great "if"—if the economy performs well, and if the Government can afford it. That is the biggest "if" we have ever heard.

In a recent speech delivered in South Ribble, my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring said:

> The British people want a system which guarantees that nobody ever has to endure the harrowing experience of someone whose treatment was postponed so often it became inoperable. They want a system that doesn't put half a million patients on the waiting list to get on the waiting list . . . a system in which doctors decide who should be treated, when and . . . no wait exceeds a clinical maximum. The Government has meddled with the system, making the sickest wait longest, which is . . . simply wrong. Staff are demoralised because they can't do what they were trained to do. The Government has raised expectations but they don't match people's experience. For the first time in a generation, we have a chance to hold an honest debate on how to buttress the NHS but the Government has closed its mind. The Prime Minister says there is "no alternative" to the Government's present strategy. What a missed opportunity! There is debate everywhere—in the press, in the professions and amongst the public. But the Government won't debate the options.

Like my hon. Friend, I believe that the NHS deserves better.

6.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): This has been an Opposition-day debate on a topic chosen by the Opposition. It is therefore a shame for the Opposition that, from the opening speech of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), the debate from the Opposition side has lacked focus, facts, policy alternatives, analysis and, for a good deal of the time, an audience. It speaks volumes that, for a considerable part of the afternoon, only two Members from the Opposition party bothered to turn up for an Opposition-day debate.

[Mr. John Denham]

On the subjects covered in the motion under discussion—financial management and deficits—the worst that we could deduce from the facts that emerged in the debate was that the situation was at least twice as bad in the last two years of the Tory Government as the worst that has been projected for the current year, and that does not take into account the extra funds that we have put into the health service over the past couple of years.

Cancelled operations were raised by the hon. Members for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), yet there was less chance of an operation being cancelled during the first two years of the present Government than during the last two years of the previous Government. That does not mean that the situation is good, or that we are happy that anyone's operation is cancelled, but the situation is better than it was before.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) raised a number of issues, principally private medicine. I understand his continuing concern, but the Government's view is that our priority should be to concentrate on the time for which consultants are contracted to work for the national health service, and to ensure that we get the best contribution during that time. That is where we are focusing our effort in our discussions with the British Medical Association about a new contract.

The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) had the same difficulty as other Opposition Members who spoke—he did not understand the policy of his own party, when he said that he did not want the privatisation of many services provided by the NHS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) is right to be proud of the new hospital that the NHS and the Government are delivering for his constituents. He raised the question of the funding formula, as did the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes). A review of the funding formula is under way. There will be no changes, other than the statistical changes, until we have the findings of the review. A wide range of factors will be taken into account in the review, and I cannot prejudge the outcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hesford) correctly pointed out the huge unanswered questions at the heart of what we know about current Opposition policy.

The hon. Member for New Forest, West made me wonder, as he always does, what the other candidates in his selection conference were like.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) rightly underlined the good work of the NHS. It is important to strike a balance between the proper discussion of issues that have yet to be resolved in the health service, and the presentation of a negative view that might persuade some patients not to take up the services on offer.

To the extent that there was any focus in the debate, it was the attack on the Government's pledge to reduce waiting lists and our determination to honour the promise that we made to voters at the last election. We will reduce waiting lists and honour that election promise, and we will do so for good reason. Fewer people on waiting lists means fewer people waiting for treatment. The main way in which we cut waiting lists is by treating more patients. It is as simple as that. More patients were treated last year, more are being treated this year and more will be treated next year. Those who say, as the Opposition do by implication, that we should let waiting lists rip are effectively saying that we should treat fewer patients.

Dr. Fox: That is not the case. The question is whether the correct patients are being treated, and whether patients are being treated in the right order. The Secretary of State said that under the waiting list initiative, there had been and would be no clinical distortion, but almost the entire medical profession says the opposite. When Dr. Wilde says that his patients died unnecessarily, having to wait because of clinical distortion, is he wrong or is he lying?

Mr. Denham: Let us look at the evidence. The charge that is made not infrequently is that the complex, difficult operations and those that are likely to require a stay in hospital are being reduced. The facts are as my right hon. Friend said earlier. There were 1,000 extra bypass operations last year. There were more hip operations and more knee replacement operations. There is no evidence that those complex, time-consuming operations have been cut to allow other operations to be carried out.

Mr. Burns *rose—*

Mr. Denham: I shall make progress.

The hon. Member for Woodspring produced no evidence to sustain his charge. Those who say that we should not be reducing waiting lists ought to tell us which of the extra half a million people who had operations last year would not have had them had the Conservative party been in power.

To be fair to the hon. Gentleman, in the past there was always a deathly silence when we asked which patients should not be treated. The hon. Gentleman has changed all that. He has told us, through *The Sunday Times*, which operations should not be done, unless people can pay for them: hip replacements, knee replacements, cataracts and hernias. That is an outrageous attack on the rights of patients, mainly elderly patients, to the NHS treatment for which they have paid all their lives.

On 16 January, the hon. Gentleman told *The Sunday Times* that private medical insurance companies should cover such conditions as

> hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations,

and his hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) told Sky News that the Conservatives wanted people to look to the NHS

> when they had serious life-threatening conditions, and . . . to their private insurance to help them

with the rest.

The hon. Member for Woodspring should clarify the situation and get *The Sunday Times* to retract. He has had two months to do so, but he has not done so yet. He had the entire debate this afternoon during which to do so, but he did not.

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Mr. Denham: Let us hear from the hon. Gentleman. It would be interesting to hear a quick retraction and an assurance that there will be no change in people's ability to get those operations on the NHS.

Dr. Fox: As I said this afternoon, if it is a question of maintaining the NHS as a comprehensive service, I absolutely accept that. What the Minister and his colleagues cannot conceive is that additionality is possible, and that an increase in capacity and more cases treated by the private sector would offload the NHS. That would be a total increase in capacity, and it is only the Government's ideological bigotry that prevents them from being able to accept the truth.

Mr. Denham: The entire House will have noted that I gave the hon. Gentleman time in my speech to reject the charge that we have made and to withdraw any misconstruction that we had put on what he said. The entire House now knows that he failed to reject the charge and failed to ask us to withdraw. He has confirmed the information. The 300,000 elderly people who had those operations last year and those who are waiting for them this year—for hips, cataracts, hernias and knees—now know that they would have to pay under a Tory Government.

We shall get waiting lists down not by trading in-patients against out-patients, not by doing one instead of the other, but by doing more of both. Clinical priority will continue to be the main determinant of who is treated.

Of course, we must do more, because the waiting list initiative alone is not enough to meet need. We acknowledge that, and we have therefore included in the waiting list initiative the two-week target for cancer waits. That will be introduced this year, because some people must be seen as quickly as possible. The Conservative party did not introduce such measures.

Although 1,000 extra heart operations will be done next year, we need more. We will therefore allocate £50 million so that 3,000 extra heart operations can be carried out. We give priority where it is needed.

The Conservative party chose the debate. Its members failed to score any points; they largely failed to turn up. They have confirmed that, under a Tory Government, many important procedures would no longer be available on the NHS. To that extent, the debate has been useful.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 179, Noes 307.

Division No. 97] **[7.1 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*

Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's modernisation programme for the NHS and the reduction in waiting lists and times that are being achieved through the dedication and hard work of NHS staff; notes the progress being made on recruiting more doctors and more nurses, building more hospitals, treating more patients and modernising more services; applauds the Government's decision to make tackling cancer, coronary heart disease and mental illness a priority; believes that financial provision for the NHS would be reduced as a consequence of the Conservatives' Tax Guarantee and that clinical need would be abandoned in favour of ability to pay under the Conservatives' health plans.

Small Business

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.15 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I beg to move,

That this House opposes the growing regulatory burdens that the Government has added to business costs; deplores the failure of the Government to understand the contribution that the small business sector makes to employment, growth and UK trade; calls on the Government to recognise the failure of the Better Regulation Task Force and the consequences of ill-thought-through legislation and regulations that have damaged small business; and condemns the Department of Trade and Industry for unco-ordinated policy initiatives and for diminishing the status of small business debate in the House of Commons.

I am pleased to welcome the Secretary of State to the Dispatch Box for tonight's debate. He is here to discuss, at our request, small business and the burden that it bears. I believe that this will be the first time that he has addressed the House on that subject at any length since taking office and I am therefore pleased to see him. I look forward with interest to hearing what he has to say.

New Labour promised small business a lot when it came to office. Indeed, its manifesto said:

Support for small businesses will have a major role in our plans for economic growth. We will cut unnecessary red tape.

Three years down the track, the Government avoid debates on small business and have deliberately done the subject down. There is a reason for that, of course, which is that their track record over the past three years has been to add £9.6 billion of regulatory costs to business. They fall disproportionately on the small business sector.

The Government also implement regulations in such a way that even their own chairman of the better regulation taskforce called it a dog's dinner. They were described in a Trade and Industry Committee report in terms that have not previously been seen in such reports on this subject. For example, the 13th report, on small businesses and enterprise, stated:

From the situation as we saw it a year ago, where there seemed to be something of a policy vacuum on SMEs—

small and medium-sized enterprises—

we have moved to one where there is some risk of an excess of loosely connected and apparently uncoordinated policy initiatives shooting off in all directions, generating noise and interest, but not commensurate light.

When the Government came to power, they promised an annual debate on small firms and made quite a virtue of that. We certainly do not disagree with holding such a debate, but the then Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry began the debate in the first year of the Parliament by saying that it

fulfils a commitment that the Government gave while in opposition, when we said that we would institute an annual parliamentary debate about the small business sector in the United Kingdom.—[*Official Report*, 19 June 1998; Vol. 314, c. 606.]

They did not have a small firms debate the following year. Indeed, at business questions, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the shadow Leader of the House, kept asking when we might

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

have such a debate. A whole year went by. When it eventually took place, it was relegated to Westminster Hall. As the British Chambers of Commerce said:

> From our perspective this has to be a downgrading of the importance of small firms. This debate should be in the House of Commons with the Prime Minister. It does not signal that the government is taking small firms seriously.

Even when the Government appear to have proposals to help small firms, the Secretary of State remains silent. Last June, they produced two documents, one of which was specifically about small firms and the Small Business Service. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment made a statement on post-16 training and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry sat next to him as both documents were important to business, but the only reference to the Small Business Service document throughout the statement amounted to some 21 words.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment referred to

> the parallel consultation on the Small Business Service announced today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1999; Vol. 334, c. 345.]

There was no detailed presentation in that statement. It is a mystery why, if the Small Business Service is to be of such value to the small business community, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry remained silent in his seat and did not take the opportunity to make a statement and, perhaps more pertinently, submit himself to questioning from the House about the new proposal that he was introducing on behalf of small businesses.

The Secretary of State will do anything rather than answer publicly for his failure to understand small businesses. Most important of all, by last year it was apparent to everyone, including small businesses and their representative organisations, that the Government and these Ministers are all talk and no delivery.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): Would the hon. Lady be kind enough to tell us how often her Administration held lectures, or rather debates, on small business services?

Mrs. Browning: We did not lecture the House, whereas we are used to having lectures from this Administration, not only on small business, but on just about everything. We held regular debates but, more important, Ministers in the previous Administration made statements to the House and held full debates. On both occasions, they were subject to questioning, whereas this Administration, especially the Secretary of State and his team, are reluctant to submit themselves to the scrutiny and questioning of hon. Members.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Does my hon. Friend recall that, in the early part of the Conservative Administration, we had Ministers, such as Sir David Mitchell, who understood businesses because they had run small businesses and brought their experience to the House?

Mrs. Browning: It is an added bonus when Ministers who speak on a subject actually know what they are talking about. That is one of the distinctions between the previous and the present Governments when it comes to any matter to do with business, but especially small businesses.

Not only are this Administration adding to business costs they have completely lost the plot.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central) *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I am happy to give way on that point.

Mr. Davies: How very amusing. Will the hon. Lady confirm that the figure of £9.6 billion is based on old regulations? It is based primarily on the minimum wage, which I understand she will support, so the Conservatives would have that cost. Does she accept that the figure for the working time directive is massively inflated? Would she reverse the working time directive should the Tories come to power? I suggest that she could not do so, because of EU law.

Mrs. Browning: All the burdens that the hon. Gentleman's Administration are putting on business are under review. They are all on the table, and are being closely considered.

The figure that I quoted for the total of the aggregate cost that the Government have put on business was produced by the British Chambers of Commerce. It was challenged by the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce in the debate in Westminster Hall. The British Chambers of Commerce subsequently issued a press release, which I shall quote as it may be helpful to the hon. Gentleman. It was responding to the fact that the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce had claimed that the figures were inaccurate—along the lines of the hon. Gentleman's argument. Chris Humphries, the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce, said:

> What matters to business is the overall cost of government regulation. We therefore stand by our overall figure of £10 billion and, in particular, the costs of the Working Time Directive.
>
> The Working Time Directive is by far the biggest cost facing business at £7.65 billion over the life of the Parliament. This includes the cost of minimum daily and weekly rest periods and a minimum paid annual leave, and the additional week's paid leave introduced from November 1999. This is of course the result of a European Directive but regardless of the source, business has to bear the cost.
>
> However, I must stress that, contrary to reports—

that is the reports from the Department of Trade and Industry—

> BCC's figures do not include the cost of paying the minimum wage, which we do not treat as a regulation. If we were to add the recurring financial costs of paying the minimum wage, the total cost of red tape on business would increase to a massive £17 billion.

I hope that that has been helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Lady confirm that those costs would continue under a Conservative Administration, and that there is no plan to reverse either the minimum wage or the working time directive? What is the point of bringing these matters to the table? It is not even true.

Mrs. Browning: I am happy to assist the hon. Gentleman. One thing that is pertinent to small business in particular and to business in general is the cumulative cost of regulation. It is not this regulation or that regulation, but the cumulative cost of regulations and the point at which that has an impact on whether a business can expand, move to new premises or take on new

employees. That is why the British Chambers of Commerce say that it is the overall cost of Government regulation.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I have given way twice to the hon. Gentleman. I will now give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry).

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not only the British Chambers of Commerce that is reporting such burdens on business? I understand that, this coming Friday, Lord Haskins, who was appointed by the Government to monitor regulation, will report that the administration of the working families tax credit costs small businesses £25 million a year. One of the Government's own appointees is reporting that.

Mrs. Browning: Lord Haskins chaired the better regulation taskforce. The Government claim to have tackled regulation, but they have had two key problems. When they have regulated, especially in the area of employment law, they have regarded it not as a cost on business, but as a social benefit that they have provided to people. The tab has always been picked up by business.

It is a little disingenuous for the Government to add regulation to regulation, thus adding to businesses' costs, and then to say, "Aren't we wonderful? We are providing workers with extra benefits. Someone else will have to decide how to pay for it". That is part of the problem that the Government have created, and it is the main reason why their better regulation taskforce failed.

Despite the efforts of Lord Haskins and others on the taskforce, regulation was moving apace, and they could not keep up with it, let alone cut it. The taskforce could not even make it better as time went by, given the Government's mismanagement by continually introducing new regulations on business, and given the inept way in which they went about their business and implemented regulations that they had put on the statute book. The Government had a manifesto pledge to cut red tape, but they added to the amount of regulation and cost until it became so out of control that they had to abandon the better regulation taskforce.

I have just had an exchange with the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) about the views of the British Chambers of Commerce. The Government consult, or so they say, but I am only too well aware that such consultation is meaningless when it comes to the legislative process. The views of business and its representative organisations are not taken into account. We constantly see a pattern in the regulations on small business and in other areas introduced by the Department of Trade and Industry and other Government Departments. They legislate and suddenly realise the inept way in which they have gone about it. They then have to shore up the situation by changing the regulations at the last minute. They parade that as listening to business, but the time to listen to business is at the beginning, during the consultation, not after the regulations are on the statute book and have had a damaging impact on people's businesses.

I should like to draw attention to some of the businesses and the varying sectors that have suffered under the Government. It is all very well to talk of £9.6 billion and of different sectors, but, at the end of the day, small business is about individuals—individuals who work hard. In many cases, we are talking about small family firms established by someone who may have gone as far as putting his or her house on the line to raise the necessary capital.

As all of us who have run our own companies know—I had 10 years' experience of running a company—it is necessary to get up, go out and secure business every day. Every aspect of the company must be managed. It is exciting; it is challenging; it is rewarding; but it is pretty scary at times. One of the key messages that I receive as I go around the country talking to those running businesses in various sectors is that they want the Government off their backs.

I can give the Government examples of what has happened to businesses in less than three years. A Mr. Chetwynd, who has a machining business in Warwickshire, writes:

> I have been in business now for 18 years and I have survived three recessions.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): How many did not survive?

Mrs. Browning: Are Labour Members suggesting that, if they were in charge for 18 years—which they will not be—the economic cycle would be as it is today? No one but a fool would say that. I suspect that even their prudent Chancellor would not make such a prediction. I must not allow myself to be distracted from what a real person running a real business has to say, in deference to some apparatchik who has a view on the subject. Mr. Chetwynd continues:

> I have expanded my company from 4 employees to 33 in this decade, all without the aid of grants, which I have not been clever enough to exploit.

He believes that most of the problem is

> due to this government and their total nonchalance at our predicament and unforgivable lack of knowledge and understanding of what it is like to employ people.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No. I am reading an important letter from someone who is at the sharp end, rather than sitting here and talking about it.

Mr. Chetwynd writes:

> The increasing burden on us is intolerable. Do you think they know about the constant cost reductions which we operate under? There is no spare money to keep jobs open to people, or to administer more and more of their responsibilities.

Those responsibilities were formerly paid for by the Government, but Government have now dumped them, as costs, on to businesses. Mr. Chetwynd adds a list showing how his costs have changed since the Government came to office.

The Government say that they listen to, and consult, business. As I have said to business organisations, that sounds all very warm and cosy, but, after three years, are the Government really listening? One would have thought that, during this great consultation period, they would at least have listened, and would have recognised nonsensical regulations, disproportionate regulations, or regulations that do not smack of fairness and justice.

[Mrs. Browning]

I have a letter from someone who runs a privately managed residential and nursing home. That sector is very concerned. The lady in question writes:

> While everybody has to applaud the idea of higher standards for the provision of Care for the Elderly . . . it has to be understood that it can only be achieved at a higher cost.

It is clear that, although the Government engaged in some form of consultation exercise in regard to changing the regulations for residential and care homes, that does not satisfy this particular home—and I have received many similar letters.

The letter that I have been quoting continues:

> The proposals exclude any choice for the Client or their families in deciding that maybe they prefer to pay less for their Care package and are happy with things as they are.

The letter mentions the widening of doorways by 1.5 in, 10 sq m of usable space—not to include a door opening space—additional sitting and lounge areas, plus another room in which families can meet, and the provision of furniture over and above that provided. It appears that the Government are now to decide what sort of furniture each room should have. The letter also refers to the number of care assistants under 18, and asks how such assistants are to be trained for national vocational qualification 2. No one aged under 21 is to be in charge, so how can such people be trained for the important NVQ 3, which can be obtained at the age of 19?

I should have thought that, when the Secretary of State sat next to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment last June, joined-up government in regard to training would have been one of the things that we could expect; but here we have a whole sector under pressure. The lady writes further:

> Government should not be able to suddenly change the regulations and send so many Private Businesses to the wall.

One of the problems is that those whom the Government consult tend to be those with a vested interest in seeing this sector develop into something like Trusthouse Forte. What will happen if all the little individual residential and nursing homes, with their funnily shaped rooms and, perhaps, not the right width of doorway, are forced to spend money—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members are shouting "Wheelchairs". That may be appropriate in the case of new build, but some homes do not accommodate wheelchair users, and it is not reasonable to insist that they incur the capital expense involved in making changes on the chance that a particular person will need the facility.

We will end up—perhaps this is the Government's plan—not with privately owned residential and nursing homes, but with big Trust House Forte-style rooms where every piece of furniture is the same and every room is the same size, with the same wallpaper and the same carpet. I can think of no more sterile experience than that of people who must end their days in such an atmosphere. Institutions of that kind must be contrasted with some of the caring residential and nursing homes, catering for the individual, that my constituency—along with others, I am sure—contains.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Will the hon. Lady tell us when the regulations to which she has referred were introduced, and at whose behest? I understand that they were the product of the Conservative Government's processes.

People who live in homes are entitled to the best possible conditions. Second-rate accommodation of the kind that the hon. Lady supports is an insult to the elderly.

Mrs. Browning: No, it is not. The Government have consulted on the regulations; they are not inherited from the last Government. Moreover, a Bill is proceeding through the other place. When it comes to the House of Commons, I will go into more detail.

The lady writes:

> We are at present registered for 25 Residents and have 2 double rooms, to accommodate the physical changes required we would have to reduce to 19 Residents. It is unlikely that our running costs would then be covered by the fees we are currently able to charge.

The Government have paid no attention, but I have raised the subject of nonsensical rules of this kind on the Floor of the House. There is the construction industry tax scheme, which involves the absurdity of people having to present themselves in all four corners of the country. We still have the dreaded climate change tax—I received a letter from someone who runs a nursery, who will be buying all the plants from Belgium this year—and, of course, there is the much-publicised IR35 legislation, which is sending many businesses abroad.

The Government's answer is to abolish their better regulation taskforce, and to set up a star chamber in the Cabinet Office. The first Labour Minister for the Cabinet Office said that there was a difference between deregulation and better regulation. If only that had been true. There has been no better regulation; there has been chaos ever since, given the way in which the Government have implemented legislation. They have implemented it late, and have not given businesses the lead time that they need just to read the literature.

It seems that, when the present Government make a mistake of this kind and businesses are clearly in difficulty, their answer is not to take practical action to relieve businesses, but to re-budget, give it a smart title and send it off to the "cutting edge of business" in the Cabinet Office, of all places.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will, but for the last time.

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend is perhaps unfair to the Secretary of State because, at a stroke last week, he halved the regulations on the utilities by abandoning half the Utilities Bill, which was supposed to be so important to consumers.

Mrs. Browning: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I hope that the Secretary of State was listening to my hon. Friend because, last Wednesday, I tabled a named-day question asking the Secretary of State whether he was going to remove water and telecommunications from the Bill. Yesterday, I received a holding answer saying that I would receive an answer shortly. If he did not know five days after he had done it that that was what he had done, what hope is there that

there will be any businesslike management in the Department of Trade and Industry? I hope that I shall get an accurate reply from him in short order.

The Government and the Secretary of State have learned the language of business, but they do not understand it; the regulations that they place on small businesses are testimony to that. The Conservative party will change that.

Mr. O'Neill: How?

Mrs. Browning: I am just about to tell the hon. Gentleman. When we come to office, we will set regulatory budgets. Every Secretary of State, after an independent audit, will be required over the lifetime of a Parliament to reduce the costs that the Department puts on business through regulation. Every year, that Secretary of State, unlike the present one, will stand at the Dispatch Box and account progress to the House: the right and proper place for such announcements.

We shall exempt small businesses from much regulation that the Government have put on them and have proper independent impact assessments before a Bill proceeds through the House, so that the consultation becomes a key part of the way in which a Bill is fashioned, we do listen to what business has to say and independent assessment plays its part in ensuring that we get it right. There will be no tsars or star chambers, just honest, common-sense policies that business supports from Departments where Ministers manage in a businesslike way.

7.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

welcomes the action taken by Her Majesty's Government to foster an environment in which small business can flourish, with macro-economic stability, a 10 per cent. starting rate of corporation tax, a research and development tax credit, regulation introduced in ways that minimise burdens on business, and the creation of the Small Business Service through which for the first time there will be at the heart of Government an institution dedicated to representing the interest of, and improving the services to, small firms; congratulates the ongoing work being undertaken by the Better Regulation Task Force, chaired by Lord Haskins, in spearheading the Government's campaigning for better regulation; and contrasts this with the boom and bust policies of the previous administration, which led to 15 per cent. interest rates, double digit inflation and the collapse of thousands of small firms.

May I put the situation of small businesses in context? We have not been given a true picture of the strength of the small business sector. I regret that, but I can understand the reluctance of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) to address the sector's success under this Government: it stands in stark contrast with the neglect that it suffered under 18 years of the Conservative Administration of which she was a member.

The hon. Lady will know, then, of the hardship and record level of insolvencies that were inflicted on the small business sector as a result of the three recessions about which she kindly reminded the House. She is right. There is an economic cycle. The Government have ensured for the first time that no recession has resulted from the economic cycle and the slowing down in economic growth.

The Government of whom the hon. Lady was a member three times imposed a recession, as she kindly reminded the House, but, if we look at the facts and get away from the prejudice that we have heard from her this evening, we will see the true value that the Government have been able to bring to the small business sector. More than 1 million businesses have started up in the lifetime of the Government. On average, 8,000 more businesses have started up every quarter under the Labour Government than in the first half of the 1990s. That is the record. That is because of the economic climate that we have been able to engineer.

In the past two years, the overall number of business closures has been lower than at any other time in the whole of the past decade. There has been a net gain of 140,000 small firms since the middle of 1997. That is because, under the present Government, with the economic stability that we have been able to create, small businesses can be formed and can plan ahead with confidence.

That is why, on taking office, we took immediate action to provide independence to the Bank of England and to ensure that we did not repeat the cycle of boom and bust about which the hon. Lady has kindly reminded the House.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Byers: I shall in a minute.

It is worth reminding the House that, 10 years ago this week, interest rates went up to 15.5 per cent. Inflation was in double figures. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Front Benchers say, "Oh dear." The thousands and thousands of small businesses that went into insolvency because interest rates were at 15.5 per cent. will not like them saying that so cynically.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) *rose—*

Mr. Byers: Jobs and businesses were lost as a result of the Conservative party engineering boom and bust.

Mr. Cash *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I will not tolerate the hon. Gentleman standing when the Secretary of State is speaking.

Mr. Byers: I will give way to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) in a second, but someone has already asked me to give way—my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies).

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the main point of Mr. Chetwynd's letter was that he had miraculously lived through three Tory recessions? As he knows, I have started a number of successful small businesses. What small businesses want is stability and growth to plan ahead, with low interest rates, more employment and a prosperous Britain in an uncertain world. That is what we are delivering.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend puts it extremely well: that is what we are delivering. I am grateful to him for

[Mr. Byers]

pointing out, from his personal experience of running several small businesses—*[Interruption.]* He does not regret it. He knows the way in which small businesses operate.

There has been a net gain of 140,000 small firms since the middle of 1997, when the Government took office, as a result of the economic stability that we have been able to create.

Mr. Cash: When the right hon. Gentleman is going on about the thousands of jobs that were lost during that regrettable period up to 16 September 1992, does he accept that the reason for the loss was the exchange rate mechanism, which many of us fought against all the way down the line? The real reason why the present Government have a more beneficial economy is precisely that they are out of the exchange rate mechanism and not in economic and monetary union. Does he not accept that those two things run together?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman has been a powerful advocate in the House for a particular position on Europe. Giving the Bank of England independence over the setting of the exchange rate in 1997 and getting public finances under control for the first time have laid the foundations for the economic stability that we are seeing.

I know that I will never convince the hon. Gentleman of the argument. He has a particular view. We talked about it for hours during the debates on the Maastricht treaty. Thankfully, we are not going back to those days—at least I hope not—but if he looks back at what we have been able to achieve since May 1997, he will acknowledge that one of the great foundations of that economic stability was laid by the politically difficult decisions that we took in the early days of office. They have been proved to be absolutely right, so we have created the economic stability in which businesses can start, succeed and grow and in which people can invest with confidence. That is the framework that we have been able to establish.

Because we were able to do that, there has been a dramatic increase in small businesses starting up. It is a tangible demonstration of our success that more and more people are deciding to start their own businesses. That is a far better test than anything that we hear from Conservative Members in relation to the success, or otherwise, of the Government's policy: the fact that, day in, day out, more and more people choose to start their own businesses. Small businesses are starting at a rate that we have not seen for generations.

That is because of Government policies, not because of anything that the Conservatives are doing. They will go on about the burden of regulation and so on, but, day in, day out, people start small businesses. Those people will make a clear distinction between the need to provide their employees with decent minimum standards in the workplace—there is broad support for that approach there—and the cost of administration, red tape and bureaucracy. The big mistake that Conservative Members always make is to confuse the two. They cannot distinguish between red tape and bureaucracy and providing decent standards for people in the workplace.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman will know that, six months ago, we debated on the Floor of the House regulations on employment agencies. Why did he introduce those regulations, which occupied the attention of the House for about 18 months, but subsequently do a complete U-turn on temporary-to-permanent employment fees and on abolishing—as he was asked to do initially—value added tax on certain services?

Mr. Byers: I know that Conservative Members find it difficult to understand that there are a Government and a Secretary of State who are prepared to listen. I hope that it will not affect the digestive system of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton if I say that I shall not apologise for the fact that I very carefully examined the regulations, realised that a very powerful case on temp-to-perm was made by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), examined the regulations again, and said, "There is merit in the argument—so we'll change regulation of the matter." The whole point of consultation is to listen, and I have listened. I believed that the suggested approach was better, and we adopted it.

I also considered the value added tax issue. I said, "There is a better approach here. I have the agreement of my colleagues in the Treasury that we should not impose VAT", and we adopted that approach. Consequently, we have a far better provision, which has been applauded by the industry itself, which realises—

Mr. Bruce: There was no need to change the regulations in the first place.

Mr. Byers: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the industry itself is applauding our action—which stands in stark contrast to the 18 years of inaction by the previous, dogmatic Government, who listened to no one apart from themselves. That is the reality of the situation, and I make no apology for it.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Will the right hon. Gentleman concede that, given the debacle in the Department's handling of the Utilities Bill, the press are not complimentary to the Government? Rather, they are talking about a dog's dinner of a Government and are waiting to see the Secretary of State depart from the Department.

Mr. Byers: The phrase "dog's dinner" is being over-used in the debate. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton used it, in quoting Lord Haskins—who is chairman of the better regulation taskforce—on the working time directive. The hon. Lady will be delighted to know that the better regulation taskforce is not being abolished. I know that she will be celebrating that great news tonight. She said in her speech that it is to be abolished, but it is not.

Mrs. Browning: Star chamber.

Mr. Byers: The star chamber is quite different. It is a very powerful body at the heart of Government. There are no tsars or tsarinas, but there is a star chamber—presided over by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Mrs. Browning: The tsarina.

Mr. Byers: I do not think that my right hon. Friend would like to be called a tsarina. There are many ways of

describing her, but I do not think that that is one of them. The star chamber is working, and it is already doing some excellent work. We look forward, in the not-too-distant future, to announcing the product of its labours, which I hope will be welcomed by all hon. Members.

I was trying to provide the framework within which small businesses are able to prosper, and explain why so many small businesses have been created under this Government. There have been so many start-ups because of the economic stability that we have been able to create and the fact that we have been able to get interest rates down, inflation on target and public finances sorted out. Another reason is that we have introduced some of the lowest corporation tax rates ever. We have also introduced special tax rates for small businesses. We have created a situation in which a record number of small businesses are being established.

To encourage investment in new companies, the small business tax has been reduced to 20p in the pound, and we have introduced a new starting 10p corporation tax rate for small companies. That will benefit 270,000 companies. We have also abolished advance corporation tax, thereby simplifying the tax system.

We also have to tackle the barriers that exist to enterprise flourishing in the United Kingdom. I accept that, currently, barriers stand in the way of many small businesses starting up and obtaining the finance that they need for success. Small businesses often have real problems and fail in their first three or four years because they have inadequate finance in their early days, when money has to be borrowed. In the early days, people over-extend themselves in credit and borrowing, then pay the price for it three or four years later. The Government therefore have to find ways of providing finance for small businesses to start up.

We have to recognise that one of the main issues concerning small businesses is the fact that some banks feel very reluctant to provide finance. The banking review that has been established by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with Don Cruickshank as chairman, is very carefully examining the ways in which banks provide support, particularly to small businesses. The review will be reporting in the next few weeks. However, we shall have to take action over and above the recommendations that may be in the Cruickshank report.

We have to review all sources of finance available to small firms. One issue that we have been examining and that demonstrates a clear lack of support is provision of finance up to £500,000. Small businesses find it very difficult to access that level of finance. It is particularly difficult for some hi-tech start-ups and for small businesses in certain parts of the country to gain such finance. There is a real regional disparity in the finance made available to small businesses.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Will the Minister consider encouraging mutual guarantee schemes as a way in which small businesses might combine together to provide self-financing? Such schemes have operated in many other countries, and there have been trials of them in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. There have been trials in the United Kingdom, and we should learn from them. There are some very good examples of small businesses collaborating with each other. Although that did not happen before, small businesses are increasingly recognising that they can learn from each other, particularly on finance. I shall certainly draw such schemes to the attention of the Chancellor. I shall perhaps do so in the next few weeks, as he prepares, on 21 March, to unveil an undoubtedly hugely successful and popular Budget. That may be one of the issues that he will wish to address.

I was trying to identify the small business groups, such as those in the hi-tech sector, for which the market is not providing the financial support necessary for development. As I said, there are also regional disparities in access to finance. The third main group without sufficient financial support are small businesses in some of the United Kingdom's most deprived communities, where people who want to start businesses have huge difficulties in raising finance.

We have separate proposals to deal with the deficiencies affecting each of those groups—whether in the regions, hi-tech start-ups or business start-ups in deprived communities. In total, we have provided £180 million for an enterprise fund, within which we have targeted particularly those three groups.

There will be a hi-tech venture capital fund that will provide financial support to start-ups in the hi-tech sector. The United Kingdom—particularly United Kingdom pension funds—has been very bad in providing financial support to that sector. It is a bit of a condemnation that much of the investment for United Kingdom hi-tech companies is coming not from United Kingdom pension funds, but from the United States. We have to do something to encourage United Kingdom pension funds to invest in United Kingdom hi-tech companies.

We also have to do something about regional disparities. I am pleased that we have been able to establish, for the first time, a regional venture capital fund, which we hope to launch in the next few months and which will be able to offer finance to business start-ups in those regions which, perhaps historically, have not regarded the business start-up route as the way forward and the way of regenerating their local communities. The Phoenix fund, which we have established for deprived communities, is worth £30 million annually and will make a real difference. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) may snort at the idea of a Phoenix fund; it may not be needed in Buckingham. However, it is needed in Barnsley, Bradford and many parts of the country where access to funds is simply not available at present. It will make a real difference to decent, hard-working people in deprived areas who want to start their own businesses, but cannot access finance at present.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I sincerely hope that the Secretary of State is not suggesting that there are no needy people in Buckingham, because there are. They need sound policies and Conservative representation. They do not have not the former, but they have the latter.

Will the Secretary of State tell us what further plans he has for sunset regulation? He dipped his toes in the water with the Electronic Communications Bill, which, I am pleased to say, was based on advice that I have proffered him for the past two years.

Mr. Byers: I am in danger of agreeing with yet another Conservative Member. The hon. Gentleman quite rightly

[Mr. Byers]

says that he drew to my attention on several occasions the potential benefits that may come from sunset regulations. As I said to him at the time, they were worth investigating and we have done that. I am pleased that we shall be able to take a small step through provisions in the Electronic Communications Bill, but we can do more. However, that means breaking down a culture.

We are having an adult debate and, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said of her experience as a Minister, there is a culture in Whitehall that is inclined to regulate first, because that is a soft option. If there is a problem, it is easy to regulate. What we must do is create a culture which asks, "If there is a problem, why do we not consider alternative means, such as guidance on best practice, codes of conduct and so on?" They are often a better way of approaching such problems. I know that the hon. Lady has said in the Chamber that, during her time as Minister, the previous Government did not do enough.

Mrs. Browning *rose—*

Mr. Byers: Let me finish my point, because it is a serious one. There will be political point scoring about regulation and the burdens of regulation, and I understand why that is necessary. However, if we can raise the debate slightly above that, there is an issue of the culture of government which we all need to address. How can we ensure that we provide minimum standards for people in the workplace that businesses will accept? The debate on the minimum wage, for example, has been interesting because most employers now agree with the principle. I am delighted that the Conservative party now endorses the principle of the national minimum wage. *[Interruption.]* Some Conservative Members do not endorse the principle. I am inclined to ask which of them do not agree with it, but I think that a majority of those present do not.

I am not altogether sure what the result would be if the five people on the Opposition Front Bench voted. I think I can spot one who is in favour of endorsing the national minimum wage, but I am not sure that the other four would. In fact, I can see that there is a four to one majority against the national minimum wage. That is interesting, and they clearly do not disagree with my analysis. However, we had better move on quickly.

The important issue is that, where there is a need to regulate—there will occasionally be such a need—it is done in a way that is as light-touch as possible. Figures from the British Chambers of Commerce that were cited by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton show that there is confusion in terms of what is being covered. I can understand people being critical of the administrative burden that arises, but the hon. Lady kindly read out the letter from Chris Humphries, in which he confirmed that the figure of just under £10 billion that the British Chambers of Commerce quoted included the cost of providing four weeks paid holiday entitlement.

If the hon. Lady wants to go on the record as saying that the Conservative party regards such costs as unacceptable, the implication of her argument is that four weeks' paid holiday, which is part of the working time directive, is something with which she disagrees. A clear distinction must be made between administration and red tape, which we should all be against, as opposed to the costs of providing entitlements for people in the workplace. The figures that she cited referred to the costs of providing four weeks' paid holiday entitlement, which comes in under the working time directive. There is a cost there, but I think that most businesses are prepared to bear it. It is a matter of regret that the British Chambers of Commerce has included that figure in its costings.

Mrs. Browning: Does the Secretary of State not understand why businesses have been placed under such pressure by the regulatory burdens that this Government have placed on them? They are under pressure because of the cumulative cost. It is not the number of regulations or any one regulation that has caused the problem. The cumulative cost has reached the point at which it impacts on the viability of businesses, and it is that cost that we intend to reduce. That is the difference between the Secretary of State's perspective and that of the Conservative party and small businesses. The right hon. Gentleman has come to the point where he has done so much cumulative damage to business that an individual regulation becomes the straw that breaks the camel's back, however worthy he may think it is.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Lady drew the House's attention to the detail provided by the British Chambers of Commerce. I pointed out that it includes in its figures the costs of providing four weeks entitlement for paid holiday. The implication of the hon. Lady's argument is that the Conservative party does not support that entitlement. People need to be aware of that.

The question is the balance that needs to be struck between providing minimum rights and entitlements to people in the workplace, which we support, and doing so in a way that is light-touch and does not create the over-regulation that can often result from doing that inappropriately. I should like to think that, in my time as Secretary of State, we have been able to change the regulations affecting the national minimum wage so that they are far more light-touch than they were when I came to office. We have taken steps to change record keeping in relation to the working time directive, That is far more friendly in terms of how it can be applied in practice without losing the entitlement for people not to have to work more than 48 hours a week if they do not wish to do so. That is the appropriate approach to take.

We have laid good foundations for small businesses as a result of the economic stability that we have created. At the beginning of April, we shall establish the Small Business Service which, for the first time at the very heart of government, will ensure that the small business sector has a voice and can argue for its interests. I am confident that the Budget on 21 March will be a Budget for enterprise and fairness. What has struck me in my conversations throughout the country with small businesses is that they are asking not for some form of special treatment, but for enterprise and fairness. That is exactly what the Government are delivering and we will continue to do so.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): What message would my right hon. Friend send to the small business federation which is to meet tomorrow night in Tayside? Among its members are a number of sub-postmasters. Initially, they ran scare stories that sub-post offices were likely to close

and they organised petitions. We dealt with those issues and we made it clear that the Government intend there to be choice even after 2003. They then switched the spotlight and now they allege that the administration of the working families tax credit is liable to threaten small businesses. What message would my right hon. Friend like to send to them?

Mr. Byers: The strong message that I can give is that we understand the concerns. That is why we are expanding the Inland Revenue's new enterprise support initiative, which will specifically help small businesses with payrolls so that they will not experience the sort of difficulties about which my hon. Friend, as well as postmasters and postmistresses, are concerned.

Let me remind the House of some facts. More than 1 million businesses have been started under this Government. That is the clearest demonstration of the fact that we are getting things right. However, there is no complacency. We will continue our efforts to reduce regulation and to cut red tape. I invite the House to support the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

8.9 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I welcome the debate, although a motion such as this comes rich from the Conservatives. As the Secretary of State rightly pointed out, their record on the matter was not brilliant. At their peak, interest rates were 15 per cent., and they were in double figures for four of the Conservative party's 18 years in office.

Liberal Democrats were pleased when the Government gave the Bank of England independence as a way forward for the economy, a policy which we had advocated for many years. The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) now says that that is a good idea. I wonder whether his colleagues on the Front Bench agree with him. I am glad to see that they support that policy, although the minimum wage may be a different matter.

I ran my business throughout the time of the previous Government when there was a tremendous number of business failures. I believe that during the last five years of that Government one business went bust every three minutes of every working day. Coming from manufacturing industry, as I do, I also remember the way in which that Government concentrated on investment in City jobs. Valuable as they are, that was at the expense of manufacturing industry and the small business sector.

In their last three years, the previous Government introduced about 3,000 additional regulations each year. I give them credit for their deregulation initiative, but it was not particularly successful. The Deregulation Committee is not brilliantly successful now. During those years, the Conservatives introduced about 15 times as many regulations as they managed to get rid of through deregulation.

I join Conservative Members in their concern about the present situation facing small businesses. We are still waiting for the Government to fulfil the many promises that they have made. In particular, I welcome the concept of the Small Business Service. We have long needed a one-stop shop. Training and enterprise councils, business links and so on have proliferated. The Small Business Service is dedicated to reducing regulation from April and to concentrating on firms with up to 250 employees. It is important that that service should address the micro-businesses, something which the business links system failed to do.

I can attest to the way in which the administrative burden falls disproportionately on small companies, particularly when it comes to taking on an extra employee. Having just taken on an extra employee in my company, I know how discouraging it is. I need someone who can do a number of different jobs and I had to search hard to find such a person. Large companies have personnel departments to do such work, whereas I had to do the job with others in the company. Taking people on is a big cost to business. Everyone would accept that if every small business took on one additional employee we would have a real solution to the unemployment problem.

I reiterate what Conservative Members have said about the better regulation task force. We have not seen what we were looking for from that. It tried to do its job with insufficient resources, although I take my hat off to its chairman, who does an extremely good job. The different areas that it has chosen have been rather arbitrary. I hope that the Small Business Service will address the issue. In a debate on small businesses in January, it was announced that each Department would have a Minister responsible for regulation, and I should be interested to know whether that is now the case, and to have some sort of feedback.

Mr. Byers: I can confirm that in each Department a Minister has been appointed with specific responsibility to monitor the development of regulations within their Department and to report to the new Cabinet Committee.

Mr. Cotter: That is welcome news.

A key issue that I have raised before concerns regulatory impact assessments. Having served on a number of Standing Committees I have been struck by the poor quality of the information that those assessments contain. Moreover, I urge the Secretary of State, if he has not already done so, to ensure that they should come at an early stage. The Secretary of State talked about consultation, and an impact assessment should be available at that stage so that an appropriate assessment can be made. I would also urge him to implement an annual report to Parliament on the impact of such assessments on Bills and new regulations.

The Secretary of State sets up the Government to be conscious of small business issues, and one way of achieving that would be if civil servants and Ministers were aware of the work involved in running a small business. We have an interchange scheme whereby civil servants and others go into companies such as the Shells and BPs of this world. I urge the Secretary of State to consider the value to the small business sector if civil servants and others on that scheme worked in the smallest of businesses—the garage, pub or shop. Only a few days would be needed to recognise the enormous problems involved in running a small business.

One of the biggest problems in business is seeing regulation coming down the line. The way in which it pops up from nowhere at short notice and is dumped on business is a problem. A taxi driver came to my surgery recently wanting to take on a black taxi in Weston-super-Mare. As things stand at the moment, he could just

[Mr. Cotter]

about manage the investment, but he was worried about rumblings to the effect that in one, two or three years changes in regulations could affect him badly. I should be grateful if the Secretary of State could take that issue on board.

I am glad to hear the Secretary of State welcome sunset regulation, which has been implemented in the Electronic Communications Bill. I hope that he will consider that as a way of ensuring that regulation is allowed to wither away if it is no longer appropriate.

Liberal Democrats have always proposed regional development agencies as a way forward, and we wait to see what the Government intend to do about them. I hope that there will be a means by which the Small Business Service can be relevant to local communities. When I intervened earlier, the Secretary of State accepted the regional guarantee scheme as a possible way forward. We want to see such local initiatives rather than the Government issuing diktats from the top.

Mr. Geraint Davies: What is the hon. Gentleman's view on regionally based venture capital funds? Does he agree that US venture capital funds are highly diversified, from corporate re-engineering to small and high-tech companies, and that we need to have such diversification to re-engineer British industry and take advantage of small business opportunities in the European market.

Mr. Cotter: That is an excellent point. More than that, we want the RDAs to have real money following them, not just a rejigging of the deckchairs on the Titanic.

I welcome the Secretary of State's point about flexibility of enforcement. We support the small business community being excluded to some extent from regulation, but it is important to have flexibility. Inspectors should have the sense not to march in on day one and say that all the doors have to be a certain width, even if it is clearly impractical to get that done by next week.

Apprenticeships are very important. This country has a tradition of apprenticeship schemes, and many of us would like them to return. My party has been considering the concerns that people have about builders and others not doing work to the right standard, and a lot of that comes from the lack of apprenticeship schemes. When traders try to have apprenticeships, they find that the burden of paperwork is too much, and they are put off.

We look to the Government to deliver on what they say. We are concerned that the Small Business Service will not meet local needs if it is not linked in locally. The regional development agency concept must be sharpened and made clearer. I hope that the Secretary of State will bear in mind the extra costs involved in hiring people because of regulation. I urge him to ensure that when the Small Business Service begins its work in April, it delivers what he has promised. We shall be watching. We have long believed in the RDAs' local one-stop shop delivery of services, and we look to the Secretary of State to deliver on his promises.

8.22 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): We debated this subject on 20 January in Westminster Hall. On that occasion, I believe that only three Conservatives attended the debate; there were certainly only three Conservative contributions. At the start of tonight's debate there was a sizeable Conservative presence, but we quickly got to the stage where there were more Conservatives on the Front Bench than on the Back Benches. It ill-behoves them to lecture us on the diminishing status of small business debates.

The most depressing factor about Conservative Members' contributions to small business debates has been the persistent complaining and whingeing about regulation. I suspect that they do that because they are unable to complain about inflation; about business rates, in any serious way; about industrial relations; or about the general level of economic activity.

If there is one thing that encourages people to set up small businesses, to take the risk and put their house on the line, it is the prospect of a stable environment in which to get the business up and running. That is what the Government have provided over the past two and a half years. That is what sickens Conservative Members. They told lies before the general election about our irresponsibility and how we would spend money on needless projects. They raised many questions about how we would handle the unions and establish decent pay and conditions while keeping inflation in check, but we have achieved all that.

Small businesses now express a sense of relief. Since just before Christmas, I have spent part of almost every Friday talking to small business people in my constituency. I can think of two firms in the construction industry, one of which is in building supply. There is a company that makes double glazing—and sells it, too, much to its embarrassment, as after politicians and, I think, journalists, double glazing salespeople are about the least popular group in the country.

People in those firms tell me that they are confident. That is in an area of Clackmannanshire where, because of the collapse in the textile industry, some large employers have gone to the wall and there is considerable disadvantage. The firms sense that people are willing to invest in their houses, so they feel that they are in a position to start employing new people.

I do not disagree with the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) on many points on this subject—we have debated it before—but credit should be given to the variety of schemes that enable employers to take on extra labour. He spoke about apprenticeships. We tend to get hung up on old language, and I would rather we talked about progressive training programmes whereby people outwith the traditional skills areas can get formal qualifications to enable them either to go on to subsequent employment in the relevant area or simply to show that they are trained personnel, capable of undertaking work.

There is a plethora of schemes that are not too difficult to administer and which afford employers tremendous support in the early stages of a person's working career. To put an old-fashioned name to it, there is a subsidy to get people into work. Young people have been recruited by firms through schemes such as the new deal, and those firms have not said that that was the downside of regulation or an aspect of Government policy that they find reprehensible. Employers and small business people express quiet confidence and pride because they have been able to take on additional people with Government support.

A woman in my constituency has started a catering operation running factory canteens and the like. In two and a half years, she has gone from no employees to more than 50. She said that she has no objection to paying the national minimum wage—she recognises that catering is a low-paid industry—but that she would like due notice of an increase.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the prudent way in which he has dealt with that issue. There was speculation about a rise, and now we have what most people would agree is a fair increase. It is just ahead of inflation and will probably be in line with it by October. People were given about six months' notice of the increase. It is important to small businesses to be able to make the appropriate calculations, feed them into their business plans and accommodate the change, rather than facing a drastic lurch into having to pay more.

Most of us would regard the national minimum wage as unreasonably low and would like people to be paid more, but we know that some fledgling businesses have serious cost problems, and those issues must be addressed. We all agree that workers are entitled to fairness and a decent crack of the whip, be it in their pay or, what is equally important, the number of weeks' holiday that they get. It will be interesting to learn whether the Opposition spokesman is able to tell us when he winds up whether the Tories will abandon the commitment to four weeks' paid holiday. Will they work through the EU regulations and find a way to renege on the undertaking of the Labour Government—in the unlikely event that the Conservatives ever again secure a majority in the House?

I know a small IT company that was woefully undercapitalised and going through a difficult spell. It found that by working with agencies such as 3Is, which works alongside Government but is not Government owned or controlled, it has been able to secure the continuing assistance that is necessary for its endeavours.

In the past couple of days, we have seen a dramatic shift of opinion on e-commerce. If one thing will assist an abundance of small businesses, it will be access to the net. When we last spoke on this subject, a Conservative Member was dubious about whether we would ever have free access to the net. Of course, access will never be completely free because a bill must be paid at some stage. There is no such thing as a free telephone call in any country under any circumstance. Payment is made through the rent, a standing charge or the metered call. However, as a consequence of the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer—we recall the abuse that he received for intervening, even though he did so having consulted the Director General of Telecommunications and with his authority—he virtually shamed BT into providing free access to the net. First AltaVista announced its plans and then—surprise, surprise—along came BT. BT cannot be accused of the power of original thought, but it can be credited with speed of response.

I remember when the director general was to appear before the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which I chair. Less than an hour before the Committee was due to meet, we received faxes informing us that BT intended to introduce an ultra-cheap scheme.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The hon. Gentleman knows that as soon as BT saw competition in the market, it was going to act. I wish it had been first, instead of just a follower. Did the hon. Gentleman notice that on the same day that Oftel said that it would not accept BT's first offer for internet access, the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce announced it to the world as the way ahead? She obviously gave way too quickly.

Mr. O'Neill: The point is that we have had the breakthrough we all wanted. The service providers are now confident that we have a climate in which the importance of electronic commerce is recognised. That is encouraging and important, because it will enable small businesses to expand their range of activities. It is clear that the experience of the United States is that cheap access has enabled small businesses to take advantage of the opportunity.

The Small Business Administration in the US, which is one of the great success stories of the American Government, has been the model for our Small Business Service. It is depressing that in the two speeches that I have heard the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) make on small businesses, she has not even deigned to mention the Small Business Service. She has never made any serious attempt to offer what should be the responsibility of the Opposition—an analysis of a Government proposal. She should tell us what parts of it she thinks are worth proceeding with and, before 1 April, what parts are dangerous and should not be included.

Mrs. Browning: When the news was given to the House, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry did not even stand at the Dispatch Box and present it; he just left it in the Vote Office, and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment referred to it in a passing sentence. That is hardly an inspiration to treat the proposal as a major plank of Government policy.

Mr. O'Neill: That is not an excuse for abdicating your responsibilities as an Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson. You have a duty—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman must remember to use the correct parliamentary language.

Mr. O'Neill: The hon. Lady has a duty to the country, if not to her party, to let us know what she thinks about these matters. She has had two opportunities in my company to argue the case and on neither occasion has she addressed the issue with any seriousness. All we have had is whingeing and moaning about the fact that on a particular date the Secretary of State for Education and Employment made a statement and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry sat alongside him. That is the best that the Tories can give us on the Small Business Service, which is probably the best opportunity that small businesses will have had in the past 20 years.

We will have a consistent service across the country, and small businesses will be guaranteed a good service regardless of their location. The previous Government introduced business links, but they were not an overwhelming success. Provision was patchy and depended on relations with chambers of commerce and the local training and enterprise councils. Some of those impedimenta have now been removed.

Mrs. Browning *rose—*

Mr. O'Neill: I cannot give way because I wish to leave time for other hon. Members. Several of my hon. Friends wish to speak and it is important that as many people as possible have that opportunity.

Small businesses have a better chance now than they have had for many years, with the Small Business Service and the support that it will be able to offer. There will be an ally of small businesses at the heart of Government, which will be similar to the position enjoyed by Mrs. Alvarez of the Small Business Administration in the US, who sits in President Clinton's Cabinet.

The debate tonight is a welcome opportunity for the Government to make the position clear. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have disagreements from time to time about presentational matters, but the presentation is not in doubt on this issue. The core position is that we have a climate of opinion in this country that is capable of supporting more small businesses, and that becomes ever more evident with every new business that starts. They receive encouragement from the Government and the institutions that surround the Government. I support the amendment and I am happy to do so.

8.37 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In April 1997, the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown)—then shadow Chancellor—declared in the foreword to Labour's business manifesto, which was entitled "Equipping Britain for the Future":

> We will not impose burdensome regulations upon business because we understand that successful businesses must keep costs down.

Nineteen months later, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, told the House, apparently with a straight face, that

> we have no intention of introducing any legislation that presents a burden on business and reduces the competitiveness of British firms.—[*Official Report*, 25 November 1998; Vol. 321, c. 214.]

Sadly, only a matter of weeks after the first statement, and fully 18 months before the second, the Government had begun the process of betrayal that has so far resulted in an additional 2,700 regulations impacting adversely on British business.

As recently as 20 January, Mr. Chris Humphries, director general of the British Chambers of Commerce, put his view, on behalf of his members, fairly and squarely on the record. He said that

> despite all its rhetoric, the reality is that government has dramatically increased the regulatory burdens that threaten small business competitiveness.

Frankly, if I had to choose between the sayings of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and of the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and the considered judgment of a person at the coal face—the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce—I would opt for the verdict of the latter every time. Mr. Humphries knows the facts, recognises the realities and hears the stories of his members who are struggling under the dramatic imposts of this Government. He knows the truth—that the burden of regulation is greater now than at any time in the history of the United Kingdom.

In her sparkling opening speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) set out some of the sins, of commission and of omission, perpetrated by the Government since they came to office 34 months ago. There are several examples, and I shall illustrate some of them this evening.

The first example that springs to mind has to do with the Part-Time Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000. Their purpose is to give effect to the European directive on part-time working by 7 April. Conservative Members have two principal objections to the way in which the Government have proceeded. First, the consultation process has been a sham and a disgrace. We deserve an apology from the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, who is winding up the debate. She should apologise to all those people in business who have suffered as a result of that process.

The Government knew in April 1998 that they would implement the directive. They agreed to the directive, and intended to give it effect. However, in the intervening 21 months up to January this year, the Government chose to do nothing by way of consultation with the affected businesses in this country. Eventually, on 17 January, the Government issued their draft regulations for the purposes of incorporation of the directive in British law.

With a sniffy disdain unworthy of Government representatives, Ministers indicated that they expected that businesses might have some comments to make in response to the draft regulations, although it was not clear that the Government were inviting a full-scale consultation. Moreover—and this is a further indicator of the Government's frivolous approach to this partial consultation—Ministers said that all responses from businesses had to be received by 27 February.

That meant that businesses—and most of them were the small businesses for which a substantial proportion of part-time employees work—had 44 days in which to respond. That is risibly inadequate. If Ministers do not realise that, it is about time they did.

The Secretary of State made much of the fact that he had amended the regulations on the national minimum wage and those pertaining to the working time directive. In saying what he said, he was delivering an indirect and not very subtle attack on his predecessor, who is now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

We rightly castigated the former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for the feebly inadequate period of consultation that he provided in respect of the working time regulations. According to my calculation, however, the present Secretary of State has done even worse with regard to the consultation period on the part-time employee regulations. He has allowed only 44 days for it, which is worse than the most palpable of the sins committed by his predecessor.

There is no good reason for that carelessness, for which Ministers should apologise. They do not have to apologise to Conservative Members: I know that to do so would stick in the Minister's gullet, and I could not give a tinker's cuss for any apology made to us. However, she has an obligation to apologise to this country's small businesses. She should remember that 99.6 per cent. of companies in this country employ fewer than 100 people, yet they account for almost 50 per cent. of the private-sector work force and generate two fifths of the national output.

Those business will be awaiting, with eager anticipation, bated breath and beads of sweat on their brows, an apology from the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce tonight. If it is forthcoming, I will thank her and say no more on the subject.

The second objectionable feature of the proposals is that, not for the first time, and doubtless not for the last, the Government have gold-plated a European directive. How have they done so? Ministers have decided that if businesses do not wish to apply exactly the same treatment to part-time employees as they confer upon their full-time equivalents, they shall be obliged, in the form of a written statement within 14 days of a request so to do, to justify a continuation of differential treatment. That is not in the directive. There is no such requirement. Nor is it a simple matter of a brief memo bashed out by someone in a company's personnel department. Such memorandums or notifications will constitute admissible evidence in the event of a case going to an industrial tribunal. They therefore acquire a legal significance which any company anxious to limit its costs would be foolish to ignore.

Once again, this hits small companies particularly hard. It is all right, perhaps, for large businesses with in-house legal departments; it is a relatively trivial matter for them to attend to this legal requirement. But for the small companies for which, as I emphasised, a large proportion of part-time employees work, it is a costly burden and they could well do without it.

Once again, I suspect that consideration of the need to avoid such burdensome regulation did not even penetrate the inner recesses of ministerial minds at the Department of Trade and Industry. It probably did not even occur to them. Well, it should have done and it should do in the future.

Those, I believe, are two cogent objections to the Government's proposals for part-time employees. There are other legitimate criticisms of Government policy on regulation. The first that occurs to me is in relation to the parental leave directive. *[Interruption.]* As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) observes from a sedentary position, it has a chequered history. The House should be aware, and the country should know, that there was no obligation to implement that directive. It was specifically the result of a bone-headed decision by the Government voluntarily to sign up to the European social chapter. If we had been in office, it would not have happened.

Appearing before the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, chaired by the distinguished hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), on 4 November 1998, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool, declined to accept the Confederation of British Industry estimate of the likely cost of the directive. Instead, he indicated that a cost to business of approximately £29 million a year was roughly accurate. I note that the figure has been creeping up since then. I believe that I am right in saying—although sometimes it is difficult to establish this for certain, because of the differences between what Ministers say on a Monday, a Wednesday and a Friday—that Ministers now estimate that implementing the directive will cost £42.3 million annually.

There are two points to be made. First, it was, frankly, shameful for the then Secretary of State—and he has not been disowned by his successor—to observe sniffily to me on 4 November 1998, in response to interrogation, that the cost was merely a tiny fraction of the total cost borne by businesses. That is both true and staggeringly irrelevant.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way—I did not want to upset his customary flow. However, he has left the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry under-reported. The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) was extremely unkind to Conservative Members for moaning about the Department of Trade and Industry. Does my hon. Friend agree, that the hon. Gentleman himself is an even better moaner, and is quite right to keep criticising the DTI for its total failure to do its business properly?

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is entirely correct, and it has to be said that the hon. Member for Ochil has something of a Jekyll and Hyde quality. He is a very agreeable individual, but in political terms he has two faces. He has the face that is on display when he is chairing the Select Committee, on which occasions he demonstrates a remarkable independence of spirit. He is prepared to demonstrate his resolve to interrogate witnesses fiercely and to hold the Government to account, and he is not averse, from time to time, to insulting Ministers, if not about their personalities, at any rate about their policies.

When, however, the hon. Gentleman is in the Chamber, possibly conscious of the imminence of a hostile pager message from the Government Chief Whip, he is converted to an altogether different specimen. Suddenly, the criticisms that he habitually volunteers in the Select Committee and in the media are subdued or removed, and instead we have what amounts almost to a panegyric of Government policy from him.

So far as the hon. Gentleman's inner contradictions are concerned, I cannot be held responsible. I hope that appropriate treatment will be made available to him. I am a compassionate individual, and I am willing to assist. If he would like a quiet word in one of the darker and more pleasant recesses of the Palace of Westminster about this innate contradiction in his thinking and practice, I would be happy to oblige.

Mr. O'Neill: I cannot resist the temptation to respond to the hon. Gentleman on one issue. We had similar exchanges when we were on the same Committee. He had a brief stay on that Committee before he was relegated to the Opposition Front Bench. In none of the reports that were both favourable to and, on occasion, critical of the Government did he find grounds to disagree with the Committee's conclusions and recommendations. In some respects, the Janus-like qualities that he is attributing to me are perhaps more a function of his own experience in front of the mirror.

Mr. Bercow: I think that there is a certain revisionist rewriting of history taking place. I always made my position and that of my right hon. and hon. Friends on these matters abundantly clear, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and I can agree on that point.

I said that there were two problems with the Government's position on the parental leave directive. The first was the rather silly comment by the former

[Mr. Bercow]

Secretary of State about its constituting only a tiny fraction of the costs borne by business, when what matters of course is the cumulative impact of all the regulation that the Government have foolishly foisted on the businesses of this country.

The second point is that there is no reason to believe that the Government's estimate is accurate in any event. A national opinion poll last year suggested that up to 15 per cent. of the relevant cohort—working parents with children under eight—might decide to take advantage of the directive and avail themselves of three months' unpaid leave. If they were to do so, and companies, believing that their services were indispensable, decided to recruit staff, perhaps to retain an important contract, and paid them, for the sake of argument, £10 an hour for a 40-hour week for 12 weeks, the cost would not be £42.3 million a year; it would be no less than £360 million a year.

We do not know precisely what the total cost will be, but we know that the Government have a habit of understating the pain and overstating the gain. There is no reason to believe that their behaviour on this occasion will be any different.

Another example of burdensome regulation from the Government is the working families tax credit. The Government have an unfortunate habit of celebrating the measure's apparent merits without acknowledging its drawbacks. I urge them to take account of the views of businesses, because they are petrified by the likely costs of operating the working families tax credit. We know that there is to be a recurring cost of £105 million a year; we know also that almost half that annual sum, £52 million, will be borne by small businesses that employ fewer than 100 people. That is a significant problem about which we have not heard anything from Ministers.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Surely the effect on the cash flow of small businesses is even more damaging. They suddenly have to find money up front rather than paying taxes to a Government official a month or so after they have paid wages.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is invariably helpful and that intervention was no exception. There is certainly a problem with cash flow.

There is also the consideration that, for small businesses, costs incurred through regulation are proportionately much greater than they are for large. For the smallest firms, we are talking about a cost—calculated by the Inland Revenue among others—of over £288 per person per year, whereas for the largest businesses, with more than 5,000 employees, the cost is of the order of £5 per person per year. Nowhere in the honeyed words of Ministers—veritably the Dr. Panglosses of our age—do we hear anything about the downside that flows from those Government policies.

Yet another example is agriculture, which has been consistently downgraded and hit by an insensitive Government for nearly three years. The extensification premium on beef animals, for example, will require farmers to submit detailed forms up to six times a year in order to get their just entitlements.

Then there is the consideration of the Draft Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000, which have been handed down from Brussels and will effectively prevent farmers from feeding health-boosting vitamins or minerals to their herds, with the limited exception of compound feed. All that regulation is burdensome. The National Farmers Union says that there is no need for such regulation, but of course the Government have cow-towed, gone along with it, made no complaint and tried to put a brave face on it.

We were promised much and have been delivered little. The record of Ministers to date has been a litany of promises broken, trust betrayed and hopes destroyed. If the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce is not aware of that important fact, it is about time she visited small businesses—not just for convenient photo opportunities, but to learn in detail from those in the know how they are suffering from the damaging regulatory policies of this anti-business Government.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I have thought about a couple of examples that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I am sorry that he is not in favour of rights for working parents and low-income families—parental leave and the working families tax credit. I am very impressed by his grasp of figures and the way in which he does not use notes. Will he tell me the cost of the 3,000 regulations introduced by the previous Government for each of the past three years?

Mr. Bercow: The answer is very simply no. I do not have the square root of a clue off the top of my head, but I would be happy to engage in correspondence with the hon. Lady, if she would find that an enjoyable experience. I put it on record, just to cleanse the soul, that she, who, if I may say so, is a parliamentary virgin, was not in the previous Parliament, just as I was not.

I am not responsible for what happened under the previous Government. I accept that their record was mixed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) made strenuous efforts on the subject of regulation. If the hon. Lady is asking me whether I believe that his record was one of unfettered perfection, the answer is no. My right hon. Friend is an estimable individual, but I am not responsible for his policy decisions and I am not going to be held responsible for them. I am concerned about what is happening now, and the fact that the regulatory burden is greater than ever. I am concerned that the Government have broken their promises and have no idea how to chart a better course.

I conclude—I know that other right hon. and hon. Members want to contribute to the debate—simply by saying this about the Government's record. There are three central problems for Ministers. The first is that there are six DTI Ministers in the House of Commons, and all of them have one thing in common. I appeal to the fertile minds on the Government Back Benches to discover their common characteristic. I shall tell the House what the right hon. Members for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers), for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell) and for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), and the hon. Members for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells) and for Hull, West and Hessle (Mr. Johnson) all have in common: they have never run a business. They have not the slightest experience of the private enterprise sector of our economy. That stands in stark contrast to the experience of the Opposition Front-Bench team, comprising my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, who is a distinguished and successful business woman, and my

hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who has an enviable business record. No Minister can compete with them, not least because none of these Ministers has ever run a business. The current team of Ministers has no feel for the issues.

The second problem is that, almost to a man or a woman, Department of Trade and Industry Ministers are fanatical European federasts. All of them believe in extensive European integration, they want to abolish the pound as soon as possible, they favour increased qualified majority voting, and they adhere to the European social model. They do not believe in the free enterprise, capitalist economy that has made this country great, developed living standards, created wealth and made Britain the success story that it has been for such a long time. Their hallmark is craven submission to every diktat from Brussels: diktats about the content of regulations; diktats about the period of consultation; diktats about the short notice of the requirement for implementation. In a shameful, risible performance, they prostrate themselves before the European Union and are not prepared to champion the legitimate commercial interests of United Kingdom plc.

The next problem with Ministers is that they have made no estimates of the costs of regulation and continue to refuse to do so. They have no ambition to deregulate. Above all, they simply do not understand the means by which to achieve such beneficial deregulation.

On a personal level, Department of Trade and Industry Ministers might be entirely convivial company, but as ministerial performers, they are hopeless—I use the word "hopeless" advisedly. They are a useless shower, they are totally complacent, they are failing to deliver, and they are letting business down. They should either get their act together and deliver for British business, or make way for my hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench who assuredly can do so.

9.2 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. Unlike the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I shall have to use notes but, as a consequence, most of my references will be reliable. I promise not to use the words "sniffy", "Euro-federast" or "risible". I can offer plain speaking from one who has worked in business, albeit one who has never run her own business. I have been extensively involved in business and I take a passionate interest in regulation. Those hon. Members who read parliamentary questions will know that I have asked more questions about that subject than about any other since becoming a Member of Parliament. The Opposition Members who usually participate in debates on small businesses are here, but it is sad that there are not more present—not just more Members on the Opposition Benches, but more Members on both sides of the House.

I shall confine my comments to the first part of the motion, which says:

> That this House opposes the growing regulatory burdens that the Government has added to business costs.

I shall examine the authenticity of the claim and then refer to points made by the hon. Member for Buckingham when he presented his Regulations on Small Businesses (Reduction) Bill to the House on 27 April 1999.

Let us examine the record on the imposition of regulatory burdens. In 1995, the previous Administration introduced 21 Bills that had an impact on business. There followed a slight slump: only eight Bills were introduced in 1996 and five in early 1997. The present Administration introduced five such Bills in 1997, 13 in 1998 and 12 in 1999.

Those are interesting statistics but, like other statistics that we have heard this evening, they are meaningless unless they are set in context. Nevertheless, it is right to say that the amount of regulatory legislation introduced by the previous and the present Administration is roughly balanced.

So much for Bills. What about assessment?

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): Will my hon. Friend take the opportunity to discuss the merits of the compliance cost assessments introduced by the previous Government?

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am about to deal with that matter.

Under the previous Administration, and for a short time under the present Government, compliance cost assessments were the only vehicle available to assess the impact of Bills on business. Unfortunately, they were not carried out independently, as is currently being advocated, and there were no exemptions for small business in those assessments. Compliance cost assessments were required only when costs might be incurred by a business, and there were no assessment orders which evaluated how money could be saved. It was this Administration who introduced such assessment late in 1998.

The compliance cost assessment was initiated by the Conservative Government in 1993 and was considered to be central to the deregulation initiatives, which we would all applaud. The assessment introduced in 1993 was an assessment of likely cost to business of proposed legislation, and was used to help parliamentary consideration of regulatory proposals. It was considered a vital part of the consultation process and gave businesses the opportunity to respond to proposals. In their speeches this evening, Opposition Members have commended that approach.

I note with regret that, although CCAs were introduced in 1993, it was decided only in 1994 that they would also have to show the effect of proposed legislation on small business. Clearly, when the assessments were introduced in 1993, small business was not at the forefront of the present Opposition's mind.

Unfortunately, like many of the "buzz" initiatives introduced by the previous Administration, apart from the inclusion of small businesses after a period of reflection, the CCA did not develop. It remained a document that discussed cost. There was neither the opportunity nor the desire to review its effectiveness, even though, as we have heard, there was considerable concern about that.

Yesterday, in the Library, I picked up a typical CCA at random. It related to the Firework Safety Regulations 1996. The document is dominated by cost consideration, and there is some reference to consultation. Given what we have heard this evening from the Opposition,

[Mrs. Curtis-Thomas]

who extol the importance of consultation, I am disappointed to tell the House that that document states that

> it has not been possible to undertake the usual consultation with industry on this occasion.

Much was promised but not always delivered, as a random sample proves.

The compliance cost assessment was a minimalist approach. It referred to cost, but not to the innate value of, or the need for, regulation. In 1998, after a year in government, the Cabinet Office reviewed the deregulation agenda and the regulation appraisals initiative of the previous Administration and concluded, in the words of the teacher's report, "Must try harder."

Deregulation, which had been made almost impossible because of the restraints of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, was subsumed by the far more onerous task undertaken by the Government—that of producing better business regulation. In 1998, the Government published "The Better Regulation Guide". For the first time, standard reports can be compared and contrasted.

If we are to have a meaningful debate, we must acknowledge that an attempt was made to understand the impact of regulation on business. However, no such attempt was made to ensure that reports from each Department were standardised. Any requests about costs, cumulative costs or impact have been impossible to tackle. The answer that the hon. Member for Buckingham suggested: "No, I can't tell you what the total cost would be" was valid. Even if he tried to find the answer today, he would fail because insufficient analytical rigour was exercised previously. That remains a problem. It is inordinately difficult to get the myriad Departments that have a significant impact on business to produce reports in a way that permits review and understanding of the total impact of any proposed legislation on business.

The compliance cost assessment has been swept aside and replaced by regulatory impact assessments. That is a step improvement, which requires not only the focus on cost that existed previously—we are building on previous measures—but a focus on benefits. Compliance cost assessments also refer to non-business costs, which had previously been ignored, and consider who would be affected by the Bill. More importantly, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out earlier, they require over-zealous civil servants who are keen on increasing the legislative tally to consider non-regulatory approaches to legislation. They include best practice and codes of conduct, which might be sufficient to achieve the Government's objective while not placing direct, burdensome regulations on industry.

What regulatory impact assessments have been undertaken to date? No Bill that has a bearing on business comes before the House without an associated regulatory impact assessment. The RIAs are detailed and expansive and they are required to include non-regulatory alternatives. They also emphasise consultation.

Let us consider the great deregulation crusade that was supposed to follow the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. For anyone who worked in business, the title alone was a joy. However, what did it mean and what could it achieve? It could not deregulate any Act that had been passed before 1994. Furthermore, any orders made under the Act could not impose costs. That restraint means that little deregulation has happened since 1994.

We are committed to trying to deconstruct the house that Jack built on regulation that was not reviewed. We must consider how many orders have been successfully executed under the 1994 Act. I am sorry to say that great enabling legislation, which was designed to cut red tape, led to only 42 orders because it was so constraining. I hope that, during this Parliament, a better deregulation Act will be passed. I hope that it will build on the 1994 measure, extend its powers and enable the Administration to provide what we all support: effective reduction in some of the bureaucracy and red tape that business experiences. The 1994 Act has not enabled us to do that.

I have asked each Department to inform me about the orders they seek or might seek, because people have discussed potential regulation. The long and the short of it is that, with the best will in the world, only so many orders can be made under the 1994 Act.

I shall consider some of the pleadings—and what pleadings they were—of the hon. Member for Buckingham, who is a zealot in matters that relate to small businesses. I offer that as a compliment. Like me, the hon. Gentleman is keen to learn the cost of all new regulation. That is important. I do not have to encourage him to visit the Library, examine the regulatory impact assessments and find the information for himself.

The hon. Gentleman's second heart's desire is to discover whether the Government intend to reduce regulatory costs in the coming year. If he puts such a request before them he will find, like me, that they are very amenable and will respond to his correspondence. If he has no joy in the short term, perhaps he would like to consult me later and I shall let him have a copy of my response.

In respect of the hon. Gentleman's desire to remove gold plating of European Union directives—I think that there is a general consensus here—he will be pleased that the Government, by and large, tend to be objective and conciliatory. They are keen to achieve the best and adopt a belt-and-braces approach. We know that that can have a significant impact on small businesses. I hope that they will do their best to encourage civil servants to take a minimalist approach when introducing European legislation. Having spoken to the regulatory impact unit and the better regulation taskforce, I have been assured that they would like to deliver on that pledge.

I must offer a plug here: I am also pleased that the Government have at least tried to take the research assessment initiative to Europe. We have produced guidelines for European legislation, which must have an assessment attached to it before it is considered here. Unfortunately, we have not made the progress with our European partners that we would have wished to make because the initiative has not been adopted universally, but everybody present would want that to happen. However, discussions are on-going. The hon. Gentleman is also keen for six-monthly reports reflecting the progress of deregulation to be made. Those may come from the Cabinet Office in due course.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have done a substantial amount of talking during the debate, but we have yet truly to deliver. That is not through want of trying. I believe that we do not have the enabling

legislation that we need to dismantle some of the past. However, I also believe that we have put in place suitable structures to evaluate what we are doing now. As hon. Members have said, they are not perfect, but we are administering a rapidly growing nation. Small businesses are proliferating, for which we are all grateful, but they present constant consultation problems. Getting it right at any time and achieving perfection is almost an ambition to which mere mortals can never aspire. That said, I welcome the Government amendment and shall not hesitate to support it.

9.18 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am grateful to be given time to speak on this important subject—*[Interruption.]* I was about to say that we have cleared the Gallery, although we are not supposed to mention it, but I am being told that I am wrong. People entered suddenly as soon as I got to my feet and I am glad to see them.

In some ways, the Government are doing well for small businesses—they have turned a large number of this country's big businesses into small ones. We notice in today's FTSE that a number of solid companies dealing with British industry and commerce have been replaced by candy-floss companies. That is the Government's hallmark: they are all spin and no delivery, and the candy-floss companies' lack of profitability represents the lack of delivery from the Labour party.

May I declare my interests? I am the chairman of Ian Bruce Associates Ltd., which is my own small company. It does not pay me anything. I advise the Telecommunications Managers Association and a firm of expert witnesses, Trevor Gilbert and Associates, which has employment agency and employment business interests.

Members of the House are small business people in some ways, as we all have thousands of constituents who want us to deliver for them. We understand some of the stresses and strains, but not all of them. However good or bad a job we do, at the end of the month we get a salary cheque. We know exactly what our expenses are, and we do not have to worry about the Government upsetting what we are doing. They always give us more money, because they want their Back Benchers to vote for them. We are in a privileged position.

I shall briefly run through some areas for which the Government are responsible. We can exchange comments about what happened in the 18 years of Conservative Government and spend the whole time looking backwards, but we should examine what the Government are currently doing.

I am surprised that many people do not understand IR35, which targets a small group of entrepreneurial business men. The limited company rules affect everyone, from the greengrocer to the garage proprietor, but that group will be treated in a special way. They get large salaries on which they pay large amounts of tax, but because there is a way of avoiding paying some of the national insurance moneys, the Government feel that they have to take action. Those people are paying enormous amounts of tax, and they feel insulted when the Government say that they are trying to avoid paying taxes. The way to avoid paying taxes is to put money into the business and invest for growth. That will provide the type of businesses that we need.

The Secretary of State seemed a little unhappy when I congratulated him on doing a complete U-turn on employment agencies. I should have said how pleased the agencies were. Employment agencies are pleased. They are a bit like hostages who are held in a darkened room with a knife to their throats and told that their businesses will be taken away from them. When the knife is removed, and the Government say "We ain't going to do that any more", they rush round saying "What a nice kidnapper. What a nice terrorist." They are all smiling because their businesses are not going to be destroyed. Why did the Government leave them in that position for 18 months?

I have been a strong critic of the new deal, because micro-companies could have put the long-term unemployed back to work, but they will not go through the bureaucracy that is necessary to set up the training schemes for individuals. The Government have lost sight of that. Please will the Government consider that issue sensibly?

A group of people want to take over the sports centre in my constituency which the Ministry of Defence has left empty for the past year or so. It would provide swimming and other sports facilities. I have been waiting 242 days for an answer from the Government in response to a letter from one of those people, who has been trying to find out how they can take it over. A big company came along and wanted to take over the facilities. It promised that it would do things for the community, and although it came late, the Government still gave permission, because they love large organisations, not small companies.

It is important to understand what happens to an employer who suddenly has to administer the working families tax credit, rather than his employees receiving family credit. Small businesses tend to have lower-paid workers, and administering the system gives them cash-flow problems. They will be hit hard, and it could put them out of business.

The Government are missing the point about Post Office businesses. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who was Secretary of State for Social Security, came from the Department of Trade and Industry realising that post offices would be closed down if the Department of Social Security decided to use automated credit transfer without introducing a measure to prevent post offices from going out of business. The Government do not understand that.

We have not mentioned local authorities. There is a Lib-Lab pact in my area, and the authority holds up businesses when they come along with a simple request. Sometimes it goes overboard. It grants permissions to larger businesses, but if a taxi driver wants to use his mobile phone in his taxi, it suddenly decides that it will change the rules for taxis and private hire cars to stop people for having dogs in their cabs. It will do anything to prevent people from making a few pennies.

We are currently considering the Utilities Bill, which I am afraid is beginning to become the futilities Bill. In that legislation the Government have halved regulation at a stroke, but they have threatened all the industries concerned with worse regulation.

There is very little time this evening. I am sorry that I cannot make the speech that I intended to make; I shall end by pleading with the Minister to think carefully before she acts. I am sure that she wants to remain Minister for Small Business, rather than Minister for only a small number of businesses.

9.25 pm

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): The majority of my constituents, like those of most Members, are employed in small or medium-sized businesses. We should put aside the party rhetoric that we expect in this place, and try to recognise the existence of a common wish—a core of intent—to seek improvement.

The Government should be congratulated on their general economic management. If economic management is wrong, the problems of regulation will be tiny in comparison. They should also be congratulated on the Competition Act 1998, which has not been mentioned this evening. Only today, I met representatives of the National Federation of Retail Newsagents, who told me that, for the first time, they as small businesses were being enabled to plead their case that big companies were using anti-competitive measures against them. I think that the legislation will help many small businesses.

On other occasions, I have identified a common fault exhibited by the House and by Governments of all political colours. When something is wrong, there is a feeling that the law or the regulation must be changed. I believe that Governments need better management techniques. If companies continually tried to change their procedures by issuing new rule books, they would not survive. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis–Thomas) also made that point, to which I believe the Government are, in fact, paying attention.

Ministers should also be aware that we need to change the culture in the civil service and in Government agencies, so that we do not administer the law as rule-bound bureaucrats. Let me cite the case of one of my constituents, who is a small business man—a hairdresser. I do so because his problem began under the last Government, and has continued under the present one. Mr. Tice found, to his surprise, that his company had been struck off. He believed at the time that there had been maladministration at Companies House, and that he had not been given the necessary warnings by registered post or some such method. He is convinced to this day that he never received those warnings. There was a full and lengthy investigation by the parliamentary ombudsman, who could not find the case proven for maladministration. My predecessor began work on the case; I had to pass the bad news to Mr. Tice.

I have corresponded with my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs about Mr. Tice's case. Apparently, under the existing regulations, if he wants to reinstate the company that has been struck off, he must pay late filing fees for his accounts for the years during which he fought to reinstate it. I am certain that the law has been administered, but I do not think that that is good management, and I do not think it looks good when Government cannot use some discretion and say, "Here is a small business man who is an exceptional case. We will waive the fees." All Governments need to be more careful about the way in which they administer the law.

Another point has not really been raised this evening, although I understand why Ministers have not yet mentioned it. The agenda for opposition on Europe is a false agenda. The real agenda for the Government must be reform. I had the pleasure of being part of the all-party group on small business delegation that went to Brussels recently; I am pleased to see its chairman, the hon. Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard), in the Chamber. We talked to representatives of small businesses Europe-wide. The consensus was—indeed, it has fertile ground in the Commission—that there is a need for reform of Europe: Europe needs to be more people-friendly and more small-business friendly.

I have heard much said in private about the intention, but I hope that the Minister can give us a reassurance that the Government recognise the importance of ensuring that we deal with that agenda. It is not about whether we should be in or out, but about ensuring that Europe actually works.

I hope that, in reacting to Opposition attacks, Ministers will recognise that many Labour Members know that the strength and health of small businesses will help our economy to grow and to continue to deliver the prosperity that all our constituencies need. At the same time, increasingly, I find that small businesses recognise that we need family-friendly policies, so let us not give those up, but let us also ensure that we take the agenda forward and reduce the burden on small businesses.

9.31 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): There is a lot to be said about the detail of Government policy. I am afraid that there is not much time to make all the points, so I shall stick to a few.

The Secretary of State refused to recognise the entrepreneurial spirit that was created in the 1980s by the last Conservative Government, from whom his right hon. and hon. Friends have much benefited, particularly the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), who, I am afraid to say, is not in the Chamber.

One point was made earlier about the British Chambers of Commerce. It has made a substantial contribution in highlighting the expenses that regulations have imposed on business, amounting to about £10 billion. The burdens barometer that it has published makes interesting reading.

I am particularly concerned about the increasing payroll burden. One area is the cost of compliance. It is highly regressive against small employers, in that the "bottom" 30 per cent. shoulder 75 per cent. of the compliance costs.

Small businesses have become unpaid tax collectors, administering the working families tax credit, student loans and stakeholder pensions, although I accept that the smallest employers have been exempted from the latter. The Government have already imposed a huge raft of burdens on small businesses through central policy planks that are highly unlikely to be repealed.

We must remember that the first year of a new business is the most important and difficult. If the business has an accumulation of regulation to apply, it will be a lot less effective in achieving its initial goals. It can be crippling at a time when the company should be spending time building itself up.

The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) talked about analysis of Government regulation. Key new regulations on business have been introduced by the Labour Government through "Fairness at Work", which includes statutory trade union regulation and changes to dismissal; and the European Union social chapter, which includes parental leave and the working time directive, as my

hon. Friends have so well articulated. That particularly affects areas such as the one that I represent, given that it relies so much on the tourism industry.

The "Making Work Pay" provisions include minimum wage administration and the working families tax credit. The environmental burdens include the climate change levy and the fuel escalator. There are other burdens, including administration of quarterly payments of corporation tax and, dare I say it, the ubiquitous IR35.

The area of social chapter regulation that concerns me was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow): the parental leave directive. We must remember that the costs of applying that will arise in three areas: arranging cover for people while on leave; obviously, additional administration; and defending unsuccessful applications to employment tribunals.

My hon. Friends have already pointed out some of the problems with the working families tax credit, but it must be said that business groups have focused their sternest criticism on the administrative burden that will result from companies being asked, effectively, to administer the welfare state. That cannot be good.

The Federation of Small Businesses has criticised the Government for failing to advise benefit claimants that they do not necessarily have to receive the working families tax credit in their pay packet. As the Government have failed to make that clear, the FSB itself is informing employees by sending leaflets to its 150,000 members, advising them of the option and by posting details on its website. It should not have to do that—the Government should be responsible for it.

The part-time workers directive is the latest burden introduced in the United Kingdom as a consequence of the Government signing the social chapter. According to the British Chambers of Commerce, under the Government's proposal for implementation of the European Union part-time workers directive, United Kingdom businesses will face increasing legal costs. I read much of the material that the British Chambers of Commerce publishes, simply because it gleans much information from those who are out there in the business world—unlike the Ministers mentioned by hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham, who do not have that experience.

Another problem that will arise if part-time and full-time workers have the same rights is the way in which company pensions are allocated.

One of the biggest criticisms of the part-time work regulations, besides the regulations themselves, is the manner of the consultation on them. The Government have consistently been criticised for the way in which they have conducted consultation on important regulations, allowing little time for scrutiny and business preparation.

The burdens on business introduced by the Government have a profound effect. Let us not forget that small business was the backbone of the 1980s and 1990s economic success that was led by the previous Government. This Government must ensure that there is a reduced regulatory burden on small businesses.

A more entrepreneurial spirit is the order of the day. Cumulative regulation stifles business, and it has a disproportionate effect on small businesses at a time when they can least afford to apply them.

9.37 pm

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): Much has been made by Opposition Members of a lack of experience in the Department of Trade and Industry in running a small business. I ran a small business for many years before being elected to the House. Should such experience become a requirement in the job description for future Ministers, I am available.

I should like to mention quickly a small business in my constituency, Groot and Hartman, which is working double shifts to cope with demand for its product. That is quite typical of what is happening in my constituency—all small businesses are doing exceptionally well.

Small businesses require three things: stability, low inflation and low interest rates. The Government are delivering all three of those, with continuity. All small business people will, of course, say that they want no regulation at all—not one bit of it—which, as we know, and as they accept, is an impossibility. They certainly want less regulation.

The week before last, I was in Brussels, with my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner). Our counterparts from other European Parliaments said that the United Kingdom is far ahead of them in deregulating small business. There was no question but that they were envious of the action that we have taken on the issue. That is not to say that we have it right, but we are getting it better.

We want stability, and we want continuity. Above all, our small businesses want a trained and enthusiastic work force and less regulation. We are doing that very well, and we are moving in the right direction. I shall be supporting the Government's amendment.

9.38 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): We have had a very lively debate in the three hours allotted to us today. It is difficult, however, to add to the scope and detail of the opening speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), who, with her own experience of running a business, brings to the debate the detail and knowledge that Labour Members lack. She lamented the fact that the debate on small business has been downgraded by the Government and put into the Westminster Hall annexe. It has taken Conservative Members to bring it back to the main Chamber of the House of Commons.

My hon. Friend's main message was that people who run a small business are increasingly saying to the Government, "Get off our back." Indeed, my hon. Friend quoted a business man who said that the Government are showing an unforgivable lack of understanding of what it takes to employ someone. I shall address that issue in a moment. We see that interference extended further to the likes of nursing homes, with the absurdity of instructions to widen doorways by 1.5 in. When the Conservatives are in government, we shall have a full audit of regulations with a view to ensuring that there are fewer of them.

In sad contrast to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, the Secretary of State appeared disdainful of the problems caused by over-regulation. He simply does not understand what it takes for a small company to grow. In his policy, we see the absurdity of his making it hard for business to take risks, then setting up regional venture funds to tackle the problems that his Government have exacerbated.

[Mr. Alan Duncan]

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) made a pertinent point when he said that there are increasing disincentives to taking on apprentices. The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), as the House heard, takes a slightly inconsistent approach to the topic. We all welcome his robust comments in the reports of the Select Committee, which he oversees. However, as if to atone for being so critical, he takes a different attitude in debates such as these. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said, the hon. Gentleman seems to have something of a Jekyll and Hyde character, taking the opposite view in these debates from that which he takes when he chairs the Select Committee, as he does so well. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham made a remarkable parliamentary contribution, characterised by his usual dynamism, authority and forensic and analytical skill.

The hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) lamented the fact that it has not always proved easy for central Government to estimate the costs of regulation. That may be so, but the Government should appreciate the fact that there is another litmus test: if in doubt, they should just go and speak to those running small businesses, who will tell them whether the regulations are punitive—as they feel increasingly strongly they are.

We also had very helpful contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) and for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser)—a sort of Dorset double—and from the hon. Members for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) and for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard).

However, perhaps the tone of the debate was set by a recent document from the Forum of Private Business. On the front page, it says that employment regulations are a top priority for action. Later, it adds:

> There is evidence that firms are facing extra costs from a range of increasing burdens, mainly in the form of employment regulation . . . There are also pressures on sectors, such as the construction industry tax scheme, regulation of care homes . . . and security companies.

Many sectors of small business activity are feeling the strain of the Government's intervention. Many references have been made to the document produced by the British Chambers of Commerce, which puts the cost of the burdens on its businesses at something approaching £10 billion. That is dwarfed by the calculation on the next page in which the BCC says that the stealth taxes affecting its sector equate to something approaching 32 billion dollars, which is another cost that it, like other areas of business, has to face. [Hon. Members: "Dollars?"] I meant pounds. Having been so long in international trade, which is something that Labour Members do not understand, I occasionally make a slip and take an international rather than a parochial view.

In taking such an international view, I note that, despite many weeks and months of campaigning by Conservative Members—and despite increasing evidence of the detrimental effects of the Government's policy—the Government still refuse to appreciate the bad decision that they have taken in adopting IR35. Even last night—and in this morning's debate in the Westminster Hall annexe about the internet—it became increasingly clear that their approach to IR35 will drive people out of this country.

I have here one of many hundreds, if not thousands, of letters from a person in such a predicament, who writes:

> It makes little difference to me. I will be long gone by the time the damage has been done by the idiotic Government.

When will Ministers wake up to the fact that, at a time when they are attempting to promote the internet revolution, their own policy is destroying this country's position and chucking out of business, or out of the country altogether, those at the leading edge of the revolution that we wish to encourage?

When will the Government appreciate that, whenever they take a decision to collect more money or impose a directive, they are, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset said, increasing the payroll burden on small businesses, which they cannot afford? They are being asked to fulfil tasks for Government as unpaid tax collectors, and often to do so with little notice, which throws their business into chaos and causes them to set aside the main purpose of their commercial activity in order to do the Government's work for them.

The Government must not only now make it their policy to put less of a burden on small businesses, but must ensure that, when they do increase that burden, because they have not listened, they at least give businesses sufficient notice so that they can organise their affairs and tackle their main priority before doing the Government's work for them.

I have a very few minutes to say the many things that I would like to say in this rich area of policy and, at the moment, of complaint. Perhaps at the root of what the Minister should appreciate—and the Secretary of State clearly failed to appreciate—is that what matters to a small business is the marginal cost of employing someone. It is that marginal decision which leads a company, at the beginning of its life, to take on that one extra person—and then, one hopes, another—that allows it to grow from a little acorn into the big oak that it needs to be if it is to appear in the FTSE 100.

The Government are increasing that marginal cost of employment, so that the burden of taking on a person is becoming increasingly difficult for small businesses which have to count their pennies, and which see one extra person on their payroll as an important element of all their costs and budget.

We are also seeing the continuing gold plating of directives. When will the Secretary of State appreciate that a new EU directive is not an instruction to shape a law according to an exact form of words, but merely a requirement for this Parliament to shape its law according to the parameters laid down, in words that we in this House choose and understand? Increasingly, those directives impose more burdens on our businesses—and comparatively greater burdens than those placed on many of our EU counterparts. That not only puts small businesses at a competitive disadvantage but leaves them facing obligations that they need not face.

Small shops and community post offices are under threat, and fuel taxes are imposed on companies such as garden centres, putting those businesses in jeopardy. It is time for the Government to leave small businesses alone. Let them be. Let them grow. The Government should stop paying lip service to that when in fact they are all mouth and no delivery. Let us leave small businesses alone, and relieve them of the burdens being imposed on them by the Government.

9.49 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): This has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate—the fourth on small businesses since we were elected. We have heard some excellent speeches this evening. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) rightly referred to the importance to small businesses of a favourable economic environment—the environment that we have created.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas), in a most thoughtful analysis, spelled out how inadequate were the compliance cost assessments from the previous Government and how important it is to enact new regulatory reform legislation to strip out some of the old and unnecessary red tape.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) made the important point that we need to promote economic reform in the European Union to create a climate that is favourable for the entrepreneur and for small businesses. I am happy to reassure him that we have indeed placed that issue on the agenda for the forthcoming Lisbon summit.

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard), in a most effective job application, stressed again the need for small businesses, in particular, to have a stable macro-economic climate.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) and several other Conservative Members raised specific issues concerning regulation. The hon. Gentleman spoke about IR35, which we have debated extensively in the Chamber and elsewhere. He may not think that there is a tax loophole, but I suggest that he reads at least one of the computing journals which notoriously advised information technology contractors last year to pay themselves a salary of no more than just over £4,000 a year and to draw all the rest of their very substantial fees by way of dividends, thus ensuring that they paid neither income tax nor national insurance contributions.

The IR35 reforms are about a fair tax system that treats employees and the self-employed fairly. The Inland Revenue is working very closely with industry to ensure that there is proper understanding of the self-employment rules. IR35 will have no effect whatever on those who are indeed self-employed, and it will not prohibit in any way the use of personal service companies, but it will remove a tax loophole that clearly distorts the choice between employment and self-employment and leaves employees on modest salaries paying more national insurance contributions than those who are using personal service companies to avoid fair tax responsibilities.

Several Conservative Members spoke about the working families tax credit. Perhaps I can remind them that even in the worst-case scenario—that of a small employer with an employee entitled to the credit, who is doing his own payroll with a manual system—the additional compliance work amounts to about six minutes a week at a cost of about 70p: not, I think, an excessive burden on any small business, especially when the credit is a central part of our strategy to ensure that work pays and to help people to move from dependence on benefits to independence as they earn a living for themselves and their families.

The hon. Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) repeated the accusation that we have failed to explain to people claiming the working families tax credit that they have a choice about how it is paid. That is simply not true. The application form makes it quite clear that before an application is made people need to consider who is to receive the payment: the person at work or a partner at home.

We start from a simple principle: wealth is created not by Government but by business. Our responsibility is to create the conditions in which business can succeed. One might not have thought so to listen to Conservative Members' whingeing, but British businesses are indeed succeeding.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, more than 1 million new businesses have started since the general election. More businesses registered for VAT than in the previous five years. We have seen fewer businesses closing than at any time in the past 10 years. Since the Government were elected, we have had 700,000 more people in work than ever before. More people are now in work than ever were under the Conservative Government, most of them in small and medium-sized businesses.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): While the Minister is crowing about how many new businesses have started up, could she tell us what are the costs of the new burdens that the Government have imposed on those businesses?

Ms Hewitt: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained with great care, most of the figures that are bandied around by Opposition Members, and, I am afraid to say, most recently by the British Chambers of Commerce, simply ignore the changes that we have made to the administrative costs—real red tape and compliance costs. They complain about the costs of paying employees fair wages and ensuring that they have paid holidays for the first time.

Most businesses welcome the fact that at last they have a Government who have set fair standards for all employees. Every good business knows that if it wants to get the best people—and it is having good people that every business depends on for its success—it has to treat them properly. Good businesses do not want to go on being undercut by cowboy businesses that exploit their employees and very often break other regulations as well.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The Minister will know that the British Chambers of Commerce has estimated that every small business has had £5,000 added to its costs by regulations imposed by the Government. Does she agree with that figure and, if not, will she give us the real figure?

Ms Hewitt: As I have pointed out on other occasions in the Chamber, the British Chambers of Commerce made the unfortunate mistake of taking early estimates of compliance costs before they were changed as we simplified the administrative procedures. I can give the hon. Gentleman an example. We amended the draft national minimum wage regulations to reduce the record-keeping requirements. We did that after listening to businesses and learning from them. By doing that, we reduced the costs to employers by more than £100 million a year. We amended the working time regulations, again to reduce record-keeping requirements, which cut compliance costs by approximately £13 million.

It was also this Government who acted on an important recommendation from the previous Government's deregulation taskforce back in 1995 to merge the Inland

[Ms Hewitt]

Revenue and the Contributions Agency, so that employers no longer had to deal with two different agencies and report to two different Departments. That was a recommendation that the previous Government had, but never acted upon. *[Interruption.]* The fact is that businesses in this country— *[Interruption.]* As some Opposition Members know, I have been speaking in several debates elsewhere this evening, and I apologise for the fact that I seem almost completely to have lost my voice. Happily, I have not lost my conviction. Businesses in this country are doing exceptionally well, in striking contrast to the bankruptcies that took place under the Conservative Government.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 159, Noes 309.

Division No. 98] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin (Tatton)
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David

Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Oliner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 305, Noes 160.

Division No. 99] **[10.12 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor

Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John

Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the action taken by Her Majesty's Government to foster an environment in which small business can flourish, with macro-economic stability, a 10 per cent. starting rate of corporation tax, a research and development tax credit, regulation introduced in ways that minimise burdens on business, and the creation of the Small Business Service through which for the first time there will be at the heart of Government an institution dedicated to representing the interest of, and improving the services to, small firms; congratulates the ongoing work being undertaken by the Better Regulation Task Force, chaired by Lord Haskins, in spearheading the Government's campaigning for better regulation; and contrasts this with the boom and bust policies of the previous administration, which led to 15 per cent. interest rates, double digit inflation and the collapse of thousands of small firms.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Representation of the People Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenses incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the provisions of the Act relating to the free delivery of election addresses at the first Greater London Authority mayoral election.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

10.24 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): We are dealing with a money resolution that results from an altercation between the opposition parties and the Government about the issue of free mailshots for candidates in the London elections. I am pleased to inform the House that the Government have been forced into the most miserable and humiliating climbdown on the issue.

The last time I stood at the Dispatch Box to discuss the matter, I explained that it was important because the London elections are extremely important. We are dealing with an electorate of 5.1 million people. The precedent set by the Government in their legislation for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the European elections and for parliamentary elections established the principle that free mailing should be available to candidates. I pointed out the need to promote a high turnout and fairness in the elections. It is a matter of democracy. Election rules should be agreed by consensus among the parties, as they always have been, rather than the governing party abusing its position to impose on all the other parties its view of how the elections should be conducted.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), put up all the old canards about why the Government could not allow that to happen. First, he said that the London election was a local election. That reason was repeated in the Upper House when these matters were debated there, despite the fact that the Government were already arranging experimental free mailings for the Watford local elections under the Bill.

The Minister put up ludicrous scare stories about the cost of free mailings in the elections, which were exposed in this House and the other place as utterly fraudulent. Finally, there was the curry house argument—the idea that every two-bit restaurant in London would put up candidates for the London Assembly and the London mayoralty in order to advertise its take-away services.

[Mr. Bernard Jenkin]

In the other place, the arguments for truth, fairness and democracy prevailed. As the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, it was a question not of the elected House versus the peers, but of the Government versus the people, with the peers representing the people—and the peers won. They caught the Government ballot rigging.

Not only did the Government attempt to rig the ballot for the selection of their candidate for mayor, they attempted to rig the election itself and, indeed, before they made the concession, they threatened to rig the voting in the House of Lords by appointing extra peers in order to get their way there as well. The Government would rig the entire constitution in their fit of pique and determination to get their way.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Will my hon. Friend remind the House that during the campaign before the last election, the Labour party called for a voice for London? Will he ask why the Government now want to make that such a muted voice, unable even to communicate with London?

Mr. Jenkin: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The Government's political and constitutional project is designed to create a voice for the Prime Minister in every corner of the United Kingdom, and to stifle dissent.

In the London election, the Government are about to send an expensive booklet containing information about how wonderful their constitutional reforms are, but they want to deny the same right to the candidates standing in the elections. They have been forced by the Upper House into a dramatic U-turn.

I want to question the Minister about the money resolution, because although the Government have been forced to concede the principle, they have been crabbed, bitter and grudging in their concessions on the detail. They have insisted not on the right of individual candidates to send their election manifestos in separate envelopes or even in a joint envelope to the electors, but on creating an A5 booklet. Candidates will have to send their camera-ready copy to be edited and included in a booklet that will be stapled together and contain the candidates' addresses. What sort of constitutional abomination are we considering?

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Did my hon. Friend use the word "edited"? If so, who will edit the booklet?

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Alastair.

Mr. Jenkin: It should be put on the record that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said "Alastair" in response to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) asked. I presume that he means Alastair Campbell, who is the press secretary at No. 10 Downing street. I fear that the hon. Gentleman may be right; I shall give way to him so that he can dig his hole even deeper.

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman interrupted me too quickly. I was referring to that great editor, paymaster, diarist and literator of the Conservative party, Alistair McAlpine.

Mr. Jenkin: I rest my case on the size of the hole that the hon. Gentleman is in.

There is a mess. I accept that the other place has let the unsatisfactory measure pass because it rightly wanted the London elections to be conducted in an orderly fashion, and without chaos descending on them. However, the Government have consequently taken advantage of the leniency and reasonableness of the other place. There is a constitutional mess, which involves the stapled A5 booklet. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham asked a good question, which the Minister should answer: who decides on the order in which the A5 leaflets are printed and stapled together?

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): The alphabet.

Mr. Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman claims that it is the alphabet. We are back to the hereditary principle that God will decide. The leaflets have nothing to do with fairly conducted elections, for which our original proposal would have provided.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): If the booklet is to be in alphabetical order, will my hon. Friend speculate on the order in which the candidates who bear the name "Frank Dobson" will appear?

Mr. Jenkin: I am confused about which one my hon. Friend means.

Mr. Greenway: There are two.

Mr. Jenkin: My hon. Friend is right. I do not know whether that means that there are two or three Labour candidates in the election. That remains to be seen.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The second Mr. Dobson lives in my constituency. His name is Frank S. Dobson. I believe therefore that his name would appear below that of the official Labour party candidate on the ballot paper.

Mr. Jenkin: We are presenting the argument that the leaflets will be stapled in a specific order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The money resolution is a narrow matter. There will be an opportunity to discuss booklets, leaflets and ballot papers later.

Mr. Jenkin: Of course I shall concentrate on the money resolution, but the current debate is not part of the time-limited debate that follows. I fear that some hon. Members may not want us to reach the relevant amendments.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's fears are nothing to do with me. He must keep to the money resolution.

Mr. Jenkin: I shall keep to the money resolution because it compounds the mess that the Government are creating as they try to wriggle off the hook of the concessions that they have given. The money is provided not only for the booklet but, according to the money resolution, for

the first Greater London Authority mayoral election.

My noble Friends thought that they were extracting a concession on the conduct of London elections in the future and in perpetuity, for as long as elections shall exist in London, and providing through their amendment a general power for the Government to supply free mailings not only for mayoral candidates but for Assembly candidates at some future date. However, it turns out that the money resolution, which we are attaching to the Lords amendment and which gives Ministers the power to authorise such free mailings, applies solely to this election.

We are compounding the constitutional mess that the Government have created by setting a precedent for free mailings in London elections, but the Government clearly have no intention to honour it at a future mayoral election. That may be an academic matter for Labour Members, but they may not be sitting on the Government Benches after the general election. The measure will make the mess that they have created so much worse and I ask the Minister to explain why a freepost is right for this election, but not others. He would not have tabled the money resolution if he did not agree with that proposition. Goodness me, I cannot believe that he is about to stand at the Dispatch Box and say something in which he does not believe.

If the measure is right for this election, why is it not right for all elections? Why has the Minister's Department—perhaps it was the hapless Deputy Prime Minister again—been so ineffective in its negotiations with the Treasury that it has been unable to secure the money and a general power to authorise expenditure on future free mailings?

This is the closing chapter of a miserable saga of hypocrisy and ballot rigging by the Government, and they are crowning it with the most miserable and backward-looking climbdown from the position from which they started. They said that the elections should not have free mailings, but now those will take place. The Minister should make the long-term policy clear for that reason—although we shall not vote against the money resolution—or is he merely going to carry on doing what is convenient for his party in government, regardless of the interests of democracy in this country?

10.38 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) will reflect on the answer that we hope to receive from the Minister before we decide whether to divide the House. It is far from clear that we should not divide.

A number of questions need to be asked and answered, but before I come to them, may I say that I am extremely glad that the measure is not going through on the nod, which was the Government's intention? I intend to pose some of those questions, and I suspect that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), for one, will ask others. First, why are individual candidates being asked to contribute £10,000 rather than some other sum? There must be some logic in fixing £10,000 as the contribution. I ask the Minister, why £10,000 and not some other sum?

Secondly, if the candidates are to contribute £10,000, what balance will fall to the Exchequer? So far as I can see, the bill is not quantified. Surely we are entitled to know exactly how much the measure will cost us. If it is neither enough nor too much, the House might decide to divide on this matter.

There is another question of considerable importance. Why was it decided to fix on a collective delivery? Applying ordinary principles, I should have thought that individual candidates were entitled to have their election addresses delivered separately. A point of principle is involved. If they are delivered collectively, who is to ensure that the Labour party does not, in one way or another, tamper with the material of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone)?

As a matter of fact, the Government are tampering with it in the legislation, because they have stipulated the order in which the election addresses will be printed. Surprise, surprise! The name of the hon. Member for Brent, East will not appear first in the bundle. It will be preceded by the Labour party's official candidate. That may be a coincidence, but I should be extraordinarily surprised if it was.

The Government have so ordered the election of the Labour party candidate as to cheat one of their own hon. Members. They have so ordered the legislation as to compound the sin. We are being asked, on the nod, to acquiesce in a fraud. I hope that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will decide not to allow this fraud to go on the nod, and to vote against it. I suspect that some of my right hon. Friends will now speak in similar vein.

10.42 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The right hon. and learned Gentleman's right hon. Friends may have to wait a little longer.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): That is all right. The hon. Gentleman can take as long as he likes.

Mr. Hughes: Be that as it may, the story of the money resolution began a long time ago, on 28 January last year, in the Standing Committee considering the Greater London Authority Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) asked the then Minister with responsibility for London, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), about expenses for the Greater London Authority election. The hon. Gentleman went on to run a candidate's campaign—he may now regret that, and think that he would have been better staying as Minister for London, but that is a matter for him.

On 28 January, the then Minister for London said:

> We do not want to hang about, but I remind him that there are still some 15 months to go before the election of a mayor. We have plenty of time to consider the issue carefully, take on board all relevant matters and introduce sensible, practical expenses limits which will have the desired effect.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 28 January 1999; c. 84.]

Time did not slow down, but Government activity seemed to get into some difficulty. It was not until 15 December that the consultation on expenses limits began. The Government asked for replies before the end of the Christmas holidays. They said, "You may not be able to get round to it, but that will be fine by us."

When it came to the consultation, my hon. Friends and I, and others, suggested that the Government should consider the little issue of a freepost. When the Bill was

[Mr. Hughes]

last before the House, I asked the Minister whether anyone had argued against a freepost in response to the consultation, and the answer was that no one had suggested that there should not be a freepost. To use the words of the then Minister, having had plenty of time to consider the issue carefully, take on board all the relevant matters and introduce sensible, practical expenses limits, the Government asked for views and then ignored them completely. They decided to resist the idea that for an electorate of 5 million people there should be a freepost.

It was not, therefore, altogether surprising that, when we debated the Representation of the People Bill on Second Reading, the issue did not come up on the money resolution. The clear implication all along had been that the money for the expenses would be dealt with under the Greater London Authority Bill (Election Expenses) Order. That was always the intention; that was what the consultation was about; and everyone expected that all the election expenses would be dealt with as a bit of business ancillary to the Bill. But, lo and behold, when it was suggested that we ought to have a freepost, the Government thought up another wheeze. The wheeze was, "We're terribly sorry, but you cannot have a freepost under the Greater London Authority Bill (Election Expenses) Order, because we would have to change major legislation, namely, the Representation of the People Bill."

Only last month, we began the second round of the debate. We became involved in a discussion with the new Minister responsible for London about the freepost for the London elections. The short history of the next month showed that the Government are not very good at maths.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Had the hon. Gentleman supposed that they were?

Mr. Hughes: I had not, but I think we have no better example of how bad they are at maths than what followed.

When asked about a freepost on 15 February, the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), said:

> The total cost to the public purse of a free mailshot would be very significant. The total could well be over £10 million and possibly as much as £20 million, depending on the number of candidates . . . Such costs would be disproportionate to the GLA's proposed budget of some £35 million, and would be equivalent to more than £3 for every council tax payer in London.—[*Official Report*, 15 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 902.]

The truth is that the Government were exaggerating just a teeny weeny bit. By the time the Bill reached the other place and Lord Bassam spoke, the cost was well and truly up to £30 million and there was speculation that it might be significantly more.

In Committee in the House of Lords, the Under-Secretary, Lord Bassam, had suggested that a freepost would mean a blank cheque.

Sir Patrick Cormack: In the post.

Mr. Hughes: Or not, as the case may be.

On leap year's day, 29 February, Lord Bassam said on the Floor of the House of Lords that, following negotiation:

> we came up with a formula which reduces the cost considerably.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 29 February 2000; Vol. 610, c. 497.]

Over two weeks of negotiation, it appeared that the freepost would not cost £20 million or £30 million, but might only cost about £2 million. That was the argument that some of us had put in the first place, and, indeed, the argument that the Electoral Reform Society—which knows a bit about these matters—had put in the first place.

As the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said, we now have cause for a second money motion, just to sneak in the authority for this itsy-bitsy extra bit of money that the Government thought was £20 million, but which has now fallen to £2 million.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): It is a lot of money.

Mr. Hughes: It is.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The hon. Gentleman is having good fun, but he would not want to mislead the House, would he? He knows that we are talking about different things, and he knows that different things were discussed in another place. Are we discussing whether there would be a single mailshot to every voter, which would cost £750,000 per candidate—if there were 20 candidates, the cost could be £15 million—or are we discussing a much more disputable concept? While the hon. Gentleman has fun, let him be careful not to mislead the House over what was discussed in another place.

Mr. Hughes: The threats are a bit late in the day. The deal has been done. The Minister was party to many of the negotiations. He knows perfectly well that the argument from the Government Benches all along was that it could not be done, was not achievable, could not be delivered and was not manageable.

It was the Opposition who put forward the idea that the literature could all be stuffed into one envelope, could be delivered at the same time and could be delivered with the polling card, which had to be delivered to every elector in any event, so we always thought that it could be done at low cost. The independent advice that the Minister has received has clearly borne out the fact that we were right and the Government were always wrong.

Mr. Gummer: Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the point, has he noticed that the Minister has given away something very important? The cost could be £15 million only if there were 20 candidates. If he is suggesting that, at one stage, it was £30 million, he must have imagined that there would be 40 candidates for the mayor of London. Has anyone ever conceived of there being 40 candidates? Now we have so few, is it possible that the Government were covering their tracks, lest all those who chose the Labour party candidate decided that, instead, they would stand themselves?

Mr. Hughes: As the right hon. Gentleman's party leader said, what was originally a day mayor looked as if it was turning into a nightmare.

Mr. MacShane: That is William's joke.

Mr. Hughes: I did attribute it.

The Government might well have dreamt that there would be 40 candidates, all from the same party. Anything was possible, but we have a proposition. We should never have reached the stage of having to battle for it. Every elector should have the opportunity to read what every duly nominated candidate wants to put to them. It was the only way in which it could be done. It means that every elector will receive some literature. To its shame, the Labour party has resisted that until the last minute. I hope that we never hear such nonsensical and badly justified arguments again.

10.52 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I had not intended to intrude on the debate, and I apologise to the House if I do not appear to share the view of some that the proceedings are a joke. I may be rather old-fashioned, but I happen to believe that this country's electoral law is very precious and that the rules under which we fight elections are a particular responsibility of the House. The Government have an overwhelming majority in the House and can carry anything against the opposition parties here. They have a peculiar responsibility to respect that. There was a tradition that, if such changes were introduced, there would be a Speaker's Conference and all-party agreement would be sought on what the rules should be for an election.

I am making a serious point. I happen to represent a constituency that, 130 years ago, was disfranchised because of the corruption there. It was not exclusive to the constituency: there was a great deal of corruption in this country. One of the traditions of our democracy, of which I hope we are all proud, is that, over the centuries, we have sought to establish higher standards for the holding of elections than exist in some countries. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland) to shout across the Chamber.

Mr. King: I hope that all hon. Members are proud of the standards in this country according to which elections are held; we all fight elections and come to serve our constituents—proud that we have fought the elections under the fairest rules in the world.

I accept the Government's right to introduce new arrangements. Although I do not believe in the idea of a new mayor for London, the Government are entitled to create the position. The proposal was made in their manifesto, and they are entitled to it. They have introduced the legislation, and there will be a mayor.

Today, we are talking about the arrangements under which an election will be fought. Something that did worry me, particularly in the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), was the statement that the proposals will affect only the first mayoral election. That does not stack up. We all know the power of precedent. As we also know, the Government's policy is to try to introduce elected mayors to other parts of the United Kingdom, in the cities that desire to have them. Today, undoubtedly, we are debating arrangements that will set precedents that could have wide application.

I am sorry, as I said, to interfere with the jollity that some hon. Members may think the debate warrants, but there are some serious principles at stake. I think that the Minister will support me in saying that, if the arrangements for the London election applied to general election practice, the Government would not have dreamt of introducing them without seeking all-party agreement, possibly in a Speaker's Conference. We are treating the mayoral election as if it were a one-off, and not as the precedent for a much wider electoral system.

I tell the Minister—who I think is listening seriously to what I am saying, unlike the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), who seems to regard the matter as a joke, which I do not—that we really must consider very seriously the arrangements that are made. It would be devastatingly damaging if the image were created that there has been an attempt at ballot rigging to enable the Government to avoid embarrassment.

In this case, the Government are proceeding not by a Speaker's Conference on electoral arrangements, but by virtue of their majority in the House. They must therefore be exceptionally scrupulous in the way in which they introduce the arrangements.

Mr. Hogg: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. King: No. I apologise to my right hon. and learned Friend, but I want to make only a brief speech. I am speaking because I have not enjoyed the first exchanges in the debate. For those of us who care about the House of Commons and the standards of democracy in the United Kingdom, this is a very important issue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Forth—

10.58 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Mr. Speaker, I shall have to speak more often in the Chamber, as my name is not sufficiently in your mind. I shall rectify that before you even know it.

One of the problems with the motion is that it is all the wrong way round. We are being asked to give our approval to a money resolution before we know which amendments to the Bill the House will agree to. It is possible that we may not agree to any of the amendments. We may not agree, particularly, either to the amendment to which the money resolution partly refers, or to an amendment to that amendment. We are therefore being asked—it really is unacceptable—to give the Government a blank cheque, presumably on the basis of the Minister saying, in the usual way, "Trust me."

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. Friend will also want to remind the House that that is contrary to precedent. The usual rule is to have Second Reading, which deals with policy, followed by a debate on the money resolution. On this occasion, it is the other way round.

Mr. Forth: I sometimes think that Ministers are not interested in precedent, but will ride roughshod, as they see fit, over any convention or precedent. This debate is yet another example of the same practice.

The problem, as hon. Members have said, is that we cannot possibly know the eventual scope of the money resolution. The fact that it will apply only to the first Greater London Authority mayoral election is stated in the money resolution itself, which leaves some very

[Mr. Forth]

interesting questions about how subsequent elections may be funded. Conversely, it may suggest that only for this election will those arrangements be made, and that, subsequently, no such arrangements will be made. The Minister will have to clarify the position.

Mr. Jenkin: My right hon. Friend has touched on a procedural difficulty, which we have encountered because of the late stage at which the amendments have been tabled. Not only do the amendments have no line numbers because of the rush to get them here, but some of the amendments that we tabled have not been called because they are proscribed by this narrow money resolution. Some amendments that the Opposition parties wanted to debate have not been called because they do not fit in with the money resolution and are, therefore, outwith the scope of the Bill.

Mr. Hogg: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Have you the discretion to reorder the business so that the money resolution can be taken after the debate on the Lords amendments? If you were to do that, some of the amendments that we wish to have discussed would not be proscribed by the form of the money resolution.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is as aware of the procedures of the House as I am. The money resolution is necessary for the House to go on to debate the Lords amendments, which will come at a later stage. Without the money resolution, we would not be able to debate, accept or reject the Lords amendments.

Mr. Forth: That presents us with a great temptation to try to vote down the money resolution. That would have an admirable effect.

We can see the real difficulty in which the House finds itself. However, that is the fault not of the House but of the Government, who have typically muddled the Bill from start to finish.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Who made the rules that you have just announced to the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It certainly was not the Chair. The Standing Orders of the House are made by the House itself, and the hon. Gentleman is part of that procedure.

Mr. Forth: I am conscious of the passage of time, and I want to leave the Minister time to answer the questions.

Does the provision apply to the election of the mayor alone, or to all the Assembly candidates? If not, will the Assembly candidates be denied the facility? Lords amendment No. 34 would insert a new clause, which refers to the possibility that the mailing may not be in booklet form. Subsection (4)(d) admits of the possibility of

> separate mailings in respect of the free delivery of election addresses.

That would have serious cost implications, and the Minister must tell us more about that. The Lords amendments also refer to whether the mailings will be delivered by the Post Office or by some other means. The Minister must explain what will happen before we can judge whether the money resolution will involve expenditure of £1 million, £2 million or £20 million.

We must know the Minister's answers to the questions about Assembly candidates, separate addresses, the booklet and whether the mailing will be delivered by the Post Office or otherwise—all those points are referred to in the Lords amendments—before we can make up our minds on the money resolution. I shall conclude my remarks, because I see that the Minister is anxious to answer the questions—although I shall believe it when I see it.

11.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): It is a pleasure to reply to such a congenial debate. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, and the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who spoke for the Conservative party, have had their little dose of yah-boo-sucks politics for tonight, so perhaps we can get on with discussing the serious business before the House.

A money resolution is needed to authorise the use of public funds to provide for the free mailing and the delivery of a booklet of election addresses by mayoral candidates contesting the first GLA election. The resolution also authorises the use of public funds to pay for the cost of printing 5 million copies of the booklet. The precise cost to public funds of printing will depend on how many candidates want to include their election address in the booklet and pay the required £10,000 per candidate contribution towards printing costs. If the sum of the financial contributions from the candidates does not exceed the total cost of printing, the difference will be met from public funds.

The cost may be met by the candidates or it may not be. However, we decided to set a limit of £10,000 on the sum that they would contribute. Obviously, during a mayoral election, they would contribute some money if there were not that sort of public funding.

What amazed me was that the hon. Member for North Essex said that he wanted a general power to authorise public spending on free mailshots in elections, and he wanted the Home Office to seek that authorisation from the Treasury. In this place and in the other place, the Conservative party has sought to use taxpayers' subsidies for their council candidates by law. The Tories say that they oppose public subsidies for political parties, but now they demand public spending. They tell the electorate that they want fewer tax burdens, but when it suits them they want to burden the taxpayer with funding Tory candidates in council elections.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Brien: No, I will not give way.

At least the Liberal Democrats have the consistency of supporting public funding for their political party throughout. Conservatives say publicly that they do not support that, but when it comes to some financial difficulty that they may have, despite donations from

foreigners to subsidise their candidates, they call for a general power from the Treasury to authorise public spending for free mailshots, which will benefit them.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: The Government did not provide for each candidate to be invited to send free mailshots because of the potential cost to the public purse.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Mr. O'Brien: Opposition Members were prepared to dish it out, now let them listen to a bit of it.

The Government did not provide for each candidate to be entitled to send mail post-free because of the potential cost to the public purse and the likelihood of abuse by unscrupulous candidates. We have resolved those concerns in what is essentially a compromise resolution brought before the House by us—a solution that met with agreement in the other place, including among its Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members.

The Post Office calculated that a single mailshot to every London elector would cost £750,000. As I have already said, it is not difficult to work out that if there were 20 candidates, the cost to the taxpayer would be £15 million, and if there were 40 candidates, it might well be £30 million. We do not yet know how many candidates will come before the electorate at the mayoral election. If each candidate is entitled to a free mailshot worth £750,000, the potential for abuse is enormous—*[Interruption.]* Yes, abuse. If I were an unscrupulous advertiser who wanted to advertise a particular business, I would only have to put down the £10,000 deposit to obtain £750,000 worth of free advertising for my business. Presumably, that is what the Tories want. I suspect that quite a few unscrupulous people might well decide to put their name to that, which is why we have included in the amendments provisions to deal with those who might be unscrupulous. That is why we want to ensure that those who stand for mayor will not be able to cause the taxpayer to spend enormous sums to benefit their commercial preferences.

We have brought forward a workable solution, which met with cross-party support in another place, and the amendments that we have tabled—

It being three quarters of an hour after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and Ways and Means resolutions in connection with Bills).*

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Representation of the People Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenses incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the provisions of the Act relating to the free delivery of election addresses at the first Greater London Authority mayoral election.

Mr. Edward Davey: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to suggest to the House that the Post Office would not be able to enforce the guidelines that it is usually allowed to enforce to prevent commercial exploitation of the freepost in elections?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order; it is a matter for debate.

Representation of the People Bill (Supplemental Allocation of Time)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Order of the House of 20th January be supplemented as follows:

Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments shall be completed at today's sitting and, if not previously concluded, shall be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on this Order.

2.—(1) This paragraph applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that Question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single Question on any further Amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown, and

(b) the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single Question on any Amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment and

(b) the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in the Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question, That this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments, or disposed of an Amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to, the Speaker shall put forthwith a single Question on any Amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

Subsequent stages

3.—(1) The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the consideration forthwith of any further Message from the Lords on the Bill.

(2) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(3) Sub-paragraphs (4) to (7) apply for the purpose of bringing those proceedings to a conclusion.

(4) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the Question already proposed from the Chair.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords Message.

(7) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question, That this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Proposals.

Reasons Committee

4. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chairman.

5.—(1) A Committee appointed to draw up Reasons shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(2) Proceedings in the Committee shall, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be brought to a conclusion 30 minutes after their commencement.

(3) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with sub-paragraph (2) the Chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided; and

(b) then put forthwith successively Questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(4) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further Question being put.

Miscellaneous

6. If the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion under this Order, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

7.—(1) In this paragraph "the proceedings" means proceedings on the Consideration of Lords Amendments, on any further Message from the Lords on the Bill, on the appointment and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the Report of such a Committee.

(2) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the proceedings.

(3) The proceedings shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(4) No dilatory Motion with respect to, or in the course of, the proceedings shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown; and the Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

8. If proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and urgent matter that should have urgent consideration), commence at a time when proceedings to which paragraph 7 applies are in progress, proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of those proceedings.—[*Mr. Mike O'Brien.*]

11.10 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): It is with regret that I once again speak to a guillotine motion on discussion of amendments to this Bill, an important constitutional measure that purports to encourage more people to get involved in our representative democracy. It could lead to wholesale changes to the way in which we elect our politicians.

Considering the Government's record in introducing constitutional changes since they took power in 1997, it is right that we should scrutinise the legislation very carefully. After all, this is the Government who brought us the constitutional change in European elections which, with the list system, transferred power from the people to political parties and led to a mere 23 per cent. turnout for the European elections. This is the Government who introduced the devolution changes without properly thinking through the settlement. They have not fully thought through the West Lothian question. Indeed, their response to it was that it should not be asked.

This is the Government who introduced the changes to the second Chamber without fully thinking through what shape the House of Lords would finally take. The threat is that, if the House of Lords does not behave, it will be flooded with more of Tony's cronies—the Prime Minister's placemen—and made into a compliant Chamber to do the Prime Minister's bidding.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The irony of this guillotine is lost on the Government. We have only up to two hours to discuss amendments dealing with important issues such as asylum seekers. We already know that the number of asylum seekers has grown dramatically over the past three years. Last year, it was 36,000; this year, it is 71,000. There is a backlog of 100,000 asylum seekers, and we need to know whether they are to be allowed to vote in our elections.

Other amendments deal with absent voters. We all want more people to vote—voting should be made easier—but we do not want to make it easier for people to vote fraudulently. There are amendments to deal with proxy votes.

One amendment concerns the declaration of local connection—the Swampy factor, as we have called it.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Before my hon. Friend continues his catalogue of Lords amendments, will he agree that we might not have needed to consider Lords amendments at all if the Minister had listened to our arguments when we considered the Bill in Committee? Most of the amendments made in the other place were amendments that were first tabled here. If the Government believe that this House should have supremacy over the other place, when will the House make its own amendments to legislation rather than having to rely on the other place to do it?

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will remember, as I do, that we had to sit through a guillotine motion when the Bill first came through the House. We ought to look for consensus on such important constitutional matters, yet the Government keep introducing guillotines.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): While the hon. Gentleman huffs and puffs about important constitutional matters and the outrage of a guillotine on such a Bill, will he explain why the Opposition took the view that they did not need to vote against the guillotine on 20 January? If it was so important, why could they not even be bothered to vote?

Mr. Evans: The Minister should just wait until the end of this timed motion to see how we will proceed. We all know the game that the Minister is playing. He wishes us to spend 20 seconds on the guillotine motion and then go on to the detail of the amendments, but he knows full well that the time that is allowed to discuss those important amendments means that we will be lucky to get past the first or second batch. We know his ploy, but we are not going to fall into his trap. Tonight, we are seeing a denial of democracy and we are not prepared to stand for it.

The Minister has rolled out several pilot schemes. He will know that, because he had to answer a written question on 29 February from the shadow Home Secretary, asking him to list all the pilot studies for which he had given permission. However, if it had not been for that question, we would still be waiting for such a list. The Minister gave that list to other organisations first and the press also had a copy, but the House had to wait. In fact, the House still has not officially been given the full list of pilot schemes so that we can question Ministers about them.

Mr. O'Brien: I am concerned if the hon. Gentleman thinks that there has been any discourtesy to the House, because there has not. As he knows, certain councils applied for pilot schemes and we gave them a provisional indication that, when the Bill was passed, we would be disposed to give our approval to particular councils. The hon. Gentleman will also know that there were broad discussions on the issue. However, because the Bill has not yet been passed, we have not been able to give that formal consent. When we do, we will of course immediately tell the House.

Mr. Evans: That is a rather thin response, and the Minister knows that it is doubtful whether any of the local authorities whose applications for pilot schemes he has already approved will later be told that they will not get those schemes. It would have been far better if he had told the House at the same time as he told the local authorities. He could have done so through a written answer, or he could even have come to the Dispatch Box and answered hon. Members' questions on the issue.

The pilot schemes are important, as I am sure that the Minister agrees, but many other issues contained in the amendments need to be discussed.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Is my hon. Friend aware that, in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which we will discuss next week, the Government are purporting to amend this Bill to allow the Electoral Commission to intervene with local authorities in respect of pilot schemes?

Mr. Evans: I am fully aware of that and, if we are able to reach the amendments that deal with the pilot schemes, I hope to go into more detail. However, that is not the Government's intention. They do not want us to investigate the amendments, and that is what the guillotine motion is designed to achieve.

At 10.15 pm, we started to discuss the money resolution. We have now started to discuss the guillotine motion, for which we have an hour, but that will eat into the two hours that the Government have allowed for the discussion of these important amendments. It is an absolute disgrace. We face a double guillotine. Even Wilkinson Sword never produced a blade that shaved as close as the guillotine motion that the Government have produced tonight. True democrats will look on tonight, not in amazement, but in disgust.

There is no surprise at the Government's antics. After all, this is the Government who rigged the referendum on devolution in Wales. This is the Government who rigged the internal elections for its leader for the Welsh Assembly. This is the Government who rigged the selection of the mayoral candidate for the Labour party, so they have ended up with two Dobsons. We are all wondering when they are going to drop the dead Dobson. The Government even rigged the procedures for grammar school votes. Now, they want us to trust them on the amendments tabled tonight. The Government want us to trust them with a referendum on a single currency, but they have another thing coming.

The Government have a very large majority and can push any measure through the House, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) noted, so they have a special obligation which they should treat with respect. Everyone knows which the Government have no principles, and tonight we have discovered that they have no shame.

11.21 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I shall be brief. However, like the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), we Liberal Democrat Members want to register our belief that it is an unacceptable use of Government power to apply a guillotine motion to a Bill which, up to now, and as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) noted—has benefited from the consensus agreement of a working party. That working party was chaired very ably by the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth).

However, the Government now want to steamroller this relatively small number of groups of amendments—

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): There are 100.

Mr. Hughes: There are 100 amendments, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman says, in 12 groups, and some of them contain controversial and important matters. One highly controversial subject—the use of electoral registers—was discussed in a long debate in the House. Should they be sold commercially? Should people be allowed to remove their names, or make money out of the registration process? That is not an uncontroversial topic, and it would be perfectly proper for the House to debate it in the context of citizens' liberties.

Another controversial matter is the possibility of holding pilot schemes for voting on Saturday or Sunday, or early in the morning, or on voting for a week, or by electronic means. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) has made it clear that there would be great unease in her part of the world if it were suggested that voting should be held on Sundays. The Bill contains a provision to decide such matters locally but if, as a result of pilot, the Government were minded to implement a proposal more widely, there is much concern that safeguards should be adopted to protect communities with different religious views, traditions or cultural backgrounds.

Thirdly, and self-evidently, the list of amendments goes further than the Government's concession on freepost facilities, which stemmed from an agreement between the parties. For instance, another amendment deals with whether one candidate can refer to the name of another, or to other parties. The Government's majority means that they will always be able to get proposals through the House. However, they do not enjoy a majority in the country, and they did not even gain a majority among those who voted at the general election. The electoral process has merely given the Government a distorted majority in the House.

It does the Government and the country's view of democracy no good when the House is consistently confronted with proposals for guillotines. The matter could have been negotiated by agreement, and a proper day's debate secured to allow adequate time for those hon. Members who wanted to speak. If we cannot have debates about the electoral process without guillotines, we really are in some trouble.

11.24 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): The two preceding speeches have been important, but I want to concentrate on the way in which the motion has been tabled in the names of the Leader of the House and of the Home Secretary. No member of the Government Front Bench rose to explain to the House why the motion was necessary. It is a shaming, inappropriate motion. Something is going wrong, as is evident in the arrogant, undirected, self-justifying nature of the Government.

I speak firmly because, again, this is an impossible motion. Not many hon. Members have been in the House a long time, but I have been here 20 years. I have seen the gradual squeezing by a jealous, self-aggrandising Executive of the freedom to debate and properly discuss the issues.

The Government are clearly in a great mess over their programme, given the hysterical state we are in. I remember how the Government, when in opposition, used to rage against the use of the guillotine by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher. They counted, as I counted, with alarm. For the first time since the introduction of the guillotine procedure, there was an average of five a year under Mrs. Thatcher. The figure rose, finally, to six a year.

What does this Government do? Let us be candid. They have been in power for less than three years, and between 1997 and 2000 they have guillotined 35 Bills. This is the fourth Bill to be guillotined this Session, and it is only March.

Mr. Hogg: Will my hon. Friend remind the House of yet another factor? When the Conservative Government were in office and they moved guillotine motions, it was normally done by the Leader of the House, which showed respect to the House. We now have a junior Home Office Minister moving the guillotine motion. Is that not a disgrace?

Mr. Shepherd: I hope that I indicated that. There is a casualness here. At least the Secretary of State responsible for taking a Bill through the House used to move the motion, if not the Leader of the House, who is the custodian of the interests of hon. Members on both sides of the House, and safeguards the House as an institution.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman wants me to justify the guillotine motion. I thought it best to do so at the end of the debate, once I had heard the points made by hon. Members such as him. I shall be happy to justify the motion then. Given that the hon. Gentleman feels so strongly and speaks so forcefully about this matter, and given that he is so outraged, why, earlier in our proceedings, did he take the view that he would not even vote against the guillotine motion?

Mr. Shepherd: I have spoken on almost every guillotine motion in the House for the past 20 years. There comes a point when it feels as if repetition does not serve the cause. Let us weigh what is happening. The Minister says, rather audaciously, that he intends to address the ruminations of the House after the motion has been discussed. He does not speak to the motion, but merely responds to hon. Members' observations: it is a motion on the Order Paper, moved formally. It would cheer the ghost of Lord Garel-Jones as he ranges round the House. The Government are implementing the device that he stumbled on and used but once—the incorporation in the time allowed of the guillotine motion. If we take the

guillotine seriously, there will only be 45 minutes in which to discuss all the amendments to the Bill. That is less than five minutes for each group. It is palpably nonsense.

Some 35 Bills have already been guillotined. The Government clearly want practice, requiring something like 52 guillotine motions, including today's supplemental motion. What has gone wrong with them? Why are they so arrogant when it comes to due process?

Hon. Members have heard me say often enough that the liberty of this people is formed through this Chamber. It is our only representative institution—we have nothing else but this Chamber. Wilfully and cheerlessly, the Government march through guillotines, because they insist on having 10 Home Office Bills in this Session alone. I feel for the Minister who is, as often as not, charting two Bills simultaneously through Committee. How can this be a serious process?

The Labour party should listen to what is happening in the Government. We have a Prime Minister who barely comes here, whose factual attention to detail such as guillotine motions is nil, who gives us inaccurate answer after inaccurate answer, even contradicting the information given by his Ministers, as if this were a show place.

The Home Secretary told us yesterday about ritual opposition, as if opposition in our system is ritualistic. It is not. Opposition is in the clash of idea and counter-idea. The Home Secretary's Hegelian vision of how, through synthesis, we come to an understanding of what is appropriate is all nonsense. Every one of us is elected on an equal franchise. We come here to represent our people and say our bit for them, and they can then judge whether we have acted appropriately.

What of due process? A long time ago it was said that our freedom and liberty lie in the interstices of procedure. That is true. We must remember Burke, as I have said many times. The Minister knows as well as I do that a parliamentary majority is not just x divided by $2 + 1$: it is informed by the process and our right to argue and say what we think is appropriate.

I think that the whole London mayor idea is nonsensical. It has no relevance to Aldridge-Brownhills, and only 23 per cent. of the electorate in London voted for it. It is typical of the Government in that they play around with the constitution not knowing what they are doing, and then do not wish to discuss it. They break up our Union and undermine the Welsh nature and culture. They do all that with no solid signal from the electorate to the effect that that is what they want: whatever the agenda, it must be steamrollered through, and that is what the House is doing yet again tonight.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is a neighbour, for generously giving way to me again. The Bill was debated on the Floor of the House, and had three days in a Committee of the whole House. On the second day in Committee, only two Conservative Back Benchers bothered to speak. On the third day, only four Conservative Back Benchers bothered to speak. We then had lengthy speeches from one or two hon. Members, who were clearly abusing the procedures of the House. The Deputy Speaker had to intervene on 19 occasions during those debates. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the abuse is coming from the Opposition rather than from the Government?

Mr. Shepherd: I know one thing, and I say it as gently as I can to the Minister: he is not a solicitor or barrister whom I would employ in these matters. After all, who is he to determine where an argument lies or at what stage simpletons such as me begin to appreciate what is happening? I have begun to appreciate from the figures that I have quoted that the Government are using the guillotine more frequently than it was ever used under Mrs. Thatcher, and in a more savage and aggressive way than she ever used it. I can only conclude that it is because she had a parliamentary history, and the new Labour Government have almost none. They do not remember the traditions of allowing other people to speak.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Rubbish.

Mr. Shepherd: Although the hon. Gentleman says "rubbish", he remembers full well his own anger at the use of the guillotine in the past.

I return to the idea that opposition to the guillotine is not ritualistic. It is the right of every Member to try to express himself. The Liberal Democrats have fought hard on some of the issues in the Bill and have a right to argue their case; I have a right to argue my case; and the Government's official Opposition have a right to argue theirs. In forgetting due process, the Government forget the trust of the British people that in this place our liberty and freedom are secured. They are not secured by measures such as this.

11.34 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I said at the outset of the proceedings on the Bill, when I had other duties and spoke from the Dispatch Box, that I believed that the Bill was deeply flawed. I made very unkind remarks about it. I am glad that some of those deficiencies have been corrected in the other place, but I am bound to say to the Minister that all the warnings that we gave on Second Reading and in Committee, which as the Minister said, was on the Floor of the House, have turned out to be true in even greater measure than we expected.

One other negative aspect is that, by the introduction of the Greater London Authority election measure, the Government have included in the Bill a matter that clearly does not command consensus. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, in a Bill of such importance, affecting electoral matters, that is a great mistake. It says something of the Government's lack of preparedness for the assembly and mayoral elections that the only way in which they have been able to rescue the situation at this very late stage has been to introduce a measure that has no place in the Bill. As a result, a Bill on which we hoped there would be complete consensus has ended up the subject of bitter and acrimonious argument.

Such acrimony is made all the greater because, regardless of whether the Government are justified in deciding to impose a guillotine on proceedings on Lord

[Mr. John Greenway]

amendments, it is abundantly clear that they have not allocated enough time. There should have been at least a whole day's debate.

The Minister says that hon. Members were given three whole days in Committee—indeed we were. He says that, in some debates, Conservative Members did not speak. I shall give him two reasons why. For the first two days, we were debating not what is in the Bill but what some of his hon. Friends and Liberal Democrats Members would have liked to be in it. That is not scrutiny of the Bill but an attempt to add other measures to it. In reality, we had only one day in Committee in which to scrutinise the Bill. That is why some of my hon. Friends were persuaded not to speak in some debates. Otherwise, we could not have debated some of the issues that should have been discussed. I know, I was there and I understand entirely the reason for the number of contributions: lack of time. We are using the time allocated—it is the only way available to us—to register our protest yet again at the Government's mishandling of a measure that should have commanded consensus.

I turn to the most telling argument that one can deploy on the mess that the Government have got themselves into.

Mr. Mike O'Brien *rose—*

Mr. Greenway: Let me finish. The Minister can answer points in his winding-up speech.

As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), the tragedy for democracy and our democratic process is that we were not able to put this Bill right before we sent it to the other place. We have had to rely on the other place to make changes, some of which the Minister told us only three or four weeks ago were totally unnecessary but is now asking us to accept.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Will my hon. Friend reflect on the irony that this elected Chamber has not been allowed to make changes to arrangements for elections which the non-elected Chamber has been allowed to make? Is that not a symbol of the disrespect with which this Government treat this Chamber?

Mr. Greenway: My right hon. Friend, with all his experience, articulates my point better than I have done. I simply add the caveat that, although we clearly have unfinished business in reforming the other place, the Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, believe that this Chamber should be pre-eminent. I think that most of us would accept that that is right because this is the elected Chamber. However, owing to the way in which the Government handle their business, we are not able to show that pre-eminence by sending to the other place legislation that is in proper order. It must have been abundantly clear to Ministers and their officials that the Bill was deficient, yet when the Bill was still being considered by the Commons, they made no effort to change it. That reveals their pomposity and arrogance, and we Members of Parliament are right to voice our concern with the passion shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd).

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does my hon. Friend agree that the position is worse than that which he describes? The other place had the opportunity to debate a very large number of amendments as recently as Monday this week, and in that debate, the Minister in the other place accepted amendments that he had ruled out only days previously. The Government are in a complete muddle, and have been throughout.

Mr. Greenway: My hon. Friend makes a telling point, but I believe that the situation is even worse than that. The Lords amendments need to be scrutinised in considerable detail because the speed with which they have been drafted and approved means that some are defective. I predict that, before long, we shall have to debate these matters all over again, in connection with amended legislation.

For that reason, the House should be especially grateful to the other place for persuading the Government that, as we in this House had suggested, it was right to remove from the Bill the Home Secretary's powers to extend to parliamentary elections the pilot schemes for which the Bill provides. When we raised that issue, we were told that we were scaremongering and that there was no likelihood of that happening. Thank goodness there is no likelihood of its happening now, because the relevant provisions have been removed.

11.41 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I would find it difficult to emulate the passionate speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), but I want to echo his stated view that these proceedings are a scandal. We should not pass over it quietly.

Let us remind ourselves what the House is being asked to do. I start not with the guillotine motion, but with the Lords amendments. There are 12 groups, consisting of more than 100 Lords amendments. Many of them are the result of considerable work in the other place, yet the House of Commons is treating those deliberations with total contempt—not because we want to, but because we are being made to. The order of business gives us but two hours from the commencement of this debate for the completion of the entirety of the business. Even if we wanted to, there is no way we could debate every important amendment. Not only could we not do so, but it is intended that we should not do so. That is a scandal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills made an important point when he talked about process. He spoke more eloquently than I can, but I understood him to mean that, in a democracy, individual Members, parties and representatives have a right to express their views on matters that come before the House. Some of the matters dealt with in the Lords amendments are extremely important. My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) referred to the extraordinary irony that this House—the elected Chamber—will not be discussing the provisions dealing with election addresses that were inserted in the other place. Those provisions touch on democracy, but we are forbidden to discuss them. Not only are we not going to discuss such matters, but the procedures that the House is adopting will prevent us from discussing them.

Mr. Gummer: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that when the Minister tells us, as he probably will,

that if we had not debated the guillotine motion there would have been more time to discuss the amendments, he really means that we should not discuss the guillotine motion and that we should instead discuss some bits of the amendments? Does he also agree that it is only by debating the motion that can we draw attention to the scandal of these proceedings?

Mr. Hogg: That was to be my next point; I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. The argument—the weasel words—from the Government is that we should make rapid progress to the next business, but what is the point of discussing the next business? We know full well that if we are lucky, we can discuss only the first, second or third of the 12 groups.

I would rather protest at the scandal of the Bill proceeding in this way. I would rather not discuss the Lords amendments than let the matter pass. If we begin to touch the Lords amendments, people will say that they received some discussion and therefore they have had some authority from this House.

Late as it is and with a limited audience, we must make it plain that this is a scandal. It is the sign of an autocratic Government. Our business as representatives of the people is to do our best to stop it. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) intends to divide the House, but I can tell him now that I shall. I very much hope that I will have the support of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

11.46 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I want to contrast this guillotine motion with the earlier guillotine motion on the same Bill—on Report, I think. Although guillotine motions always put pressure on the House, on that occasion we got through the list of amendments before us. We were conscious of the pressure of time, and some hon. Members spoke very briefly to allow us to do that. It worked well on that occasion.

The problem with the present guillotine motion is the amount of time available. The speeches that I would like to hear in connection with the 12 groups of amendments before us are 12 speeches from my hon. Friend the Minister, to explain to the House the meaning of each group of amendments. It may be possible to do that briefly, as some of the amendments may be technical. The guillotine should provide sufficient time for such explanations and for appropriate responses. If we had more time, we might be able to deal with the Lords amendments in the way that we dealt with amendments on Report.

11.48 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I shall be brief, and I hope to be non-party political in what I say. I speak as a Back Bencher, but, as many hon. Members know, I also chair the Procedure Committee, which clearly is concerned that Parliament as a whole, and particularly the House of Commons, should have an adequate opportunity to scrutinise any legislation that goes through the House. I am sure that hon. Members on the Government Benches will not disagree with that. I am happy to follow the brief contribution from the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes).

I picked up from the remarks of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) at the beginning of the debate that there had been no discussions through the usual channels about the way in which the Bill was to be handled. I assume from that that there has been no consultation through the usual channels with either the Liberal Democrats or with the Conservative and Unionist party, which is the main opposition party.

I register my concern that that is the case. On an important matter such as representation of the people, which is of deep concern to the democratic traditions of this country, it is worrying that there has not been proper co-operation between the Government of the day, with the huge majority that they have in the House, and the opposition parties, which clearly feel strongly on the subject.

I followed the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) carefully. I do not believe that any hon. Member believes as fervently as my hon. Friend in the democratic process and the traditions of parliamentary democracy. I always listen to his remarks with deep attention because I regard him highly. If more hon. Members spoke in this place with the integrity of my hon. Friend, we would have a better Parliament. The Government ignore his words at their peril.

The Government have a substantial majority now, and they may be able to push the Bill through the House, but they do themselves and the House no service. The House deserves better on a Bill that deals with what the House is about: representing the people of this country in this country's Parliament. I view with deep anxiety the way in which the Government have handled the Bill. To include a timetable motion in the time that we are allowed to debate 12 sets of amendments is disgraceful—more than that, it is undemocratic.

11.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) said that he would make a non-partisan speech and then made a partisan speech. That is slightly regrettable, but the way in which he decides to use his position is a matter for him.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) asked why I had left my comments to the end of the debate. Some valid points were made, not least by the hon. Gentleman. I shall bear in mind his comments on when I should speak in such a debate. It is useful to hear from someone of his experience.

Mr. Shepherd: Other hon. Members could have spoken during the hour. That means that the Minister may not have had an opportunity to speak. He declined such an opportunity to the Conservative Front Bench. The House might not have allowed him time to speak. He should lead on the amendment.

Mr. O'Brien: I hear the hon. Gentleman's point, but I hope that hon. Members would want to ensure, as they did during the previous debate, that the Minister had an opportunity to reply.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was worried about the guillotine. I refer him to the comments on 20 January of

[Mr. O'Brien]

the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who is the Liberal Democrat shadow Leader of the House. He made it clear that he understood why the Government believed that they needed a guillotine in specific circumstances, even though he was careful not to endorse it. He said:

we believe that agreed programme motions are the way to proceed . . . I do not understand why the Conservative Front Bench, having agreed to the necessity and importance of the Bill, did not then agree to a programme motion.—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 1007.]

I have a great deal of sympathy with that view, and I understand the frustration of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey at the need for a guillotine. I am sure that the hon. Member for North Cornwall would also understand that. However, I am sure that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will recall that there were reasons for imposing a guillotine.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). However, whatever happened when the Bill was previously considered by the House, it is no excuse for not trying to agree a procedure on such an important Bill when the Lords amendments returned. We might have been able to achieve that, but the Government did not try.

Mr. O'Brien: That is not quite fair. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the guillotine was imposed earlier in our proceedings on remaining stages in the House. It is usual to impose a guillotine on all stages when matters are referred back to the House from another place. Therefore, we are complying entirely with the usual and customary approach to these matters during consideration of a Bill of this sort. I do not accept that there is some great breach of precedent.

Although we have a lot of amendments to consider tonight, none ought to be particularly contentious, with the possible exception of those relating to the free mailshots in the London elections. As I shall explain at the relevant points, quite a few are simply minor drafting amendments and others respond to points raised by the Opposition here and in the other place. Not one of our amendments was opposed by the Opposition in the other place and quite a lot were taken on the nod. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said that they should not have been, but the Conservatives in the other place were happy with them. It seems to me that we are having a ritual debate about the guillotine, even though the Conservative Opposition in the other place took many of these measures on the nod. They did not oppose them.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: In a moment, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me.

The mailshots were the one issue on which there was a lot of controversy and I accept that we probably need some time for debate, but we would have had it were it not for all this ritualistic nonsense.

Mr. Blunt: My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) presaged that suggestion by saying that we would be told that we are at fault for complaining about the guillotine. The Minister says that most of the amendments are uncontroversial, so why table a guillotine motion in the first place?

Mr. O'Brien: A guillotine motion has been tabled—the Opposition did not vote against it on 20 January—because on 19 January a handful of Conservative MPs behaved in a manner that was described in the following day's debate as an abuse of the House. Long-winded, discursive speeches caused the Deputy Speaker to intervene on various Members to bring them to order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps we should leave the Deputy Speaker out of it. No one should involve the occupant of the Chair in the argument.

Mr. O'Brien: I take your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That brings the number of interventions to 20—one on me.

The Bill has enjoyed broad parliamentary support through most of the proceedings. Although hon. Members have raised proper points, it was the product of a working party with all-party representation and everyone has had time to express their views.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: May I finish my point? Then I shall give way.

Many of our amendments are technical; they have arisen from our debate. It is not right that we should tolerate the behaviour of a few hon. Members—as on 19 January—who were not prepared to contribute to the debate previously. I again make the point that, having demanded that the Bill be taken on the Floor of the House, only two Conservative Back Benchers bothered to make full speeches on its second day in Committee. On the third day, only four Back Benchers bothered to make full speeches.

Mr. Hawkins: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I agreed to give way to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson).

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: I shall do so in a moment, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me.

Most of the Members who now express great concern about the Bill did not bother to turn up to the Committee debates. At various times, only a Front Bencher—the hon. Member for Ribble Valley or one of his colleagues—and possibly a Whip were on the Opposition Benches. On occasion, the hon. Member for Lichfield

(Mr. Fabricant) turned up. That went on for long periods, which shows how concerned some Members were about these matters.

Mr. Paterson: Will the Minister answer the straight question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt): why has a guillotine motion been tabled if the amendments are not contentious?

Mr. O'Brien: The guillotine has been imposed because for a long period, and on completely uncontentious matters, a handful of Opposition Members decided to run the debate unnecessarily into the highways and byways.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to say that my hon. Friends were going down highways and byways that were irrelevant to that debate, given that they were not so directed by the Chair?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is a matter for debate. If someone catches my eye, they can rebut that—but not at the moment.

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) had heard me properly, he would know that I actually referred to the highways and byways of the debate.

Mr. Hawkins: On the occasion to which the Minister refers, the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) was also made after the business motion was moved by the Leader of the House. It was made quite clear from the Chair that the debate in which many of my hon. Friends and I participated was entirely in order. Serious points were being made, many of which the Government have been forced to accept in the other place or in some of the amendments that they are presenting tonight. The Minister is failing to deal with that important point. It was a valuable debate, which highlighted the weaknesses in the Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: All I can say is that the hon. Gentleman must have been present at a different debate from the one in which I participated. Not many of the matters that were discussed during those days on the Floor of the House are now turning up in these amendments.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am conscious that we are pressed for time, and I am trying to conclude. However, I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Heath: I am a little concerned about the Minister's argument. Surely he would agree that some hon. Members were involved in serious debate on the issues in the Bill. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and I, together with many other hon. Members, were involved in debates on this issue. Are we not entitled to continue those debates on the serious issues that have been referred to us by the House of Lords without the application of this guillotine motion—which seems to refer to other hon. Members, who may have other purposes?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is right. As his hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall said, in the early stages of the proceedings we had a sensible debate in which the Liberal Democrats, my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and some Conservative Front Benchers and Back Benchers participated. The sensible debates of the first couple of days turned into something entirely different on the final day of the Committee. The Tories decided to drag it out unnecessarily.

Some hon. Members have argued that guillotines are unacceptable. Conservative Members may recall with a certain discomfort the European Communities (Amendment) Bill in 1986, when the then President of the Council, John Biffen, moved the guillotine motion and pointed out that six constitutional Bills had been timetabled since 1966. This Bill is not as controversial as most constitutional Bills. We have had very few real Divisions on it.

During our debates, certainly today, we have had much ritual posturing. I have explained that, given the largely uncontroversial nature of most of the amendments, which the Opposition did not oppose in the other place, I am confident that we can deal with the Bill properly. The Opposition did not vote against the guillotine motion on 20 January following delays the previous day. We do not want to repeat such unnecessary delays. We should get on with the debate.

Mr. Evans *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman has already made a contribution to the debate.

Mr. Evans: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, the hon. Gentleman cannot contribute again, not even with the leave of the House.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 260, Noes 134.

Division No. 100] **[12.40 am**

AYES

Ainger, Nick	Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*	Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Ashton, Joe	Bradshaw, Ben
Atherton, Ms Candy	Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Atkins, Charlotte	Browne, Desmond
Austin, John	Buck, Ms Karen
Barnes, Harry	Burden, Richard
Battle, John	Burgon, Colin
Bayley, Hugh	Butler, Mrs Christine
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*	Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Bennett, Andrew F	Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Benton, Joe	Campbell–Savours, Dale
Berry, Roger	Cann, Jamie
Best, Harold	Caplin, Ivor
Blackman, Liz	Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Blears, Ms Hazel	Chaytor, David
Blizzard, Bob	Clapham, Michael
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul	Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*

Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Graham Allen.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas

Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Ainsworth and
Mr. James Arbuthnot.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Order of the House of 20th January be supplemented as follows:

LORDS AMENDMENTS

1. Proceedings on Consideration of Lords Amendments shall be completed at today's sitting and, if not previously concluded, shall be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on this Order.

2.—(1) This paragraph applies for the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1.

(2) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided.

(3) If that Question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment, the Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single Question on any further Amendments of the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown, and

(b) the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(4) The Speaker shall then put forthwith—

(a) a single Question on any Amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment and

(b) the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House agrees or disagrees with the Lords in the Amendment or (as the case may be) in their Amendment as amended.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown, That this House disagrees with the Lords in a Lords Amendment.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question, That this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(7) As soon as the House has agreed or disagreed with the Lords in any of their Amendments, or disposed of an Amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to, the Speaker shall put forthwith a single Question on any Amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown relevant to the Lords Amendment.

SUBSEQUENT STAGES

3.—(1) The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the consideration forthwith of any further Message from the Lords on the Bill.

(2) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(3) Sub-paragraphs (4) to (7) apply for the purpose of bringing those proceedings to a conclusion.

(4) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided.

(5) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the Question already proposed from the Chair.

(6) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords Message.

(7) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question, That this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Proposals.

Reasons Committee

4. The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chairman.

5.—(1) A Committee appointed to draw up Reasons shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(2) Proceedings in the Committee shall, if not previously brought to a conclusion, be brought to a conclusion 30 minutes after their commencement.

(3) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with sub-paragraph (2) the Chairman shall—

(a) first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair and not yet decided; and

(b) then put forthwith successively Questions on motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(4) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further Question being put.

Miscellaneous

6. If the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the expiry of the period at the end of which proceedings are to be brought to a conclusion under this Order, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

7.—(1) In this paragraph "the proceedings" means proceedings on the Consideration of Lords Amendments, on any further Message from the Lords on the Bill, on the appointment and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the Report of such a Committee.

(2) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the proceedings.

(3) The proceedings shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(4) No dilatory Motion with respect to, or in the course of, the proceedings shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown; and the Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

8. If proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and urgent matter that should have urgent consideration), commence at a time when proceedings to which paragraph 7 applies are in progress, proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of those proceedings.

Representation of the People Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that privilege is involved in Lords amendments Nos. 22, 24, 34 and 78, which are to be considered today. If the House agrees to any of these Lords amendments, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the Journal.

Clause 1

NEW SYSTEM OF ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 2, line 23, after first ("a") insert ("qualifying")

12.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 2 and 4.

Mr. O'Brien: The amendment gives effect to a commitment that the Government made in another place to introduce amendments to ensure that those who have not been given leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom should not be able to register and vote here. Rolling registration will make it easier for people to get on the electoral register. I am sure that the whole House will agree—Opposition Members made the point in earlier debates on the legislation—that it would be wrong if those who have not been given leave to enter this country were to try to take advantage of that by registering. This group of amendments will ensure that that does not happen, and ensure that those who have entered the country illegally may not register. I am sure that the House will agree that illegal entrants should not have the right to vote.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): This is a very important group of amendments. It is one of 12 groups of amendments, which we now have only 50 minutes to debate. That is a great shame—*[Interruption.]* It is fine for the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), to try to make a joke about it, but the Bill is about the real crisis of democracy that is not outside this Parliament, but inside it.

We are grateful that the Government have listened to the suggestion made, in Lords amendment No. 4, by Lord MacKay of Ardbrecknish. The suggestion deals with those who are commonly called asylum seekers. It is important that we should consider the legislation's full repercussions. Just now, the Minister rightly said that the overall thrust of the Bill is to make voting easier. We fully support the Government in that intention. However, in making voting easier, we want to ensure that only those who are eligible to vote are able to vote.

Although we support the Government in encouraging those who are legally eligible to vote to register and take part in the democratic process, we shall have to consider how the legislation will work in bad times as well as in good. Some Labour Back Benchers will remember that

Opposition Members made the same statement when the Government of Wales Act 1998 was being passed, but that we were shouted down. The Government said that everything would be okay and that there would be no problems once that legislation had been enacted. Now that it has been enacted, we see the problems. I wish that we had had the requisite foresight then, but that would have resulted from greater scrutiny and the Government listening more carefully to the arguments. I hope that they will do that on these amendments.

My great fear about amendment No. 4 results from the fact that it has been grouped with the other amendments. The Electoral Commission was mentioned earlier and it will be discussed in the debates on the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which is to come before the House next week. The Government will consult the commission and it will become far easier for people to vote. I welcome that. Pilot schemes will examine mobile voting, weekend voting and earlier voting, and the Minister has issued a list in a written answer that appeared on 29 February. However, the details of the schemes have yet to be published.

I hope that the Minister will be able to put meat on the bone of the list that he has already issued. Of the schemes, 16 deal with early voting, two deal with the extension of the hours of the poll and four deal with mobile polling facilities. People normally vote by going to a fixed polling and saying that they are who they claim they are. They may show a polling card and their name is crossed off. However, they do not have to show a card, and we have already agreed that we do not want to make that an obligation. However, we are not certain how much personation takes places in local, parliamentary, European, Welsh Assembly or Scottish Parliament elections. I hope that the Minister will reassure the House that proper research will take place into the problem of personation, particularly in regard to the areas where the pilot studies are being rolled out.

The ease with which people are able to vote causes a problem with asylum seekers. *[Interruption.]* The Minister of State should not heckle, but should listen carefully to what I have to say. Perhaps we will then ensure that the Bill is properly scrutinised and improved. The right hon. Gentleman was not present at the Bill's earlier stages, so he will not know that many of our amendments were taken on and made in another place. The Bill has returned to the House and further improvements can be made to it.

We know that, two years ago, 36,000 asylum seekers came into the country and that 71,000 came in last year. About 100,000 people are trying to claim asylum in this country. We seek assurances from the Government. The Minister says that people who are waiting to find out whether they have made a proper legal entry to this country will be able to vote, but until that point has been made clear they will not be able to register to vote. The Bill means that, with the local declaration of identity, people will be able to go to a registration officer and say that they live in a particular area. They may be homeless or of no fixed abode, but the Bill will make it easier for people to say that they have lived in an area without properly having to prove that they have done so. The Minister looks confused.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This debate began some time ago and I have listened to the hon. Gentleman with great care and with my pen poised to try to note one serious point that he has made about the amendment. So far, I have barely used my pen. What point is he trying to make?

Mr. Evans: I suspect that that may be more a problem with the Minister than it is with me. Had I been out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have told me. The Government have introduced one of the severest guillotines that I have seen in my eight years as a Member of the House. They want us to rattle through each of the 12 groups of amendments. The Minister knows that, in the 50 minutes remaining to us after the debate on the guillotine motion, we will not be able to debate the ninth group of amendments, dealing with the free delivery of election addresses at the mayoral elections; that was his intention, so it is pointless making bogus arguments. We shall not be denied the opportunity of debate. It is all right for the Government. They have the numbers on their side. They are abusing their large majority. They can always win the vote, but they will not deny the Opposition their voice when Opposition Members have something to say. Back Benchers are also being denied a say, and they should be alarmed by that.

How many asylum seekers come from Commonwealth countries? Of the 100,000 who are awaiting adjudication, how many would be eligible to register should they be allowed to stay here? Registration officers will have to deal with many changes to the registration system. The rolling registers, which we back, will be expensive for local authorities. What resources will be made available in that respect? What guidance will registration officers be given on dealing with inquiries from people in this country who have not been given leave to stay? There may be a large number of such people. As I say, 100,000 are awaiting adjudication on their claim for asylum. What guidance will registration officers be given on how to determine whether people are eligible for inclusion on the register? There may be others who are not claiming asylum but who are here as Commonwealth citizens; they will not be eligible but will nevertheless ask to be registered.

The local declaration is also important. Will each registration officer ask the person who comes to the town or city hall whether he or she is a bona fide British citizen, and what sort of proof of identity will the registration officer ask for? Those are important questions that need to be answered.

We are extremely grateful that the Government have listened and for the amendments suggested in the other place by Lord MacKay. But we want to ensure that the legislation will be effective and that the registration officers have the tools to do the job.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The amendments are sensible and we support them.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said that he is pleased that the Government have listened. He said that the thrust of the Bill is to make voting easier, and that the Opposition fully support that. In view of the debate that we had earlier, I am pleased that he has decided that the Government listen and that he supports the general thrust of the Bill.

The provisions will bite on all port applicants, overstayers, illegal immigrants and those with no leave to remain in the United Kingdom. Asylum seekers with

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

leave to remain and who are Commonwealth citizens may well be in a different category. We will have to do the calculation to let the hon. Gentleman know how many asylum seekers there are from Commonwealth countries.

12.30 am

Mr. Evans: Is the Minister saying that the Commonwealth citizens on the list of 100,000 who are waiting for adjudication will be able to vote in general elections?

Mr. O'Brien: There are obviously people who have come here lawfully, who may have good reasons for being here and who have, quite properly, been granted the right to enter, and who may then, for their own reasons, have decided to apply for refugee status. That puts them in a somewhat different category. They have the right to be here in the first place. If they are Commonwealth citizens, they may well be in a different category from those who have entered illegally, for example.

The hon. Gentleman asked about guidance for electoral registration officers. We will certainly discuss with them what guidance they will need in order to determine some of the issues, but we do not anticipate that issues such as local connection will create much controversy.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 2 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 3, in page 2, line 44, at end insert—

("(ii) compliance with any prescribed requirements; and")

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 5, 6, 8 to 11, 13, 40, 44 to 51, 53 to 55, 59, 61 to 65, 69 to 73, 75, 76 and 86.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Although these are described on the amendment paper as minor and drafting amendments, I ask the Minister to consider some points carefully, because some of the amendments add substantially to the text of the legislation. Some of them have been discussed in another place. I refer hon. Members who have not looked at the Lords *Hansard* to the number of occasions on which the Minister, Lord Bassam of Brighton, had to concede ground both to Liberal Democrat Lords and to my noble Friend Lord MacKay of Ardbrecknish.

It is clear that the Government have been in a terrible mess over this legislation and have been trying to rush, in the past few days, to get it into order in the other place. That is why we have such a huge group of amendments to correct mistakes that were made earlier. We shall come later to even more substantive amendments that the Government finally accepted in another place.

Lords amendment No. 69 refers to matters that need to be proved. What advice has the Minister been given by his officials on the standard of proof? The amendment is to insert a new section 180A, which says:

> The certificate of a registration officer that any person is or is not, or was or was not at any particular time, duly registered in one of the officer's registers in respect of any address shall be sufficient evidence of the facts stated in it; and a document purporting to be such a certificate shall be received in evidence and presumed to be such a certificate unless the contrary is proved.

In certain circumstances, that could be an important matter. Will the standard of proof for the contrary being proved be the civil standard, on the balance of probabilities, or the criminal standard, beyond a reasonable doubt? I am sure that officials will advise the Minister about that. I rather presume that it is likely to be the civil standard, but these are important matters relating to the certificates of registration officers and I hope for an answer.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): What background information do we have about the nature of proof that will be required and the definition of sufficient evidence?

Mr. Hawkins: My hon. Friend is right to query that point, because the amendment is so recent and has been brought forward at such a late stage—I referred earlier during the debate on the guillotine motion to the fact that the other place was considering amendments to the Bill as recently as Monday—that we have no background information. That is why I am asking the Minister to respond. My hon. Friend is on to a good point because the provision is potentially draconian, in that it says that the certificate of the registration officer will be conclusive.

Lords amendments Nos. 71 and 73 delete the words "the principal Act". Will the Minister confirm whether that corrects a mistake in the original drafting? I do not believe that those words appear anywhere else in the Bill, but I would like the Minister to shed light on what the "principal Act" was.

Lords amendment No. 76 deletes the word "time" and I hope that the Minister will shed light on why that deletion has been made. The original words of the 1983 Act, mentioned in schedule 3(4) of the Bill, referred to

> the time, place and manner of its publication.

Why will only "place and manner" be left in the Bill?

Lords amendments Nos. 8 to 11 deal with the position of patients in mental hospitals and prisoners on remand. It has been accepted by the Home Affairs Committee, on which I served, and by the Government's review, chaired by the hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) and which led to the introduction of the Bill, that the provisions for both those categories should be revised. Those issues received much debate in the House and in the other place. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley pointed out that the amendments have been rushed through at the very last minute, and we fear that the Government will have to come back to the House and amend the legislation yet again.

There have been so many amendments relating to previous mental health legislation and legislation on remand prisoners that I wonder whether the Minister is certain that the Government have finally got it right.

Are they confident that the legislation is in the correct form in respect of the amendments needed to previous legislation on those issues? When I practised at the Bar, I dealt with several cases connected with mental health issues. Of course, all practising lawyers in the criminal law have been concerned about the rights of remand prisoners, so I simply want the Minister to reassure us that we will not find that the last-minute rush will lead to more confusion that will need to be corrected.

It struck me as an extraordinary irony that amendment No. 6 contains the words

page 4, line 13, after 1984, insert.

The guillotine proceedings tonight have been yet another example of how this has become a truly Orwellian Labour Government, in which a word means what they want it to mean. The Government specialise in newspeak, so it struck me as ironic and appropriate that Government amendment No. 6 refers to things happening after 1984. It is precisely because Conservative Members worry so much about the Government's Big Brother style that we wish to query so many matters.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am saddened by that attitude. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) clearly said that the Government were listening, but the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) went on about matters Orwellian, saying that the Government are in mess because they have made concessions and have not got their act together. Throughout the debate on the Bill, the Government have shown that we are prepared to listen to sensible points. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath has just presented himself as the king of yah-boo-sucks politics, which does not give the debate the credit and the importance that it deserves.

Some of the matters that have been raised are quite technical, so I shall deal first with amendments Nos. 8 and 9, which bring clauses 4 and 5 within the scope of the provisions for the registration of mental patients and remand prisoners. Those provisions are thereby brought into line with new section 7C, which is inserted by clause 6.

The amendments will make entitlement to be registered for a 12-month period explicit on the face of the Bill, whereas that entitlement was to have been included in regulations. In the course of our deliberations, Conservative Members have asked for matters to be included on the face of the Bill, the Government have listened to the points that have been made and have sought to respond. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley acknowledged that, and I welcome his approach. However, I think that the yah-boo-sucks politics exhibited by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath does the House no credit.

Amendments Nos. 11 and 45 also clarify that the word "residence", in this context, needs to be construed in accordance with new section 4. As to whether the Government consider that we have got the matter right, I can tell the House that we would not have brought it forward if we did not think that we had.

Amendment No. 69 provides for the evidential effect of a registration officer's certificate that a person was, or was not, registered at a particular time. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath asked about the standard of proof, but we are dealing with a simple, factual statement by a registration officer. How that statement is used will determine the standard of proof that is required. Therefore, if the statement were to be used in a civil case, the standard of proof will be the civil standard. If it were used in a criminal case, the situation could be different if a prosecution were under way. Matters would then have to be proved to the normal standard of proof. That is fairly straightforward.

Amendment No. 71 is necessary because provisions relating to the registration of overseas voters are now contained solely in the Representation of the People Act 1985. Amendments Nos. 72 and 73 are consequential on amendment No. 62, as they remove provisions relating to the effect of section 49 from new sections 2 and 3 of the 1985 Act.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath asked about the principal Act. The proposals relate to matters arising from the 1985 Act.

Mr. Hawkins: What about amendments Nos. 76 and 65?

Mr. O'Brien: I apologise for omitting those amendments. Amendments Nos. 76 and 65 remove the requirement that regulations should cover the time at which a register is published. That is already dealt with elsewhere in the Bill, so the amendments are merely technical to remove the requirement to deal with that matter in regulations.

I hope that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath will consider that my remarks have clarified those technical but no doubt relevant issues.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 4 to 6 agreed to.

Clause 3

RESIDENCE FOR PURPOSES OF REGISTRATION

Lords amendment: No. 7, in page 5, line 32, at end insert—

("( ) Subsection (3) above shall apply in relation to a person's absence by reason of his attendance on a course provided by an educational institution as it applies in relation to a person's absence in the performance of any duty such as is mentioned in that subsection.")

12.45 am

Mr. Evans: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 43, 77, 82 to 85 and 87.

Mr. Evans: Yet again, the thrust of the amendment is to encourage more people to vote. I hope that the Minister will correct me if my interpretation of what the amendments seek to do is wrong. In my estimation, they would encourage more young people at universities and colleges to register to vote, perhaps even registering in two places. They would give them the opportunity to use a proxy or a postal vote, whereas in the past they may have found that difficult or impossible to do.

I totally support the idea of students having postal votes. There is a burgeoning student population. We have a problem getting young voters to register, and once they have, getting them to vote is another problem. Anything that we can do to encourage that must be good.

[Mr. Evans]

I have more of a problem with the proxy aspect of the amendments. I think that the Government were concerned about making it easier for people to have proxy votes as opposed to postal votes. Will the Minister explain why they have adopted this approach? In the other place, Lord MacKay made a suggestion that will go a long way towards dealing with the problem of personation where proxy votes are concerned. Personation can happen when it is known that someone who intended to vote has moved away, or that he never intended to vote. The suggestion is that, if electors ask for a proxy vote, they are notified three days later that a proxy has been awarded in their name.

The Government said that they would consider this idea, but nothing seems to have happened. I should be grateful if the Minister would say something about it. If he thinks that it is still worth considering, perhaps he could look at it again.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The amendments correct an omission that was spotted when we were considering the Bill. They would allow those who are away on educational courses to be registered at their normal place of residence. They are sensible amendments.

I should like to flag up the question of dual registration. It is not before us for consideration, I understand, because there was no agreement in the working party. However, concern was expressed, and I should like to use this opportunity to express the hope that, as soon as this measure reaches the statute book, we will reconvene a working party with cross-party representation. In that way, we will not be rushing to catch up with necessary electoral concerns, but can immediately pick up concerns that are more difficult or need more time or that people have raised since the working party began.

The working party was a very useful institution. Rather than having it constituted on an ad hoc basis, it would be better to have it as a more permanent institution, and one slightly less formal than the Speaker's Conference suggested by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). Not only would we then have a rolling register; we would have a rolling review of electoral law, and that would be useful.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I shall deal first with the point raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). He proposes having an on-going working party or similar group because there are always relevant issues to be raised. I can see merits in that for dealing with dual registration, and I will certainly consider his point. However, he knows of the difficulty of getting parliamentary time to legislate and, given the difficulties with this Bill, I would not at the moment encourage my colleagues to support the idea of an annual electoral procedures Bill.

Amendments Nos. 7 and 77 and part of amendment No. 85 owe their origin to my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). He asked that the provisions be introduced, and we have considered the issues and introduced them. They are designed to rectify an anomaly to which my hon. Friend drew our attention when the Bill was first brought before the House. Students now routinely obtain absent votes, even though, strictly speaking, the law does not include attendance at an educational establishment as one of the grounds on which absent votes may be granted.

We should, of course, be doing everything that we can to enable that group of electors to vote and one way to do so is to allow students who are studying at an establishment some distance from their parental home to vote by proxy. Normally, we know where the student's home is, so some of the dangers of proxy votes that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) identified, which we continue to be concerned about, are not present in this case.

The amendments clarify the point that students are entitled to apply for absent votes and do not in any way relax the proxy vote regime. We agreed to the amendment tabled by Lord MacKay of Ardbrecknish, and we can consider the issues raised by him when we make regulations.

Amendments Nos. 43, 82 to 85 and 87 are in many ways technical, and, as points were not made about them, I will not describe their effect.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 8 to 11 agreed to.

Clause 6

NOTIONAL RESIDENCE: DECLARATIONS OF LOCAL CONNECTION

Lords amendment: No. 12, in page 8, line 43, at end insert—

("( ) Where a declaration of local connection made by a homeless person is delivered to the registration officer concerned during the period—

(a) beginning with the date when a vacancy occurs—

(i) in the seat for the parliamentary constituency within which the required address falls, or

(ii) in the seat for any Scottish Parliament constituency or National Assembly for Wales constituency within which it falls, and

(b) ending on the final nomination day (within the meaning of section 13B below) for the parliamentary by-election, or (as the case may be) the election under section 9 of the Scotland Act 1998 or section 8 of the Government of Wales Act 1998, held in respect of that vacancy,

the declaration must state that, during the period of three months ending on the date of the declaration, the declarant has commonly been spending a substantial part of his time (whether during the day or at night) at, or near, the required address.")

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Mr. Evans: We are pleased that the Government have at least listened to us a little, because we raised the issue several times during the proceedings on the Bill, and it was raised several times in the other place.

We would have preferred the Government to go further with the amendment, so we have gone into great detail about why we feel that the system needed more checks to deal with what we referred to colloquially as the Swampy factor. I am sure that it has been called many other things. We did not want the Swampy factor to take hold. I echo my earlier remark that we must consider how this legislation will work at bad times as well as good. Giving it the benefit of the doubt will not prove to be effective when things start to go wrong.

Once a vacancy occurs through a by-election, whether because someone dies or stands down, a local declaration of connection provision might be abused. The Government's amendment will probably put a quarter of a check on that possibility. It will allow a homeless person to state that he or she has lived in an area for three months or more. It was suggested several times in the other place that there should be proof of that.

There are no identification cards, but someone making a declaration of local connection should be able to come forward with some documentation. We were flexible in our suggestions about particular documents. We appreciate that many homeless people simply will not have a driver's licence or passport, but the Minister might have looked more generously on a more flexible arrangement such as a letter from the police, a social worker or someone involved in a charity to say that the person concerned was known to them. As it is, homeless people simply have to make the declaration that they have been in the area for three months or more, and that may have to be accepted.

Mr. Hayes: I do not want to interrupt my hon. Friend's flow but, in suggesting that the matter is considered again, will he pay particular attention to the difference between travelling and homeless people? Homeless people might be "resident" in an area, have a legitimate and proper interest in its affairs and wish to participate in elections, whereas people travelling through for whatever reason—legitimately or otherwise—may have a much less profound reason and legitimacy in taking part in an election. That is an important distinction, which needs to be drawn out.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We all want—this is why we have supported the local declaration of connection—to ensure that homeless people, who normally do not, like others, have a voice in Westminster through an elected Member, are not denied the opportunity to vote in elections. We are considering people legitimately making local declarations. We want to ensure the integrity of the system; we do not want it debased in any shape or form.

I hear what my hon. Friend says about people travelling through an area, although, if a vacancy occurs, someone who is doing so could not go to the town or city hall to claim a connection for three months or more. That is covered; I believe that that is the Minister's quarter check. The problem arises when someone who is travelling through an area makes a declaration, but no proof of its truth is needed. They may merely state that they have been resident for three months or more, and that is that.

I turn to something a little more sinister: the Swampy factor. We have an example of where the provisions might go cruelly wrong if we do not ensure that proper checks are made: a by-election in a marginal seat, where protesters want to make their feelings known. We are talking about people who feel equipped to go out to sea in rough conditions when they want to board a ship to make a protest, who climb trees to make a protest and live there for weeks, if not months, and who dig holes in the ground to stop developments—direct action. My goodness, it is a doddle for such people to turn up at a town or city hall to claim a local connection once a vacancy has occurred. As my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said, what proof will electoral registration officers look for?

We need look no further than the Scottish Parliament by-election in Ayr, where the previous majority was 25. If everybody voted in the same way again, only a small group of people would have to make the declaration. All sorts of people might be interested in doing so to sway the election.

Therefore, I ask the Minister to consider the matter again. He has obviously felt that there has been a problem, otherwise the amendment would not be before us. If he does not address the problem now, how would he do so after the Bill's enactment? A small group of people moving into the area could make a difference in a general election as well.

Will the Minister comment on whether the amendment addresses local as well as parliamentary elections? I ask that because, at times, including in 1997, a general election and local elections have been held on the same day. If the amendments deal with only one type of election, could people be enfranchised for one type of election, but not another, once the vacancies have been announced?

1 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I shall speak briefly. As the Minister knows, we support the declaration of local connection as a suitable vehicle.

I do not entirely buy some of the arguments advanced by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). For example, I do not accept the notion of a peripatetic platoon of homeless people who are prepared to make a nuisance of themselves in any by-election; nor do I accept the generalisation that those who are involved in environmental protests are prospective perjurers.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman not believe that we should introduce legislation that contains as few loopholes as possible? He is talking about protesters who feel free to break the law in pursuit of direct action, so why does he believe that they would not break the law in another respect?

Mr. Heath: If the hon. Gentleman had waited for me to finish my remarks, he would have heard me say that I agree that there is a basic problem that needs to be addressed. However, I do not accept the generalisation that people who care passionately about environmental issues are necessarily likely to perjure themselves.

There is a weakness in the Bill relating to the period when a vacancy has arisen. People might make declarations and affect the result of an election. As a Member of Parliament with a majority of 130, I am conscious of the effect that a relatively small number of people moving from place to place might have. The amendment contains almost the weakest possible safeguard against that eventuality, so I wonder whether serious consideration was given to a prohibition on addition during the period of a vacancy. That might have been a safer course to adopt.

I accept that the amendment represents a move in the direction of those who have expressed concern. We must monitor the operation of the provision carefully—indeed, we must constantly review our electoral arrangements to identify what does and does not work.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has expressed his fears about the

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

Swampy factor. I do not object to people voting because they want to protest about an environmental issue, such as a road or other development that causes them concern. If they can establish lawfully and properly a local connection, they should be able to vote and express their view. That is democracy and we accept that people have a right to disagree with us. The fact that we may passionately disagree with their views does not mean that they should not have the right to vote.

The hon. Gentleman suggests, however, that the provisions allowing registration by means of a declaration of local connection could be abused by those who might travel to an area during a by-election solely for the purpose of voting in that by-election and in the absence of any local connection. I think that he overstates the fears, but we acknowledge that they have a basis, so we have considered the notion of a group of politically motivated protesters who, on hearing of a by-election in an area in which they are not resident, travel to that area and become residents by way of a declaration of local connection. We believe that that is an unlikely scenario, but the potential for abuse exists, so we have sought a way in which to close off the possibility.

The amendment would overcome the potential problem by requiring those who register by means of a declaration of local connection during a period when a by-election is pending to confirm that they have had that connection with the address that they have supplied for registration purposes for the three months prior to the date on which the declaration is signed.

A homeless person who has been living in the area concerned for the requisite time, but who has not got round to registering, will be able to register, as he should indeed be able to do. Carpetbaggers, if I may so describe them—the term has already been used—will not be able to make the required declaration. To take the point made by the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), they are just passing through, so they would not comply with the conditions.

It is usually obvious that a convoy of new age travellers has moved into the area. The electoral registration officer would become aware that they had arrived. If that occurred in the course of a by-election, it may well raise suspicions in his mind and he may take extra steps to ensure that those people had complied properly with the law. Paragraph 17 of schedule 1 makes it clear that making a false statement in a declaration of local connection is a criminal offence that can be punished with a fine of up to £5,000.

We have safeguards in place. I do not believe that the concerns are as great as the hon. Gentleman suggests, but we have covered the serious issues that he presented to the House.

Mr. Evans: I thank the Minister. Our suggestion still holds good. We do not want to stop anyone who has a legitimate right to vote. However, the Minister conceded that there was some basis for our fear, particularly in seats such as Ayr, where the majority is 25.

Once the vacancy is announced, no one should be allowed to register to vote. With rolling registers, people can register at any time. That is the beauty of the system. Although there may be a possibility of one or two people being prevented from voting legitimately, many other people who would try to vote illegitimately would be prevented from doing so.

Mr. O'Brien: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. The point that he raised—the Swampy factor, as he called it—is a possibility, but it is unlikely. Because it is a possibility, we have closed it off and dealt with the hon. Gentleman's concern.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 13 agreed to.

Clause 9

RESTRICTION ON SUPPLY OF INFORMATION CONTAINED IN REGISTER

Lords amendment: No. 14, in page 10, line 32, leave out ("both the full register and the edited register may") and insert

("the full register and the edited register may each")

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 15 to 19.

Mr. Hawkins: The importance of the amendments reinforces the argument that my right hon. and hon. Friends and I advanced in the debate on the guillotine motion. We are just starting the fifth group of amendments, and our protests about the inadequate time allowed have been amply borne out.

This group deals with one of the most important issues, which was raised extensively on Second Reading and in Committee, and again in another place. It led to a lengthy debate, with a number of amendments being moved as recently as Monday of this week in another place.

The concerns that I raised in Committee—at that time, from the Back Benches—have still not been properly addressed. We are waiting to hear from the Government about the progress of their consultation with industry about the commercial use of the electoral register, and what representations have been made. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) said in Committee, mixed messages have been given throughout the Committee stage and in all the statements made by Ministers in this House and in another place. We await a code of practice. For a long time, we have been asking the Government to introduce regulations under clause 9. They have been promised since Second Reading. Our anxieties about the difference between the full register and the edited version cover such important issues as battered wives—

It being two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the supplemental allocation of time motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Lords amendment agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *then put the remaining Questions required to be put at that hour.*

Lords amendments Nos. 15 to 87 agreed to [some with Special Entry].

Mr. Hawkins: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Government have committed a scandalous abuse of power in trying to deny the House the opportunity to debate the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The House has decided on those matters, and I must move on.

Minimum Wage (Scotland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

1.11 am

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): I want to speak about the implementation of the national minimum wage in Scotland. The minimum wage will rank as one of the great achievements of the Labour Government. However, I come to speak not about its merits but about its implementation. While it is true that, in the past, the majority of employers paid wages that were above the present national minimum rate, and that now a majority of employers who previously paid low wages now abide by their legal responsibilities and pay that rate, there remain a minority of rogue employers. Many vulnerable employees and potential employees need our help and protection.

It is too soon for a full analysis of the scale of the problems, but we can get a glimpse of them. Citizens Advice Scotland has collected information on cases from some of its bureaux. That information raises several worrying issues. The trawl by Citizens Advice Scotland is not scientific or complete, but it gives a valuable insight, which I want to share with the Minister and the Department. I hope that it will lead to action in the not-too-distant future.

The information that I cite is from a special briefing that is based on cases from individual citizens advice bureaux in the past year. I believe that it will lead us to agree that the Government need to undertake an information campaign on the national minimum wage to tell citizens about their rights, specify who is entitled, explain the levels, and ensure that bad employers are deterred from malpractice.

The trawl gives an idea of the sort of people who have faced difficulties, and the Government might consider aiming any information campaign at them. Approximately two thirds of those who have approached the citizens advice bureaux are women. That shows not only that women have traditionally been paid less than men, but that they have been in jobs that are more vulnerable to exploitation.

The profile of clients by age also highlights the fact that a disproportionately large number of people aged between 18 and 21 have come forward. They comprise approximately 17 per cent. of those who go to citizens advice bureaux to discuss the national minimum wage. That is a much higher proportion than the 4.7 per cent. of the population that that age group makes up. It is therefore important to target any information campaign at young people.

When we consider the sort of jobs that people do, it is noticeable that the largest category of employment about which complaints have been made is hairdressing. I have some sympathy with the hairdressing industry, as it is not likely to get rich off me. I bear the industry no grudge because of that. I am sure that many good employers provide excellent wages and first-class training for their employees, but clearly there are problems and I believe that young people and women workers in that industry ought to be targeted.

I draw the Minister's attention to other industries that were highlighted by those who presented themselves to bureaux: 13 per cent. referred to the retail industry,

[Mr. Ian Davidson]

9 per cent. to catering and bar work, 8 per cent. to farming and fishing, 6 per cent. each to hotel, cleaning and security guard work, 5 per cent. to care assistant work and 4 per cent. each to taxi work, nannying and nursery nursing. Those figures show that 82 per cent. of those who presented themselves came from a relatively small number of industries—most of us could have identified them beforehand as being from ones in which difficulties were most likely to arise—and emphasise where we need to campaign.

I want to raise with the Minister a number of issues arising specifically from the citizens advice bureaux trawl. The bureaux identified a number of employers who were failing to pay employees the national minimum wage, to which they were entitled. A 32-year-old client of a north of Scotland CAB was being paid £2.20 an hour—£1.40 below the minimum wage—for working as a nanny. An 18-year-old client of an east of Scotland bureau being paid £2.50 an hour approached his employer about increasing his wage in line with the national minimum wage. The employer simply refused. An 18-year-old client of a west of Scotland bureau working in a nursery approached her employer about the national minimum wage and the employer assured her that the law did not apply to privately run nurseries.

Individuals in those circumstances lack information and many are vulnerable. A significant number of CAB clients were aware that they were entitled to a higher rate of pay under the new legislation, but they were either dismissed or threatened with dismissal when they tried to negotiate with their employers. A south of Scotland bureau reported that a 22-year-old client was paid £3 an hour. He approached his employer about increasing his pay in line with the minimum wage, but the employer said that he could leave "if he didn't like it." A client of a south of Scotland bureau aged over 22 was dismissed when she asked her employer about increasing her wage in line with the national minimum wage and, to return to hairdressing, an east of Scotland bureau reported that a fully qualified hairdresser aged over 22 was being paid only £2 an hour, which is £1.60 below the minimum wage.

We need to ensure that information is provided as a great deal of confusion remains—among young workers in particular—about the age at which they qualify for the minimum wage, the conditions that have to be met before they qualify and when they qualify for the £3.20 and £3.60 rates. The fact that that confusion exists is borne out by the cases that are coming forward.

A north of Scotland CAB reported that an 18-year-old hairdressing apprentice was being paid £1.84 an hour—she wanted to know when she would be entitled to a higher rate under the new legislation—and an 18-year-old client of a north of Scotland CAB being paid £3.30 as an informal trainee wanted to know when he should receive the minimum rate. To be fair to hairdressers, a client who owned a salon went into a north of Scotland bureau to obtain information about the rates that should be paid to staff.

I am sure that the Minister understands those points about information, but I want to touch on abuses. In a number of situations an employee has been redefined as an apprentice or a trainee so that the employer does not have to pay the full rate of the national minimum wage.

A 37-year-old client with 18 years experience of bar work was told that she was being paid only £3.26 an hour because she is on a trainee wage for six months. Six months' training was not mentioned when she was recruited and appointed to her present post. A west of Scotland CAB reported that an 18-year-old hairdresser, along with all the other employees of that age, had been asked by her employer to sign a contract classing them as apprentices. If they did so, they would sign away their rights to a higher rate on the national minimum wage. An east of Scotland CAB reported that a man over 50 had been taken on as a labourer on a trial basis. After he had worked 18 hours, he was told that he was unsuitable, paid the equivalent of £1.85 an hour, and when it was queried, the employer said that he did not have to pay the national minimum wage to someone under training.

There is a whole host of such examples that show the difficulties that are presently being experienced by some of our most vulnerable people in work. We need a publicity campaign on the national minimum wage to inform the public of the new legislation and of their rights. We need enforcement, and if necessary we should name and shame bad employers. I am sure that that policy would be agreed by the vast majority of my parliamentary colleagues. I am particularly glad that this issue has been taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan), who is present this evening.

The national minimum wage has been the Labour Government's great achievement. We must do as much as we can to ensure that everyone gets the benefit of it. I look forward to hearing the Minister's agreement.

1.21 am

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): I am delighted to speak about the national minimum wage as it applies in Scotland. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) has recognised, it is overwhelmingly a good news story. It is historic legislation, and has benefited about 100,000 workers in Scotland. More than 1.5 million people in the United Kingdom are entitled to receive the national minimum wage.

I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the citizens advice bureaux for collecting the information and for gathering the cases on which action should be taken. I fully endorse the sentiment, which was central to his speech, that the more information we have and the more publicity the national minimum wage receives, the more people will benefit from it.

I shall give some statistics to put the issue in context. I acknowledge that there is a great deal of activity to ensure that the minimum wage is enforced, and to make people aware of their rights. Since February 1999, 155,000 calls have been taken by the national minimum wage telephone helpline across the United Kingdom. There have been more than 4,000 complaints of underpayment since April 1999, 312 of which have been in Scotland.

Out of the 3,300 visits by national minimum wage inspectors in the United Kingdom to employers who are suspected of underpaying, 294 have been made to employers in Scotland. As a result of those 294 visits, eight enforcement notices have been issued, out of 100 that have been issued UK-wide. Those eight enforcement notices issued in Scotland are only the tip of

a significant iceberg. In the vast majority of cases, it is possible to secure compliance by negotiation and by bringing the terms of the national minimum wage legislation to the attention of employers.

There is a significant pattern of activity in response to the cases that my hon. Friend has mentioned. They are being researched and properly drawn to our attention by the citizens advice bureaux and other organisations. Let me say publicly that the more information we have, the more we can do to ensure that every worker who is entitled to benefit from the national minimum wage can do so. I urge CABs, Members of Parliament, local authorities and anyone who has contact with working people in low-paid occupations to ensure that they are aware of the terms of the legislation, and that they can add to the number of companies—which I have given—that are due to be investigated, and in regard to which, where appropriate, legislation must be enforced.

The national minimum wage is about social justice and fairness. It is about ending the exploitation of workers. I personally believe, and I think every Labour Member believes, that it is one of the historic achievements of this Labour Government. In his speech celebrating the Labour party's 100th birthday, the Prime Minister identified it as one of the party's four most significant achievements, along with the vote, the national health service and universal education.

The establishment of a national minimum wage has been talked about for most of those 100 years, but it took this Labour Government to deliver it. I think most people who understand the issue recognise that, while the level of the wage is open to discussion and dispute—and can be increased, as is now happening—it is the principle that is of historic significance, and that has been delivered by this Labour Government with no help from any other quarter of the House.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the benefits that the national minimum wage legislation has brought to low-paid workers, and to business throughout Scotland. It is now generally acknowledged that the minimum wage has been successfully introduced, and has brought substantial benefits to some 100,000 workers and their families. We are talking not just about employees, but about households. The minimum wage has been particularly important to women and part-time workers; and, contrary to the scare stories that we heard from Conservative Members before the general election, its introduction was achieved without the imposition of undue burdens on business, or an adverse impact on employment or the economy as a whole. Rogues have been brought to heel, to the benefit of employers who were already paying decent wages.

Both employers and workers have adjusted well to the introduction of the minimum wage. Small businesses have been most affected, but have managed the transition most successfully. Peter Agar, deputy director-general of the CBI, recently described the minimum wage as a model of how to introduce new regulations.

With the national minimum wage and our in-work benefit reforms, we now have the means to eradicate the worst excesses of low pay, and thereby to provide greater decency in the workplace. We are doing that in a way that ensures that there are the jobs necessary to provide the wages in the first place. Indeed, jobs are being created—especially in the service sector, to which my hon. Friend referred and in which the national minimum wage has the greatest impact. Unemployment is falling, and pay settlements are remaining moderate.

Estimates show that since the introduction of the minimum wage, employment in Scotland has increased by some 23,000, or 1 per cent. Since the March-May quarter, Scotland's employment performance in percentage terms has been better than that of the United Kingdom as a whole: in the UK, employment has increased by 0.8 per cent. over the same period.

Together with the Government's reforms of tax and benefit arrangements, the national minimum wage forms the cornerstone of our police to make work pay. It is also part of our commitment to a modern knowledge-based economy that promotes competitiveness through the introduction of minimum standards in the workplace. By setting a floor below which pay must not fall, the minimum wage prevents unscrupulous employers from paying poverty wages as a means to undercut their competitors in terms of price.

Paying very low wages is obviously a shortsighted policy, which is seldom, if ever, successful in the long term. Poverty pay inevitably leads to high staff turnover, high absenteeism, poorly trained staff, low productivity, dissatisfied customers and cancelled orders. That is a recipe for despair, which poverty pay represents, Those are very good reasons, among others, for introducing a national minimum wage.

Evidence of the widespread support for the national minimum wage can be found in the most surprising quarters. When in government, the Opposition, who, disappointingly, are unrepresented in the Chamber tonight, frequently claimed that the introduction of a minimum wage would lead to the destruction of 2 million jobs. It was fantasy, but it is not long ago that they were making such claims.

It is now 11 months since the minimum wage was introduced. With increasing employment, as opposed to the increasing unemployment that the Opposition predicted, where are those siren voices now? As we heard recently, they have belatedly joined the bandwagon, agreeing that the minimum wage has had no adverse impact.

I always said that the real significance of the national minimum wage would be to introduce the minimum standard—the floor under what people could be paid: the decency wage—and that, once it was there, no Government, even the hardest-faced Tory Government, would ever dare reverse the minimum wage legislation. That is why it will be regarded as one of the landmark pieces of legislation introduced by the Labour Government. It cannot be reversed because it is patently socially just.

As my hon. Friend will appreciate, we have decided to increase the main national minimum wage to £3.70 per hour in October and the young workers' rate to £3.20 in June. Those increases were recommended in the first report of the Low Pay Commission, alongside its recommendations for the initial rates. Remember the importance of the commission. The minimum wage is not something that the Government set and decide on internally. We rely heavily on the commission's advice. It confirmed its belief that the necessary conditions exist for the increase to be introduced. The Government agree with that assessment.

[Mr. Brian Wilson]

The economy continues to work extremely well and we have managed to hold down inflation. The new adult rate provides fairness in terms of retaining the value of the minimum wage. However, we are exercising some caution in making the change to the adult workers' rate in October, rather than June, crucially allowing business plenty of time to adjust. The increase for young workers aged 18 to 21 has been known about for some two years and will go ahead in June.

Beyond those increases, we have made no decisions about future changes to the minimum wage rates. What we have done is to ask the commission to continue monitoring the minimum wage and to produce a further report by July 2001. The new report will include the commission's view on whether there is a case for further increasing the minimum wage and, if so, by how much. Any further decisions will be taken in the light of its report, taking account of the prevailing economic circumstances. Both the Government and the commission have said from the outset that that is a better approach than any form of automatic annual uprating mechanism.

The commission said that the Inland Revenue's national minimum wage inspectors are operating successfully. The Government wholeheartedly endorse that view, not least in Scotland. Just how effectively the inspectors are working is perhaps best illustrated by a recent well-publicised case involving a group of Thai workers at an electronics company in Greenock. The case came to light following a letter to the Department of Trade and Industry from my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), who drew attention to what was going on at that workplace.

Minimum wage inspectors ensured that the employer, who is based in Thailand, paid the £12,000 arrears of wages owed to those workers. That has been done following a tribunal case, which received a fair and welcome amount of publicity. That is all to the good. We want employers to know that our inspectors mean business.

The inspectors' influence clearly extends far beyond our shores. That was an important case, involving different subsidiaries of a large international company. Its resolution sends out a powerful message to employers and to the low paid—that there is no hiding place for an employer who acts unlawfully and fails to pay the national minimum wage to its workers. All workers in Scotland and in the rest of the United Kingdom are entitled to the minimum wage, even if they are overseas workers working here for an overseas company. I hope that that is one of the messages that will come out of this debate.

It is very important—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Pollok and others will help to draw attention to it—that employees in low-paid industries, whether they are manufacturing or service industries, should be aware of the national minimum wage telephone helpline. The helpline provides practical advice in the application of the minimum wage, and it is a focal point for complaints of underpayment.

The Inland Revenue's inspectors have already followed up 320 complaints in Scotland and, as I said, issued eight enforcement notices there. The figures for the United Kingdom are 4,000 and 100 respectively. Scotland is certainly not at the top of the league in non-compliance. We should take some satisfaction from the negative fact that non-compliance with the minimum wage in other parts of the United Kingdom is more extensive.

The figures are important: 320 complaints, almost 300 visits by national minimum wage inspectors and eight enforcement notices. It is vital that we should realise that, although inspectors have recovered in formal action against employers more than £750,000 in underpayments to United Kingdom workers, that is only the tip of the iceberg. Many low-paid workers receive the correct money after a simple inquiry to the helpline without any formal action. We cannot, of course, calculate how much is involved.

A debate such as this one, initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Pollok, serves the purpose of sending out to low-paid workers the very strong message that, if they are not receiving the national minimum wage, they should telephone the helpline, and that that will lead to implementation of the legislation. As I said, there is no hiding place from the national minimum wage, and—case by case, and telephone call by telephone call—we are tracking down those employers who continue, quite irrationally and improperly, to offend against the national minimum wage legislation. We are forcing them to pay up.

Our publicity campaigns, in spring and autumn 1999, have significantly raised the level of awareness of the minimum wage and resulted in many workers being paid their statutory entitlement. Prevention is better than cure. As I said, I hope that the message going out today is that we are very serious about ensuring that every employee who is entitled to the national minimum wage receives it.

Independent surveys, including those undertaken by Reed Personnel Services and Incomes Data Services, indicate that implementation has been remarkably successful and that most employers agree with the policy and are compliant. That is an important point. When we talk about the rogue employers—those whom my hon. Friend referred to as delinquent in this matter—we are talking about a very small minority. The vast majority of employers, and all sensible employers, recognise that the national minimum wage is a good provision which works in their interests as well as those of those whom they employ.

There is little or no evidence of higher costs feeding into higher prices, and there have been few signs of any demands for the restoration of pay differentials. The surveys also found little evidence of any negative employment effect. In the past year, staff levels in smaller firms have increased by 11 per cent., and staff turnover has decreased in traditionally low-paying industries, with little evidence of significant job losses.

Even the British Chambers of Commerce survey, which was reported to have found extensive adverse effects, showed that almost 80 per cent. of all respondents thought that the current rates of the national minimum wage were about right. Adair Turner, when he was director general of the Confederation of British Industry, said that the national minimum wage had been set at a prudent level that avoided pricing workers out of jobs. The CBI is also on record as finding little evidence of any negative impact on inflation.

The national minimum wage legislation is a piece of legislation in which all Labour Members can take pride and satisfaction. It is working well and it is being implemented and enforced. Rogue employers are being brought to heel and every case that is reported to us is thoroughly investigated. The minimum wage is enforced as a result. All that is a cause for satisfaction.

My hon. Friend rightly drew attention to some occupations in which the national minimum wage is particularly necessary and in which additional enforcement measures are still needed. I assure him that, as a result of this debate, I will make sure that any case from those sectors that is drawn to our attention is investigated and that enforcement is carried out as necessary.

In Scotland, we recognise that, on the ground of social justice, the legislation was necessary in those areas of the economy that were subject to low pay. It is welcome as an excellent piece of Labour legislation of which we can all be proud.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes to Two o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 9 March 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[LORDS]*

Order for consideration read.

To be considered on thursday 16 March.

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Orders for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second Time on Thursday 16 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Unemployment (Conwy)

1. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): If he will make a statement on the change in the level of unemployment in the Conwy constituency since May 1997. [112212]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Claimant unemployment in the Conwy parliamentary constituency has fallen by 341—14.3 per cent.—since the general election. Youth unemployment has fallen by 76 per cent. To secure our objective of high and stable employment, the Government will proceed on the basis of matching rights and responsibilities, creating new opportunities for work in return for obligations. The report by Lord Grabiner QC on the informal economy proposes to toughen sanctions against working in the hidden economy. At the same time, for the vast majority who are looking for work, we are considering more intensive coaching and help, where appropriate, with training, travel, transitional costs and child care.

Mrs. Williams: I thank my right hon. Friend. Hundreds of my constituents are grateful for the Labour Government's new deal and would condemn the Opposition for describing it as a colossal and expensive failure. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give to show that he intends to build on the success of the new deal to achieve Labour's historic aim of full employment?

Mr. Brown: Even though youth unemployment has fallen by 68 per cent. in the constituency of the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) says that the new deal is an expensive failure and that he would abolish it. In October, the Conservatives announced that they would privatise the Employment Service. Their policy would be bad for Conwy: in addition to abolishing the new deal, they would return the economy to boom and bust. The shadow Chancellor made Tory policy clear when he said that the Tories were

> linked to harshness, thought to be uncaring about unemployment, poverty, poor housing. We were thought to favour greed.

That is, in fact, exactly the policy of the Tory party.

Manufacturing and Service Industries

2. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): What increases in manufacturing and service industry productivity were secured in the calendar years *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [112213]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The service sector grew in those years respectively by 2.1 per cent., 1.7 per cent. and 0.7 per cent. The manufacturing sector grew by 0.7 per cent., minus 0.6 per cent. and 3.6 per cent. Whole-economy productivity growth including manufacturing and services per employee was 1.5 per cent., 1 per cent. and 1 per cent. Because whole-economy productivity during the 1980s and 1990s remained below that in the United States of America, France and Germany, we have instituted long-term measures for improvements in productivity—monetary and fiscal stability, a new competition policy matching innovative capital markets with a more favourable tax environment, and making Britain a skills centre for Europe with measures including labour market reforms.

Mr. Brooke: Since the Chief Secretary to the Treasury told me at Treasury questions last month that no one could be complacent about the figures, what would it take for the Chief Secretary to become actively dissatisfied?

Mr. Brown: I am the Chancellor, not the Chief Secretary, but, like my right hon. Friend, I was appalled by the Conservative Government's failure to improve productivity during the 1980s and 1990s. The Conservatives failed to institute a new competition policy that would mean lower prices and greater efficiency. We have created an independent Competition Commission, which, I believe, the right hon. Gentleman would support. We have instituted labour market reforms, emphasising skills that are desperately needed in the economy but which the Conservatives failed to provide. At the same time, we have instituted measures that mean that investment in the

economy is now 14.5 per cent.—a proportion of gross domestic product far above anything that the Conservatives achieved over 20 years.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): With productivity in mind, does my right hon. Friend regard sterling as competitive?

Mr. Brown: I have made it clear that we understand manufacturers and exporters worries about sterling. In relation to the dollar, sterling has remained virtually unchanged over several years, but developments in the euro area have created difficulties for exporters. However, exporters and manufacturers to whom I have talked most fear a return to the policies adopted by the Conservatives—the policies that brought stop-go and boom and bust.

Let us not forget that the shadow Chancellor was at the Treasury when, in the recession of the early 1990s, 2 million jobs were lost in the British economy. While he was at the Department of Employment, unemployment—on the claimant count—never fell below 2.3 million; it is now 1.1 million. Youth unemployment during the right hon. Gentleman's spell there was 300,000; and it is now 50,000. We favour creating jobs; the right hon. Gentleman was the Minister for unemployment.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Does the Chancellor accept that any increases in productivity that British industry is likely to achieve will be insufficient to overcome the problem of an overvalued exchange rate, which is itself largely caused by our high interest rate policy?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should look at the figures: manufacturing productivity is rising by 3.6 per cent. He should congratulate the manufacturing sector of the economy on its response to what is happening. Equally, he should look at the amount of business investment in the economy, which is more than £100 billion, and has risen from the maximum of slightly more than 12 per cent. of gross domestic product under the Conservatives to more than 14 per cent. under Labour. We are making the long-term changes that will give higher productivity in the economy. The Conservatives had 20 years to do so, and they failed.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the steel industry is the most productive manufacturing industry in our country at present? However, it is encountering tough problems because of the high value of the pound. The steel workers at Shotton, who in 1980 suffered Europe's biggest redundancy, are anxious—as are those in other steel plants throughout Wales—about a statement by Corus, the new steel company, that no job and no plant is safe. The steel workers know that the strength of the pound and the merger are putting pressure on jobs. My right hon. Friend helped over the climate levy for the steel industry—in the same positive way, what he might do to enable the export of steel?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is a constant supporter of the steel industry in his constituency and throughout the country. I, too, have talked to representatives of the steel workers union and shall continue to hold discussions with them. I appreciate the problems that the exchange rate has given them. They have told me that they do not want to return to boom and bust—as happened under the Conservatives. Not only are there more jobs in Wales as a result of action taken by this Government, but there are now 800,000 more jobs throughout the whole economy. More people are in work than ever before as a result of stability and the measures in the new deal. The stop-go policies of the Opposition and their opposition to the new deal put that at risk.

Tax Burden

3. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): What his projection is of the tax burden for 2001-02 measured as a percentage of GDP. [112214]

5. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): If he will make a statement on the number of quarters since May 1997 in which the percentage of GDP taken by the Government in tax over the previous 12 months has risen. [112217]

6. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): What estimate he has made of the net increase in the amount of tax that will be paid in the five financial years from 1997–98 to 2001–02 as a result of his Budget measures to date. [112218]

7. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): What projection he has made of the tax burden as a percentage of GDP in 2001–02; and if he will make a statement on the change in the tax burden since 1996–97. [112219]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): As a result of last year's Budget, the tax:GDP ratio is lower this year than last year. The tax ratio in the two following years will also be lower than last year. Under the previous Government's plans, those rates would have been higher than the latest projections—not only in this year but in both of the next two years.

Mrs. Lait: Is not the Chief Secretary aware that, since his Government came into office, the overall tax burden has risen? The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has said that—as have the Office for National Statistics, the House of Commons Library, his own Red Book, the pre-Budget statement and the Fabian Society. In today's papers, Chantrey Vellacott has said it. Is not it time that the right hon. Gentleman gritted his teeth and, on behalf of the Chancellor, admitted that the tax burden has risen?

Mr. Smith: I keep giving the Conservatives the figures, but they do not seem to listen. Last year, the tax burden was 37.4 per cent. This year, it is 37 per cent. Next year, it is due to fall to 36.8 per cent. on the measures to date. That is a tax burden that is falling, not rising.

Mr. O'Brien: Returning to the precise figures, the ONS pointed out that the tax burden has risen in all but two quarters since Labour came to power. In the two quarters when it did not actually rise, it remained the same. Last year, the Prime Minister said that

it is clear, as the figures show, that the tax burden is falling.—[*Official Report*, 24 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 609.]

Will the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary explain what the Prime Minister was talking about when he made that statement?

Mr. Smith: I am tempted, in the interests of accuracy, to repeat to the hon. Gentleman the figures that I have just given. However, for his interest, I shall give him another set of figures that reflect the burden as it actually impacts on a typical family. The figures show that, when we came to office, the take was 21.5 per cent.; it then fell to 20.9 per cent.; this year it is due to fall to 20.4 per cent.; and next year it will be 18.9 per cent. Again, from the vantage point of the families who pay tax, that means less tax with Labour.

Mr. Brady: I suspect that the Chief Secretary's figures do not include all the stealth tax increases and the indirect taxes that have been piled on time after time. Is it not pathetic that the Government have to rely on semantics? When they are asked the straight question whether the tax burden has risen while they have been in office, they say that it is falling. Can they give the straight answer that the tax burden has risen, and will they stop relying on their own flimsy projections for what might happen in the future?

Mr. Smith: I do not have to rely on any flimsy projections; none of our projections are flimsy. Let me give the hon. Gentleman the flimsy projections that his Government were making before they left office. They said that, under their plans, tax under the Tories would have been 37.1 per cent. this year; it is lower with Labour. Next year, it would have been 37.6 per cent.; it will be lower with Labour. The year after that, it would have been 38 per cent.; with Labour the present projection is 37.2 per cent. In each and every case, our performance compared with the Conservative's projections shows a lower take in tax. We will not be lectured by Conservative Members, who broke every promise that they made on tax and imposed the 22 Tory tax increases and the boom and bust economics that did such damage to our economy. If they ever got the chance again, they would wreck the record rising living standards that we are now seeing in this country.

Mr. Leigh: Does the Chief Secretary recall that his former hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), said:

> We haven't increased the top rate of tax or the standard rate of tax, but we have increased a lot of other taxes . . . we have done it with all these stealth taxes. I just think it would have been better to have honestly told people beforehand?

Is not the truth of the matter that the Prime Minister told the British people at the general election that he would not increase taxes? He has increased taxes and every person in this Chamber is paying at least £1,500 more in tax than they were at the last general election. His candidate is 55 points behind the independent candidate for mayor because people are fed up with these lies; they want some truth.

Mr. Smith: The truth of the matter is that, unlike the Conservative party, we have kept each and every promise that we made on tax. We promised not to raise the basic or top rates of income tax throughout the next parliament. We have not and we will not. We said that we would bring in a lower starting rate of income tax of 10p in the pound, and we have. We said that we would cut VAT on fuel to 5 per cent.—the lowest level allowed—when the Conservatives put it up. We said that we would not extend VAT to food, children's clothes, books, newspapers and public transport fares, and we have not and will not. We said that we would bring in, with the windfall levy on the excess profits of the privatised utilities, welfare-to-work programmes and the new deals that have helped this country get 800,000 more people into jobs. They are all gains for hard-working families in this country that the Tories would take away.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Is it not right that where the tax burden falls is just as important as the overall tax take? Is it not right that the tax burden should not fall on those who can afford it least? A low starting rate of tax encourages people back to work and helps the economy, so it is good for Britain and good for taxpayers.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is quite right. As a consequence of the changes that we have brought in, families with children are, on average, £740 a year better off. Moreover, thanks to steady growth, low inflation, stability, the introduction of the minimum wage and the working families tax credit—measures in which the Government take pride—the real take-home pay of average families in this country rose faster last year than at almost any time for the past quarter of a century. That is the measure of the extent to which this Government are on the side of hard-working families, whereas Conservative Members put the whole future of those families at risk.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many of us in the House and in the country would not give a monkey's if the tax burden went up to 40 per cent., provided that the money went on the national health service, pensioners and the welfare state generally? I have a Budget proposal: we should put another tax—we can call it a stealth tax, if we like—on the Tories' outside earnings, and then we would hear them squeal.

Mr. Smith: All Budget representations to the Chancellor are very carefully considered.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does my right hon. Friend recall that the only people in this country paying less tax in May 1997 than in 1979 were those earning over £64,000 a year? We will therefore take no lectures on fair taxation from the Conservative party. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Conservative party has put forward a tax guarantee that it contradicts in the Chamber, week after week, by making additional spending pledges? Will he therefore make available the Treasury's computer model for the Conservatives' alternative Budget this year, so that the public can properly, rigorously and honestly work out the benefits and costs of their policies?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend indeed raises the £64,000 question. He is absolutely right to say that Conservative Members talk of the so-called Tory tax guarantee, which their former Prime Minister called mad and their former Chancellor of the Exchequer said was inoperable. The truth, as my hon. Friend said, is that it is not a Tory

tax cuts guarantee, but a Tory NHS cuts guarantee, because it would put at risk the very welfare services that my hon. Friend rightly commends.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the rise in gross domestic product that is forecast for next year, combined with the cut in the percentage of taxation, means not only that people will be better off as a result of the lower tax take, but that overall, as a result of the growth in the economy which the Government have achieved, they will be substantially better off in real terms under Labour?

Mr. Smith: Indeed, I have already said that last year people experienced the biggest real increase in take-home pay for a quarter of a century. I am confident that the Government's policies for stability, growth and economic responsibility and for getting people into jobs mean that during this Parliament we will see, as my hon. Friend says, a significantly bigger real increase in take-home pay than was achieved, on average, in the Tory years.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Does the Chief Secretary agree with the Prime Minister's comment in Question Time, that on coming to office Labour put up taxes to tackle the deficit left by Conservative mismanagement of the economy? That deficit was built on when the Conservative Treasury team, of which the shadow Chancellor was a member, mismanaged the economy in the early 1990s and forgot Baroness Thatcher's advice when she was Prime Minister that one cannot spend money that one does not have. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman should listen to the previous Conservative Chancellor, who admitted that borrowing a deficit of that size was simply taxation deferred.

Having put that right, does the Chief Secretary now accept that the issue in the forthcoming Budget is whether he uses the benefit to cut tax or to invest in hospitals, schools and a decent increase in the pension, rather than the miserly 75p provided?

Mr. Smith: No.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): With Mothers' day coming up in a couple of weeks, does my right hon. Friend agree that the shift in the tax burden under the Government represents a clear shift from wallet to purse? With the children's tax credit, the child care tax credit and the record increases in child benefit, people will be able to choose between a Government with a commitment to families, and in particular to working women and mothers, and the Opposition, who would strip most of those benefits away.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. The measures that we have taken have been of enormous benefit to working families. They have helped working women and working mothers, and we will continue to follow those policies during and after the Budget.

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): When we last had Question Time, I got the impression that the Chancellor had not got the hang of Question Time at all. While I was willing to make straightforward statements about Conservative policy, he was not willing to answer any questions. Is it not astonishing that today, when we have four questions on the basis of Government policy—the tax burden—and so much interest in the House, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will not answer the questions himself?

The Chief Secretary must begin by admitting that the Government are not publishing the figures that tell us the total burden of taxation—all taxes on families. Why is he withholding that information from the House and the British public?

I want to ask the right hon. Gentleman about the taxes that he is imposing on ordinary people. Why does he intend to abolish the married couples allowance and increase the tax on married people by £200? Their only sin is that they are married. Why does he intend to abolish mortgage interest relief and increase the tax on home owners by £225 a year, when their only sin is that they have saved for their houses? Why is he to make people who drive cars pay £178 more in petrol? Does he not know that those people have to drive their children to school and drive to work? Why has he taxed pensions, making people—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must understand that this is not a debate. There are other hon. Members who wish to ask questions.

Mr. Portillo: The Chancellor likes to claim to be the Iron Chancellor, but he is merely a Labour Chancellor. He increases taxes like every other Labour Chancellor, but instead of being straightforward, he does it by stealth, and instead of taxing the rich, he taxes ordinary people who serve and try to do the right thing.

Mr. Smith: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will get the hang of it, given time. I am surprised that with all his experience, he did not have the dexterity to come in on my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on questions 1 and 2, when he had every opportunity to question him. I am surprised, too, that the right hon. Gentleman has not learned to make his questions rather more pointed.

If there was ever a case of the Portillo trying to call the kettle black, that was it. The right hon. Gentleman was responsible for 22 Tory tax increases. It was he who was responsible for the biggest cut in the married couples allowance. He said at the time that the allowance appeared to be the most anomalous given to people, whether or not they were in work. He continued:

> I doubt that the reduction to be made in the first year . . . could be held to be crucial for those deciding whether they should be married.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 22 February 1994; c. 347.]

The right hon. Gentleman was the architect of the 22 Tory tax rises. He was the one who put VAT on fuel. He was the one who started cutting the married couples allowance. He was the one who put up national insurance. We have no lessons to learn from him on tax.

Mr. Portillo: Well, yes, the Conservatives did put up some taxes, and we paid a heavy price for it. The Labour Opposition criticised us at the time, so why are they putting up taxes now they are in government? Why are they taxing ordinary people on marriage, pensions, savings and petrol? Why are our public services getting no better? Why were 57,000 operations cancelled last

year? Why are people waiting a day and a half on trolleys in hospitals? Why has the number of policemen been cut by 1,700? Why is crime rising? Why are a Government who promised us that we would pay less and get more making us pay more, yet we are getting less?

Mr. Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is not getting the hang of it very quickly. With a record of driving through 22 Tory tax increases, and having been one of those responsible for the policy of boom and bust, the people of this country will never trust him and the Conservative party on tax or public spending.

Next year, the burden on the typical family will be at its lowest level since 1972. Our management of the economy and public finances puts £40 billion extra into health and education to repair the damage that the Conservative party inflicted when it was in government. People are better off with Labour. Conservative party promises to end the new deal and reverse the working families tax credit would return us to boom and bust, stop-go economics and damage the prosperity of the people of this country, whereas this Government have achieved the fastest rise in living standards for a quarter of a century.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report, which shows the distributional impact of post-tax income since 1997? It underlines not only his point that there are major increases in the take-home pay of the average family, but shows major increases in the pay of the majority of families, including the bottom 90 per cent. Does not that show that Britain is richer and fairer under Labour, through more take-home pay, more jobs and lower inflation?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. Unlike the Conservative party, the Labour Government care about the low paid—that is why we introduced the minimum wage. We care about working families—that is why we introduced the working families tax credit. As my hon. Friend said, thanks to our management of the economy and our policies for fairness as well as for enterprise, those on half of average earnings will receive as big an increase in real take-home pay in this Parliament as they received in all the Parliaments of the previous Administration.

IR35 (IT Contractors)

4. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): If he will make a statement on his recent discussions with IT contractors' representatives on IR35. [112215]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I met representatives of the professional contractors group in December. I explained to them why the Government believe that it is necessary to prevent avoidance of tax and national insurance contributions by workers using personal service companies.

Dr. Cable: What advice has the Minister received from the Prime Minister's adviser on e-commerce, who has publicly expressed his disquiet about the impact of the tax on our knowledge-based industry? How does the Inland Revenue propose to treat the tens of thousands of IT contractors, who are honest and do not avoid taxation, but have great difficulty in distinguishing between employed and self-employed status, as they are now required to do, because of the complexities of IT contracts?

Dawn Primarolo: First, it is not true that the e-commerce envoy has been making representations to the Treasury about relaxing the rules. He made it clear that he supports the Government's policy of stopping unfair tax and national insurance avoidance.

Secondly, IR35 deals with avoidance in cases in which one employee in a company avoids tax and national insurance. That means that such employees do not pay tax and national insurance, which are paid by other people who are self-employed or on pay-as-you-earn pay. The hon. Gentleman should explain why he is prepared to support a group of workers whose companies their own advisers describe as tax havens. Why should they be allowed to continue to cheat honest taxpayers?

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): A small IT business in my constituency has told me that it fears that it will not be able to survive and continue to prosper under the new IR35 rules. Will my hon. Friend liaise with colleagues in the Government to ensure that the Inland Revenue and the Small Business Service work with such companies to ensure that they can continue to be successful?

Dawn Primarolo: Frightening and undermining the legitimacy of the many hundreds of thousands of legitimate companies that operate as service companies is part of the scare tactics of those who seek to avoid tax by using service companies. The Inland Revenue continues to advise those companies that will be caught by the rules through a helpline and a comprehensive website. We are ensuring that honest taxpayers will be strengthened by the rules, not undermined, and that people compete on skills, not by using the rules only for tax advantage, as the few are doing.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Is it not clear from yesterday's written answers that the Minister has absolutely no idea of the damage that IR35 is causing to the knowledge-driven economy? The Government's manifesto at the last election said that they would

> Give Britain's entrepreneurs and small businesses the backing they deserve.

Instead, we have IR35—a stealth tax introduced by the back door. The result is uncertainty over self-employed status, a lot of competitiveness and a brain drain to more stable tax systems. Did not the biggest gaffe come from the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, who said that she would use a recent visit to the United States to try to woo back British expats? Looking at the chaos caused by IR35, who in his right mind would come back to this mess? It is pain without gain.

Dawn Primarolo: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman needs to be reminded of everything that the Government have done for small businesses: the small business company rate cut; the new 10p corporation tax starting rate; first-year capital allowances; enterprise management incentives; and help through the Small Business Service. He still has not told the House why his party supports a few workers who use their companies to avoid paying

tax when millions of others pay their tax. I direct him to *Computer Contractor* magazine of October 1999. Under the headline "Make hay while the sun shines", it said:

> Beg, borrow or steal to avoid paying higher tax rates this year. Next year you will not be able to avoid it. You should recognise that your company . . . is a tax haven.

He has to realise that, as we have rules in the system for self-employed and PAYE employees, it is not unreasonable to expect those few who are avoiding the rules to comply with them.

EU Markets

8. **Ms Dari Taylor** (Stockton, South): If he will make a statement on the importance of markets in the European Union to firms in the north-east. [112220]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): It is estimated that 14,500—one in three—small and medium-sized enterprises in the north-east have links with Europe. Government policy towards the euro is to prepare and decide. Today I am placing in the House of Commons Library and publishing the second draft national changeover plan. The euro standing committee, which includes the Governor of the Bank of England and the president of the Confederation of British Industry, met on Tuesday and discussed the draft changeover plan. In the draft plan that we are publishing today, which is in the Vote Office, we itemise and update the preparations being made.

Ms Taylor: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on the priority that the Government give to the changeover preparations. Will he acknowledge that more than 500 jobs in my constituency rely on a good and positive relationship with the euro? In the northern region, the figure goes up to 150,000 jobs, so it is very significant to us. Will he also acknowledge that business in the north-east sees the Tories' anti-European stance as undermining jobs and investment?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I much enjoyed my visit to her constituency this week, when I met many business men and women who know the importance of our constructive links with the European Union, and know how many firms depend on the continuation of that trade.

Three million jobs depend on our links with the EU. As my hon. Friend said, our policy on the euro is consistent with our making preparations and decisions, and subjecting that policy to the economic tests that we have laid down. Unfortunately, even if it were in the national interest for us to join the euro, the Conservative party would refuse to do so for reasons of dogma.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): By how much does the Chancellor want sterling to fall from its present level against the euro?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that we do not comment on the individual movements of sterling. He also knows that I appreciate the concerns of exporters and manufacturers about what has been happening in the euro area in relation to sterling—but the manufacturers to whom I talk in the north-east know that the greatest danger would be posed to them by action to return our economy to the stop-go, boom-and-bust policies of the bad old days.

Working Families Tax Credit (Scotland)

9. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): How many claims for working families tax credit have been received from Scotland since its introduction. [112221]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): The number of claims for working families tax credit received from Scotland is not readily available, but it is estimated that 67,000 families in Scotland had been awarded it by the end of January 2000.

Mr. Browne: That means that 67,000 families in Scotland are better off by an average of £1,250 a year than they were last year.

As my hon. Friend will know from Government statistics, my constituents are among the lowest paid in the country, with an average wage of £71 a week. That statistic and others suggest that many families in my constituency who qualify for working families tax credit do not claim it. Will my hon. Friend undertake a second phase of publicity before the new credits are introduced in April, so that those families can obtain the information that they need—information that would make a difference to their lives, and help them to lift themselves and their children out of poverty?

Dawn Primarolo: I am sure the House is shocked to learn that £71 a week is the average wage in my hon. Friend's constituency. That demonstrates the importance of the Government's policies on the national minimum wage and working families tax credit, and our reforms of national insurance, to low-paid workers who want to raise their incomes.

We naturally want to ensure maximum take-up of working families tax credit. As my hon. Friend probably knows, about 60,000 children have already benefited from the Budget measures, but I will look carefully at the rate of take-up, and will consider what my hon. Friend has said about the need for further publicity to ensure that all who are entitled to working families tax credit receive it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Why does the Paymaster General not accept the verdict of Filip de Kam, a tax expert from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, who argues that the Government are breaching international accounting conventions by describing working families tax credit as a tax cut when in fact it constitutes a hike in public expenditure? Is the hon. Lady proud of the fact that more than 50 per cent. of the cost of compliance with the WFTC—which is a recurring cost—is to be borne by small businesses, including small businesses in Scotland that have already been savaged by this Government, which employ fewer than 100 people?

Dawn Primarolo: First, the hon. Gentleman is wrong to assert that the Government are breaching OECD rules. Secondly, he is entirely wrong in what he says about the benefits involved. This is the man who opposed the introduction of the minimum wage and said that it would

be a disaster; what would he know about helping low-income families? Thirdly, as the Government have made clear, the burdens on small business have been reduced by the many changes that we have made to assist it, and by what we have done to support the few small businesses that may have an employee in receipt of working families tax credit.

We should keep this in proportion. For the smallest businesses, the maximum burden amounts to six minutes a week, and is far outweighed by the benefits in terms of recruitment and a stable and satisfied work force.

Climate Change Levy

10. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): What responses he has received to the changes that he announced in his pre-Budget report to the proposed climate change levy. [112222]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The refinements to the design of the climate change levy announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in November will further both our aims for the levy: to increase its environmental effectiveness, while protecting the competitiveness of UK firms. Those changes were welcomed by both business leaders and environmental groups.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. First, does he think that we now have the right balance between the need to protect the environment and the need to support industry? Secondly and quite specifically, will he look again at the operation of the combined heat and power exemption, particularly the definition of what constitutes high-quality CHP, as I understand that there is a debate about that?

Mr. Timms: The climate change levy forms an important part of our climate change programme, which, as my hon. Friend may know, is published today. One feature of the package in the pre-Budget report that has been particularly welcomed has been the trebling of support for business energy-efficiency measures, including combined heat and power. That underlines our determination to tackle the huge challenge of climate change, but to do so in partnership with business and other interested parties.

We are getting the balance right. We are consulting on the right definition for good-quality combined heat and power systems. It is important that we get it right and provide incentives for the right type of power generation. I will look carefully at the responses to the consultation when it is completed.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Why are the Government persisting with that damaging energy tax, which will be levied on all firms, whatever their size, in all sections of industry? Will the Minister confirm that the same firms that will have money taken off them through the tax are being blocked from installing gas-fired electricity generating plant, which would itself reduce carbon dioxide emissions and counter the threat of global warming? Why do not the Government start to practise joined-up government, instead of just talking about it? As usual, it is all talk and no delivery.

To put that contradiction beyond dispute, will the Minister confirm the fact—the calculation has been made by the House of Commons Library—that the entire carbon dioxide saving that is hoped for under that tax could be achieved simply by permitting those firms to generate electricity through gas-fired plant, which would render the entire tax, with all its expense and complexity, completely unnecessary?

Mr. Timms: I can certainly reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are delivering the climate change levy. The problem of climate change is huge and a major programme is required to tackle it. That is why we are publishing the programme today. It makes it clear that the climate change levy will make an important contribution to achieving our Kyoto targets. It will save 2 million tonnes of carbon a year by 2010, and there will be at least as much again in negotiated agreements. That is a big contribution towards meeting our objectives. The right hon. Gentleman asks about the stricter consents policy. That policy addresses entirely different issues about the security and diversity of UK energy supply. Both policies are right.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): How would my hon. Friend compare the energy tax rates in the UK with those of our main competitors in the European Union, and what impact might such rates have?

Mr. Timms: Many other EU countries have introduced carbon or energy taxes—eight of them so far. France and Belgium are working up their proposals at the moment. My hon. Friend asks about the rate of the climate change levy. The headline rate is around the middle of the rates in the eight EU states that have already introduced such taxes, so we are about in the middle.

Taxation

11. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): What estimate he has made of the incremental amount of tax that will be paid in the next financial year as a result of measures announced since 1 May 1997. [112224]

12. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): How much extra tax will be paid per annum as a result of his Budget measures to date. [112225]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): All changes to the tax system are included in the relevant Budget reports, which are publicly available. As a result of those Budgets, the direct tax rate on an average family with children will fall below 20 per cent. for the first time since 1979, and will be at its lowest level since 1972.

Mr. Hammond: The Chief Secretary focuses on direct taxes, of course. Is it not a fact that, if the total tax burden as a percentage of GDP had remained at the 1996–97 level—which applied before the general election and before the Chancellor started introducing his stealth taxes—in the coming financial year, the British people

would pay £15 billion less in tax? Is that not the truth that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister will go to any lengths to try to conceal from the British people?

Mr. Smith: No. Conservative Members are the last people who should focus on indirect taxes—they are the ones who put VAT on fuel, in breach of their election promises. The hon. Gentleman would do well to heed the advice of the shadow Chancellor, who, on 20 September, said:

> Conservatives have become increasingly connected with uncaring social attitudes, selfish behaviour and sleaze. It is not easy for the party to strike the right tone. Of course it should be apologetic for mismanaging the economy.

However much they apologise, their record will not escape them.

Mr. Boswell: Is it not remarkable that, whereas other Ministers are so keen on adjectives such as "new", "modern", and even "joined-up", Treasury Ministers become sensitive—they dislike it—when a particular noun is used in relation to tax changes, which are otherwise commonly known as "tax increases"? For the sake of argument, let us call them tax changes. Will the Chief Secretary tell us what assessment he has made of the impact on ordinary people of those tax changes? What is the effect, for example, of an annual petrol tax hike of £178 on people in rural areas and on heads of families on the national minimum wage? What is the impact on pensioners with incomes below the income support level, but who have small savings incomes, whose payable tax credits have been withdrawn?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman should remember who it was who introduced the automatic petrol tax escalator, which we have now abandoned. Who was it who imposed VAT on fuel, which did the damage to pensioners? The answer to his question is that families with children are £740 a year better off as a consequence of our tax changes.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Many of my constituents are paying more tax than they were prior to May 1997, and they are doing so because they are earning a great deal more than they were prior to May 1997. Would my right hon. Friend like to take the opportunity to congratulate some of the high-tech entrepreneurs in my constituency—such as Mike Lynch, of Autonomy—who have done so well with the economic stability that the Government have created?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I do join my hon. Friend in congratulating those high-tech and other firms in her constituency, and across the country, that are making an investment in, and success of, the crucial sphere of the knowledge economy and high-tech industries. We have been helping those companies by cutting corporation tax to the lowest level. We are also helping them by introducing research and development incentives and the management enterprise initiative, and by operating the economy so that there is stability, enabling businesses to plan and invest with confidence for the future.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in 1949, the great socialist Government of Clement Attlee cut income tax by 10p in the pound, and that, in 1951, the average industrial-wage worker with a family of two had to earn 107 per cent. of industrial wages before he paid any tax? In today's terms, that would be about £22,000. Although I do not invite my right hon. Friend to put that in the Budget, will he move in the general, socialist direction of cutting taxes, letting workers have more money to spend from their wages?

Mr. Smith: Yes indeed. As I said earlier, all Budget representations are carefully considered. The good socialist record of the Labour party in ensuring fair and low taxes is commendable, and stands in stark contrast to the record of the Conservatives, who were responsible for the highest tax burden in the past century when they took the tax take above 39 per cent. We shall not follow that example.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Will the Minister stop trying to conceal the truth about tax increases? As he well knows, the Government's Red Book figures show a 2 per cent. increase over this Parliament. If we count the fiddle on the working families tax credit, that becomes 2.5 per cent. The latest wheeze is to quote figures on average families that exclude the increases in indirect taxes. Ordinary people well know that their taxes have gone up, while the health and education services that they receive have declined. They are paying more and getting less. The Prime Minister has—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. It is about time that I heard a question.

Mr. Flight: Will the Government at last come clean on taxes, before we have to apply the same edict when referring to them as the Prime Minister has applied to all references to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone): stop using the "L" word and call him untrustworthy?

Mr. Smith: I shall give the figures again. Last year, the tax take was 37.4 per cent. of gross domestic product. This year it is 37 per cent. Next year, on present measures, it is projected to be 36.8 per cent. That is a falling tax burden, not a rising one. Coupled with the record increases in real take-home pay, it is a conclusive demonstration that people are better off with Labour.

Job Creation (London)

13. **Mr. Andrew Love** (Edmonton): What is his estimate of the number of jobs created in London since May 1997. [112227]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): The UK economy is continuing to expand and create new employment. Since the general election, 140,000 new jobs have been created in London.

Mr. Love: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate the Government on their success in creating a vibrant economy in the capital. In the past year, unemployment in my constituency has gone down by 7 per cent. and the latest estimate is that around 150,000 new jobs will be created in the coming year. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the very unlikely event of the Conservatives being returned at the next general election,

they would squander that golden legacy of the past three years with a return to the boom and bust of the 1980s and early 1990s?

Miss Johnson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend about what would happen were the Conservatives to be returned at the next general election. He talked about their record of boom and bust and the two recessions for which they were responsible. Almost 2 million jobs were lost in the UK during the recession in the 1980s and a similar number were lost in the 1990s recession. The Conservatives would abolish the new deal, which has so benefited my hon. Friend's constituency, as well as those of many Conservative Members. The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) has seen a fall of nearly 64 per cent. in youth unemployment in his constituency as a result of Government policies that he does not support and would end.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Does the hon. Lady agree that the ability of the economy in London to create and sustain prosperity and jobs depends on a low-tax regime from local and national government? Will she assure the House that the withholding tax on the savings income of European Union citizens in the City of London will be vetoed, so that it goes away for good? Why has the Paymaster General not published the report on so-called unfair tax competition, which she drafted at the behest of the European Union? The competitiveness of the City of London depends on a highly favourable tax regime, which many in the European Union would like to destroy.

Miss Johnson: My hon. Friend the Paymaster General has indeed published the report to which the hon. Gentleman referred and it is now in the public domain. I agree with the hon. Gentleman on just one of the points that he made. We continue to defend Britain's interests in the matter of the withholding tax, as we said we would do. I share the hon. Gentleman's views on that, but with regard to the economy in London, I remind him that there have been 800,000 new jobs across the country, 140,000 of which are in London, and that a record 3.3 million people are employed in London. I can attribute that only to the Government's excellent policies—the new deal, the national minimum wage, the working families tax credit—which provide the right framework for job creation through stability and meeting our inflation target. The hon. Gentleman should look at the record of his own party and ask himself how it was that the Tories presided over so much unemployment and so many periods of boom and bust. Who would trust the Tories again with the economy? The British people know that the Labour party and the Labour Government can be trusted to run UK plc.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 MARCH—Progress on remaining stages of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill.

TUESDAY 14 MARCH—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill.

At 10 o'clock the House will be asked to agree the spring supplementary estimates, supplementary vote on account, excess votes and defence votes A.

WEDNESDAY 15 MARCH—Proceedings on the Consolidated Fund (No.2) Bill.

Remaining stages of the Terrorism Bill.

Motion on the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary, Provisions) Act 1989 (Continuance) Order.

THURSDAY 16 MARCH—Opposition Day [8th Allotted Day]. Until about 4 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "The Government's Handling of the Mozambique Crisis" followed by a debate entitled "The Protection of Green Fields and the Imposition of House Building Targets". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

FRIDAY 17 MARCH—Debate on safeguards for children on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 20 MARCH—Second Reading of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill.

TUESDAY 21 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will open his Budget statement.

The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

THURSDAY 23 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 24 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for next week's business and an indication of the business for the following week. Following my comments last week, I am grateful for the additional time that the Government have found for the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. The other place has debated the Wakeham report, but there is still no sign of progress at this end of the building. When will we get the promised Joint Committee on which the Government appear to be dragging their feet? When will we have the opportunity to debate the Wakeham report—a debate during which we hope the Government will clarify whether peerages are offered to so-called opposition parties on condition that they do not oppose?

Has the right hon. Lady had time to read the excellent report of the Liaison Committee on shifting the balance between Select Committees and the Executive? Does she agree that we should debate it on the Floor of the House? Does she recall that we still have not debated the Procedure Committee report on scrutinising public expenditure?

The right hon. Lady has confirmed the date of the Budget and the four-day debate. Can she tell us when the Finance Bill will be published? Are not our debates on the economy and public expenditure a bit like buses? We do not see one for months and then four come along at the same time. Is the right hon. Lady satisfied that the incidence of economic and public expenditure debates throughout the year is satisfactory?

Finally, so that members of staff can plan their lives, has the right hon. Lady anything interesting to say about the dates of the Whitsun recess?

Mrs. Beckett: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The Government have indeed found the extra time he asked for last week for the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, and I am grateful to him for acknowledging that. He asked me last week about the possibility of a debate on the Wakeham report and the setting up of a Joint Committee, and I made the point to him then—and I am afraid that I can only reiterate it—that of course the Government have to give priority to their legislative programme and will do so. That means that at present I cannot give him a date for that debate.

The right hon. Gentleman suggests that there is some evidence of a deal being done in terms of behaviour in the House in return for peerages. First, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made plain yesterday, he has given more peerages already to the Liberal Democrats than did the previous Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* It is no good Opposition Members making those noises. We all know that the creation of peerages is within the patronage of the Prime Minister, and this one is the first to give any of it up. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman has only to look at the voting record in the House of Lords to see that it shows no evidence of any kind of deal.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about a debate on the Floor of the House about the Liaison Committee report. Like the Lords debate, that will have to wait, but it is a matter to which the Government will give serious consideration, because it is a weighty and serious report. Similarly, I am aware of the need at some point to debate the Procedure Committee's report.

I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the date of the publication of the Finance Bill, but I hope to do so shortly. I take heed of his remarks about the balance of economic and public expenditure debates. I fear that I cannot give him the dates for the Whitsun recess either, although I can confirm that we will not sit on the bank holiday.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate the important research that has been published in the past few weeks in *Nature* from scientists in south Carolina, London and Aberdeen, which proves that cannabis products can relieve the symptoms of multiple sclerosis in minutes? Another group of scientists have found proof that cannabinoids can destroy brain tumours that remain unaffected by conventional treatment such as chemotherapy. Those discoveries should cause us to end

the practice of persecuting those desperately ill people who use cannabis—we should certainly stop jailing them, as happened last year in two cases. Cannot we at least say that we will do that now for people who tell us that it has been their experience for years that cannabis alleviates the worst symptoms of MS, and who want a night's sleep tonight—not in five years' time when the Government finally agree?

Madam Speaker: Order. This is a time for questions.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend has long taken a great and close interest in that subject, but he will know that the Government have licensed projects to assess the scientific value of the medicinal use of cannabis, and when their results are available the Government will take due account of them.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Some of us are concerned that there has been no statement today from the Secretary of State for Defence on the apparent major leak in the security systems of NATO. Will the Leader of the House give us an assurance that as soon as all the information is available—which I understand will be over the weekend—we will have a statement on Monday from the Secretary of State? It is clearly not enough to have Mr. Jamie Shea of NATO make a statement on the "Today" programme, but to have no response whatever to the legitimate concerns, both inside and outside the House, that our pilots may have been put at risk and the war unnecessarily lengthened by the leak.

I endorse the Conservative view that an early debate on the Wakeham report is now necessary in order to establish precisely what the Government's intentions are. In particular, will the Leader of the House tell us whether it is the Government's policy, as apparently enunciated by the Leader of the House of Lords, that

> any proposal totally to elect a second Chamber under the mistaken view that it would increase the democratic base of Parliament would in fact undermine that democracy.?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 914.]

That is an extraordinary statement.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot give the undertaking that the hon. Gentleman seeks on a statement from the MOD about the stories in today's papers, which stem clearly from the trailing of a BBC programme. That is a perfectly legitimate thing for the BBC to do, but it is quite another matter to assume that it requires a statement to the House. In any case, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is in Argentina, and hardly could be here simultaneously.

The hon. Gentleman asked for an early debate on the Wakeham report. He will recall that Lord Wakeham himself suggested that people should take time to give mature consideration to the report's proposals, rather than rushing to judgment.

As for the remark of my noble Friend about an elected Upper House undermining the nature of our democracy in this country, I take that to be a reference to the inevitable conflict which would occur between a wholly elected upper House and this House. That is a view that many will share.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (Telford): Can my right hon. Friend confirm something that has been puzzling me—that she has, so far, received no request from the Opposition for a debate on the national minimum wage to explain their latest thinking on the subject? If there were an opportunity for such a debate, could we have it in Government time on a simple motion, inviting the House to support the way in which Her Majesty's Government introduced the minimum wage in the teeth of Tory opposition? We could then test the sincerity of the Tories' view by seeing whether they would join us in the Lobby.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a strong point, and raises an attractive proposition. He will recall that, in 1997, the present shadow Chancellor said that the minimum wage was an "immoral" policy. Last month, he said that the next Tory Government would not repeal it. My hon. Friend is entirely right to think that those are two mutually exclusive propositions which are worthy of debate. However, I fear that one of the little luxuries that we must deny ourselves at the moment is that of exploring the contradictions in the Opposition's position, which are many.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): Will the right hon. Lady arrange an early debate on the new rules for all-party groups that were announced by the Chairman of the Administration Committee on 22 February at col. 844? Is she aware that the likely impact of the new rules will be the disappearance of a significant number of all-party country groups? That would be a matter of concern for the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and for the embassies and high commissions of the countries concerned in London.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that, in parliamentary terms, it is wholly unacceptable for a Select Committee of this House to make far-reaching proposals bearing on the parliamentary activities of large numbers of hon. Members without making any formal report to this House; to do so without giving the House an opportunity to approve or reject the proposals; and to bring them in with immediate effect, backed by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards' minute of 29 February, by the expedient of a written parliamentary answer?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the concern of the right hon. Gentleman, and his anxiety at the nature of the proposal and the means that we used to bring it into effect. I am sure that the Administration Committee had no intention of causing difficulties for right hon. and hon. Members, but I will draw the right hon. Gentleman's remarks to the Committee's attention.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): May I add my voice to those calling for an early debate on the hugely significant report of the Liaison Committee issued last Friday? Does my right hon. Friend share my disbelief that the Committee found that colleagues are kept off Select Committees because of their views? I had no idea that that happened. However, this matter has particular salience at the moment. The Government are perceived by some to be in the grip of control freaks, manipulative and out to fix everything. Would not the best way of responding to that be to schedule an early debate and a vote on the Committee's recommendations?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for an early debate on what is, as my hon. Friend

[Mrs. Beckett]

correctly identifies, a weighty and serious report which will require careful consideration. Of course it is shocking to suggest that someone might be kept off a Select Committee because of their views—just as shocking as when the previous Government removed a long-serving and highly respected Member of this House from a Select Committee. It was widely thought—including by the Member in question—that that was done because of his views. The notion that there is something unprecedented about these disputes is clearly wholly wrong, but I understand the concern that my hon. Friend expresses.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Leader of the House will know that the management of the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast has put its work force on notice. Will she use her influence in joined-up Government with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Northern Ireland Office to try get a deal done quickly to preserve a shipbuilding industry in the United Kingdom? Such a deal would also help our steel industry, as the purchasers of the cruise liner involved are keen that their ship be built in a British yard.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has involved himself in the matter, with a view to helping. Tabling for the next Department of Trade and Industry Question Time will be next week, and the hon. Gentleman may want to explore the matter further then. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate, but I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of the relevant Ministers.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Will my right hon. Friend find time for an early debate on European Union objective 1 funding for areas of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion? Has she noticed that Conservative Members increasingly call for that funding for different parts of the United Kingdom? Would not such a debate give them an opportunity to explain why the inheritance of 18 years of Tory Government is that there are so many areas that qualify for objective 1 funding?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right, and such a debate would give an opportunity for Opposition Members to explain why so much poverty and deprivation was left in this country at the end of the Conservative Government's long term of office. It would also give this Government a chance to point to our excellent record in wresting objective 1 funding from negotiations in the European Union.

However, I fear that I must repeat what I have had to say to one or two hon. Members already: attractive though the prospect may be, unfortunately the Government have more pressing matters to debate.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Is the Leader of the House aware that Tuesday's spring supplementary estimates, which were published on 23 February, were sent for publication by the Treasury on 31 January? If the Government harnessed modern technology to reduce that production period, would there not be less need for revised supplementary estimates?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I freely confess to the right hon. Gentleman that I was not aware of that. I take his point entirely, and will draw it to the attention of the relevant Ministers.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): In mining communities and former mining communities, there is much concern about the time taken for miners to receive compensation for chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Does my right hon. Friend have any plans for an early debate on the progress that is being made in making the delayed payments? I understand that the process is very bureaucratic, and I urge my right hon. Friend to investigate how joined-up Government thinking might speed up the compensation payments.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I know how great is the concern that she identifies. Many hon. Members—especially Labour Members, but also hon. Members of all parties—have campaigned for the compensation. No one regrets more than the Government the time that has been taken to bring these matters to a conclusion. However, I believe that a working party has recently reported that the Government have made sure that about 50 additional chest consultants have been appointed to carry out the examinations. It is hoped that, from this month, cases will start to be settled much more speedily.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Is the Leader of the House aware of the rising incidence of suicide among farmers? It now far exceeds the number of deaths caused by or attributed to CJD. This morning, dairy farmers marched through my constituency on their way to lobby Parliament next Wednesday. Those people are at their wits' end with worry about their livelihoods and their lives in general. Last week, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was sent a letter signed by 138 organisations and associations pleading for action to save rural and small abattoirs.

May I remind the right hon. Lady and the rest of the House that for the past several weeks, pig farmers have been camped out in Parliament square because of the desperate situation in their industry? I request that the Leader of the House organise an early debate, in Government time, when the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food can come to the House and account for his stewardship. It should not take very long, because he has done nothing.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand, and the whole House shares, the concern that the hon. Gentleman has expressed about the farming industry, which my right hon. Friends the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Prime Minister have repeatedly acknowledged. The hon. Gentleman will recall that the leader of his own party has acknowledged that the problems of agriculture did not start on 1 May 1997, but are of long standing. I believe that the Prime Minister is due to see representatives of the farming industry again at the end of the month.

As for the notion that we should have a further special debate, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the last debate we had on agriculture was in Government time, at the instigation of the Minister of Agriculture. Secondly, I remind him that his party has Opposition time, and if his right hon. and hon. Friends share so widely his concern, it is open to them to use that time to debate such matters.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that if she managed to arrange a debate on industries in trouble, it might enable someone to point out just what happened when the Tories were closing the pits? They did not care about subsidies then; they did not care about subsidies when they were shutting down the steel industry; they did not care about subsidies when they were shutting down the shipbuilding industry. They are very selective about which industry to support.

I ask my right hon. Friend to remember that when the Tories privatised the pits, they decided to take 50 per cent. of the surplus of the miners' pension fund. Will she have a word with those responsible, to see that that money goes back into the miners' pockets and into the mining communities where it belongs?

Mrs. Beckett: It is well within the memory of everyone in the House how many industries suffered devastating job losses and how many companies disappeared under the regime supported by Conservative Members. Although I fully recognise the concerns of the farming industry, it has not escaped my attention that the amount of money going in public support to that industry is more than the entire budget for the Department of Trade and Industry.

My hon. Friend's final point about the pension fund is, as I am sure he will know, under review, and the Government will be making an announcement in due course.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Leader of the House will recall the Prime Minister boasting yesterday that he had visited his constituency of Sedgefield. The right hon. Gentleman did not tell us when last he went there prior to that visit. May I ask for an urgent debate on Sedgefield so that we can establish not only the frequency of the Prime Minister's visits to his constituency, but whether he listens to his constituents on the rare occasions he is there? The Leader of the House may be aware that a poll has just been taken showing that 71 per cent. of the people of Sedgefield are against the repeal of section 28.

I am trying to be helpful here, and perhaps the right hon. Lady can help me and the Prime Minister. If we debated this, it would give the Prime Minister the opportunity to come to the House, report on the number of times he goes to his constituency, and tell us whether he has listened to anyone there, particularly about section 28.

Mrs. Beckett: May I correct the right hon. Gentleman? The Prime Minister was challenged yesterday by Conservative Members to say when he had last visited his constituency, and that is why he gave the answer that he did. [HON. MEMBERS: "Once!"] He was asked when he was last in Sedgefield, and he said last Friday. I know that Conservative Members do not like it, but I am afraid that they will have to put up with it.

As for the frequency of my right hon. Friend's visits, that is not a matter in which there would be wide interest across the House. I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that it cuts both ways. I have heard remarks from constituents of his about the frequency of his visits to his own constituency.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Has the Leader of the House had an opportunity to read early-day motion 459?

[*That this House condemns the decision by Barclays Bank plc to close two branches in the Basildon and East Thurrock constituency in the Stanford-le-Hope and the Laindon centre; regrets that Barclays have chosen to close two out of five branches in the constituency, thus greatly reducing the service it offers to individual customers and local businesses; and calls upon Barclays to reconsider its decisions and consult its customers on the closures.*]

Has she, in addition, read early-day motions 447, 479, 485, 488 and 494 on the same matter? Does she accept that there is concern about banks closing local branches and removing services from our constituents without consultation while simultaneously seeking to charge customers for hole-in-the-wall services? May we have an early debate?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that there is great concern, which she has frequently voiced, about access to financial services and the problems caused when banks make changes. There is a feeling in the House that the matter should be tackled, but I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate in the near future. I know that, through early-day motions and other means, my hon. Friend and other hon. Members will continue to raise the matter.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Will the right hon. Lady arrange a debate on a subject causing increasing concern in parliamentary circles—ministerial accountability to Parliament? The Chancellor of the Exchequer does not come to financial debates, and we recently observed that the Secretary of State for Defence failed to attend during Front-Bench speeches on the main defence debate of the year.

My immediate concern, however, is the answering of parliamentary questions. Is the right hon. Lady aware that I put down an important question on reserve forces on 10 December, to which I received a holding reply? My subsequent questions in January and February about when I would receive a substantive reply have not even been acknowledged. Is that not an abuse of the parliamentary system, and are not parliamentary questions and their timely answer an important part of parliamentary democracy?

Mrs. Beckett: In general terms, I have observed that the Opposition's great concern about ministerial accountability to Parliament seems to apply only to Ministers in the present Government. However, I take the hon. Gentleman's point about his question on reserve forces. I was not aware that his question had gone unanswered, and I shall certainly draw that fact to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. I suspect that there has been an oversight, but I agree that it is not satisfactory.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will my right hon. Friend consider holding a debate in Government time on the

[Mr. David Drew]

future of parish and town councils? Like my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor), I am a member of such a council, and we should like to put it on the record that the Opposition's dishonourable and disreputable campaign claiming that the Government intend to get rid of those councils is anything but the truth.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point so firmly. I fear that I cannot find time for an extra debate on the Floor of the House, but he can seek other opportunities to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate or in Westminster Hall. I agree that the matter is important, and that it is wrong for people to be misled.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Barclays bank in Westgate on Sea in my constituency has announced its closure. The bank was the last in that populous village, although there is still a post office. Many of my constituents are concerned by the Government's apparent determination to remove pension payments from post offices. They fear that, as they will have to rely on automatic banking machines, they will be charged out of their pensions when they obtain relatively modest sums. Will the Leader of the House comply with the request made by the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) for time to debate this matter properly?

Mrs. Beckett: It was the Government supported by the hon. Gentleman who introduced the proposals that are causing a good deal of concern. We recently debated the Postal Services Bill, during which debate all those concerns were fully aired. My right hon. and hon. Friends from the Department of Trade and Industry made it plain that reports that people would have no choice in how their pensions would be paid were entirely wrong. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be glad to take this opportunity to reassure his constituents.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Will my right hon. Friend find time to debate the draft climate change programme published today, which I warmly welcome? Such a debate would allow the House to consider how to accelerate the launch of a domestic emissions trading scheme and to identify action necessary to stimulate the renewable energy industry. Achieving our targets for renewables and climate change could create between 10,000 and 45,000 new jobs, predominantly in manufacturing, but also in rural areas.

Mrs. Beckett: I know of my hon. Friend's great interest in that subject and of his pursuit of it. Indeed, he recently initiated an Adjournment debate on the matter.

There is great interest on both sides of the House in that detailed subject and a concern that the agenda be pursued. However, I fear that I cannot find time for a special, urgent debate on it in the near future.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Can the Leader of the House arrange time to have the Utilities Bill recommitted for debate on the Floor of the House? Since Second Reading, telecommunications and water have been removed from the Bill. The Clerks have been searching for a precedent for so many changes to a Bill while it was still in Committee. The measure is turning into the Futility Bill.

Today, we heard on Radio 4—where every Member obtains his or her information—that the Government have met the environmental target of 12.5 per cent. towards which, of course, the Utilities Bill was supposed to be working. The Government have just announced that they are holding urgent discussions with the Electricity Association about where the Bill should be going. May we have it back on the Floor of the House so that every Member of Parliament will be able to express their view as to what has happened?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I fear that there is no question of the Government finding time for that. The way in which the Bill is being handled has been made plain.

As for the hon. Gentleman's inquiries to the Clerks, I can save their time and his; the lifetime of the previous Government offers many precedents of Bills being changed substantially. I direct his attention to the debates in 1985 and 1986 on the Social Security Bill, when, after the Bill had been guillotined, the Tory Government introduced substantial new proposals and measures—all of which took money away from the most vulnerable people in the community.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), is not a parliamentary shrinking violet. Will the Leader of the House induce her right hon. Friend to come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement on the soaring estimates of the cost of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh? Is it not an affront that English taxpayers should have to pay for that, especially as they receive no quid pro quo? They even have to pay university fees for their children, unlike their Scottish and European Union counterparts.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is right: my right hon. Friend is not a shrinking violet—he is a robust contender in the House. Indeed, he will be in the Chamber for Question Time on 21 March to defend the Government's record robustly. However, I doubt that the hon. Gentleman or anyone else will be successful in drawing my right hon. Friend on the Scottish Parliament building; not only is that not a matter for him, it is not even one for Scottish Office Ministers—it is under the control of the Scottish parliamentary corporate body.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): In order to facilitate the family-friendly working practices to which, I am sure, we all aspire, can my right hon. Friend tell me whether there is any intention to timetable any of the Government Bills that she has announced today?

Mrs. Beckett: I only wish that I could agree that we all aspire to family-friendly working practices. It is all too plain that some hon. Members aspire to no such thing and, indeed, that they do their best to destroy those practices. The Government accept the decisions made in the earliest days of this Parliament by the Modernisation Committee to encourage the development of programme motions so that we can manage our business more effectively and in a more orderly way. That will ensure that important issues

can be properly aired. I continue to hold that view, although it is not clear whether it remains that of the Opposition.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Leader of the House will be aware that there is growing public concern about the sneaky and disreputable way in which the Government increase taxes for millions of ordinary people. Tesco has written to 170,000 of its employees to tell them that, because of the Government's pensions tax, they will have to increase their contributions from 3.75 per cent. of salary to 4.25 per cent. In view of that, is it not time we held a debate on stealth taxes—on the way the Government are hitting ordinary working people extremely hard and trying to sneak their proposals through so that people will not notice them?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that Conservative Members are not much of an opposition, but four days debate on the Budget are to come and we have just had Treasury questions. Surely even they can manage to raise the financial issues that they want to.

Points of Order

1.5 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have given you notice of my point of order, because it affects the rights of all hon. Members. Under the Bank of England Act 1998, the Treasury is required to give certain directions to the Bank of England about its inflation target and other Government policies. Under section 12, the Treasury is required to lay a copy of that before Parliament. I am advised that the Government failed to do that, both last year and the year before. They have broken their own law.

My point of order for you, Madam Speaker, is that the Government are also in contempt of the rules and procedures of the House. The laying of a paper is described in "Erskine May" as the way by which important papers are made available to the House generally. I attempted two days ago to obtain this document and was told that it was not available because the Government had failed to lay it before Parliament, as required by the 1998 Act. When I raised this matter with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury in a debate in Westminster Hall yesterday, she appeared to be unconcerned and uninterested, and failed to reply to my point.

Even if you, Madam Speaker, cannot force the Government to obey their own laws, what can you do to protect the rights of hon. Members to receive the documents that the law requires should be made available to the House through the procedures laid out in "Erskine May"?

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. He probably realises that I received notice of it only a short time before I took the Chair today, so I have not had time to examine it. I shall do so at my earliest opportunity.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Is there anything in the rules of the House that would allow you directly, or through your influence, to protect the interests of Back Benchers? You will have heard the question that I asked the Cabinet Office yesterday about the time it takes for Ministers to respond to letters. I have a constituent who has now waited 425 days for a letter from the Ministry of Defence about a simple matter. I know that I am not unique among colleagues in waiting months and months for replies.

I raised this issue with the previous Government and tried to improve matters for all colleagues. Is there anything that we can do as Back Benchers to give you, Madam Speaker, the power to require Ministers to answer letters? In extremis, perhaps you would like to invite the Prime Minister to afternoon tea where you could quietly have a word for him about what has happened.

Madam Speaker: I am not certain what I can do. I am terribly sympathetic to Members who are waiting for replies. I have been a Member of the House for more than a quarter of a century, so I know how important it is—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have not finished yet. The hon. Gentleman has been a Member for only a few years.

[Madam Speaker]

I understand how important it is to receive punctual replies. I do not know what I can do and I understand the situation only too well. I shall do my utmost to be helpful. Now—Mr. Bercow.

Mr. Bercow: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I readily acknowledge that it probably seems that I have been here for a lot longer than three years.

Further to the point of order of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), may I seek your guidance specifically about correspondence with, and replies from, the Prime Minister? In January, I had a brief correspondence with him and, four weeks ago, I wrote him a four-line letter requiring a yes or no reply. To that letter, I have received a holding reply saying that the Prime Minister will endeavour to furnish me with an answer as soon as he reasonably can, but such an answer has not yet been forthcoming. Can you, Madam Speaker, offer any guidance about the inner recesses of the Prime Minister's mind?

Madam Speaker: I cannot help the hon. Gentleman on that one.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. We understand that, despite your great influence, the problem of correspondence with Departments may be outside your direct powers. However, will you consider the related problem of the long delays in the answers to some written questions? The number of written questions that are not answered on the named day is increasing in a number of Departments. That is a matter of great concern to all Members and directly relates to the business of the House. Could you consider that problem at the same time?

Madam Speaker: Yes, I am happy to take on that additional burden. I shall do what I can to be helpful in all those matters. It is important for the functioning of the House that we get our business done speedily and efficiently.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Do you share my concern that the more dilatory Ministers are in replying to questions, the more there will be a temptation for Members to table further questions to pursue the original one? The danger is that if we are not careful the whole system will get completely clogged because of ministerial arrogance and indifference to the parliamentary process.

I know that that will concern you on a number of levels, Madam Speaker, such as the relationship between the Government and the House, over which you preside, and the administration of the House through the Table Office, over which you also happily preside, along with the Clerks. Surely there is a danger that owing to the Government's dilatoriness and arrogance, we will become mired in the parliamentary questions process, and that will adversely affect the effectiveness of the House.

Madam Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is expressing his opinion, which he has every right to do in the House, and I am prepared to listen and to understand. A few moments ago, I gave a sincere undertaking that I would do my best to help the House.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. As you know, I seldom raise points of order, but I think that this one is appropriate. Did you notice that the Prime Minister, in a reply yesterday, and the Leader of the House, in a reply today, did not deny the substance of the remarks of the Liberal Democrat leader in the other place, Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank, when he said that the Prime Minister had offered to create more Liberal Democrat peers in return for favourable voting? Is not that an abuse of the procedures of Parliament?

Madam Speaker: Points of order should relate to something on which I can undertake to try to help the House, in terms of our proceedings. I am not responsible for the comments made by Back Benchers or Ministers.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Further to the point of order made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), Madam Speaker. Will you advise me on written answers in which the Minister, in this case, the Home Secretary, hides behind national security? I asked a simple question last week about

how much has been spent from public funds on protecting Senator Pinochet since October 1998.

I was told:

The information requested cannot be provided for security reasons.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 568W.]

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order for me. The hon. Gentleman must use the Order Paper and opportunities in the House. The cost of keeping Senator Pinochet here is not a matter for me.

BILL PRESENTED

Misuse of Drugs (Amendment)

Mr. Paul Flynn, supported by Mr. Gordon Prentice and Mr. Austin Mitchell, presented a Bill to allow the production, supply, possession and use of cannabis and cannabis resin for medicinal purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 9 June, and to be printed [Bill 85].

Orders of the Day

ROYAL PARKS (TRADING) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 90(6) (Second Reading Committees), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Race Relations (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

1.13 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is a fundamental part of our programme to achieve racial equality in this country. One of the Government's central aims is to achieve a society where there is respect for all, regardless of their race, colour or creed, and a society that celebrates its cultural richness and ethnic diversity. That is not only inherently right but essential for Britain's economic and social success.

In the world of business, it is increasingly clear that the world-class organisations capable of surviving and adapting in a global marketplace are those that value and embrace diversity. A successful multicultural society is not simply a question of equality for a minority; it is an essential competitive strategy for the UK, benefiting each and every one of us regardless of our religion or the colour of our skin.

All countries have to have an effective system of immigration control. The UK is no exception, but it is worth remembering that in many ways we are a nation of migrants: ours is a history of successive waves of migration, both in and out of this country. Many of the newcomers who have arrived on our shores lawfully have had a very great deal to give. It is on these successive waves of migration that much of our society has been built. For example, Caribbean nurses came in the 1960s, in response to calls made by the then Minister of Health, Enoch Powell, to meet labour shortages in the United Kingdom. Gujeratis came to Lancashire to work in the textile mills, following advertisements placed in India and Pakistan by Lancashire mill owners.

Everyone understands the concern that exists about those who arrive in this country in abuse of our system of control. None the less, there have been moments in our history when anxieties about those who are lawfully present in the United Kingdom have threatened to spill over into divisions that could permanently have scarred us all. In the 1930s, our democracy was threatened by the rise of fascists in this country and their attacks on many groups, but especially the Jewish community.

Race relations reached another low ebb in the late-1950s and early-1960s. Signs outside lodgings reading "No dogs, no Irish, no blacks" were not uncommon. People were refused service in shops and cafes solely on the grounds of their race. It was lawful to be openly racist in electoral campaigns.

Things have changed significantly since then, and we ought to be proud of that, but the sea change in attitudes is no accident. It is in large part due to the three race relations Bills of the past 35 years. Each, I am proud to say, was brought before the House by a Labour Government.

However, there are no grounds for complacency. We know very well that real race equality has not yet been achieved. We know that many people—often the children and grandchildren of immigrants, born and bred in this country, but with a different coloured skin or a different sounding name from the majority—still suffer from discrimination and prejudice for that reason and no other.

The Bill will ensure equality for everyone, regardless of skin colour, surname, or other irrelevant factors. It significantly updates the Race Relations Act 1976, and it is the first piece of legislation to do so for almost 25 years.

The Bill has three main purposes: to extend the Race Relations Act in relation to discrimination and victimisation by public authorities; to make chief officers of police vicariously liable for acts of racial discrimination by police officers; and to amend an exemption under the 1976 Act for acts done for the purpose of safeguarding national security, thus remedying a provision that we believe is incompatible with the European convention on human rights.

Hon. Members are aware that on 27 January I announced to the House that the Government would table amendments in Committee to amend the Bill in relation to indirect discrimination, and to place a positive duty on public authorities to promote race equality.

Today, I shall describe what the Bill does, and explain the effect of the amendments that the Government will seek to make in those important areas.

Let me explain briefly what the 1976 Act does, as the Bill amends that principal Act. The 1976 Act makes it unlawful for anybody to discriminate on racial grounds in relation to employment, training and education, the provision of goods, facilities and services, and in respect of certain other specified activities. It provides for individuals who have been discriminated against to bring proceedings and to claim damages in employment tribunals or designated county courts. The 1976 Act established the Commission for Racial Equality, and gave it independent strategic investigative and enforcement powers.

The 1976 Act applies to discrimination by public authorities in employment, training and education, and the provision of goods, facilities and services. However, it has been found by the courts to apply only when the act in question is at least similar to an act that could be committed by a private person. The legislation does not generally apply to functions that fall outside the specified matters. The precise distinction between functions that are covered and those that are not is unclear, and is clarified in only piecemeal fashion by decisions of the courts.

One of the paradoxes of the legislation is that, in practice, it has had a greater impact on the private sector than on the public sector. There is no extensive regulatory impact assessment for the Bill because the private sector has undertaken to fulfil its responsibilities under the Bill, as it has fulfilled them under the 1976 Act.

[Mr. Jack Straw]

The Bill will ensure that legislation properly and comprehensively covers similar functions that can only be carried out by a public authority.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Home Secretary tell the House now, or inform me subsequently in writing, how many prosecutions have been made under the Race Relations Act 1976 and how that figure compares with the number of prosecutions under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975?

Mr. Straw: I regret that I cannot give that figure immediately. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary can provide it when he winds up, or a magical piece of paper will appear from those people who have to remain nameless and sit in the box alongside. If that happens, I shall try to provide the answer while I am speaking.

I can tell the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), because I happen to have the figures in my head, that under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 for new offences of racially aggravated harassment, violence and criminal damage, there have been more than 100 prosecutions, according to the latest figures that I have seen. I appreciate that that is not the answer that the hon. Gentleman seeks, but it provides an illustration.

The Bill will implement Government commitments that were made in response to one of the key recommendations of the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. The report recommended that the 1976 Act should be extended to cover the police and that chief officers of police should be made vicariously liable for acts of racial discrimination by police officers.

The Government said when the report was published that we would go further. We are doing that now. We are extending the 1976 Act not only to cover the police, but functions of other public authorities, listed in schedule 1, which are not currently covered. The Bill tackles gaps in coverage of the public sector which were left when the 1976 Act was introduced, or which have subsequently been found through the development of case law.

Clause 1 will extend the 1976 Act with regard to public authorities.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I want to make a point about the definition of public authorities. Schedule 1 lists many public authorities. However, a lot of other legislation, including the Human Rights Act 1998, also lists them. Will the Home Secretary consider whether it would be helpful to consolidate the definitions of public authority? I have examined every dot and comma, and the Bill presents an opportunity for achieving a common definition that would serve for much legislation.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I shall develop the point. It is fair for hon. Members to point out that the Human Rights Act, which does not schedule public authorities, refers to bodies that exercise a public function. They could be private sector bodies. For example, the provisions could apply to Railtrack's safety functions, but not its private functions as a property developer. They could also apply to water authorities. We believed that it was essential to schedule the public authorities to which the Freedom of Information Bill applies because they have a duty and they must know whether they are public authorities so that they can produce the necessary codes.

I can tell the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and other hon. Members who have raised the matter outside as well as inside the House, that deciding whether our attempts to define public authorities in the Bill are correct has been a matter of fine debate in government—I hope that it can also be a matter of debate in the House.

Some duties in the Bill are prospective; the Human Rights Act is slightly different. I would be interested to hear whether the House believes that it would be sensible to include a schedule that made public authorities aware that they are public authorities. We could also consider whether there should not be a definition equivalent to that in the Human Rights Act, which could take account of private sector bodies that exercise public sector functions. I am happy for that to be considered.

Mr. Hughes: I understand exactly the point that we need certainty so that people understand that they might have a duty or an obligation. Therefore we probably need a schedule containing a list that could be updated by secondary legislation or in other ways. As the Freedom of Information Bill is going through Parliament, is the Home Secretary willing to consider whether, after discussions, we could decide on a common formula that would allow a definition that gave best advice where possible and could be updated annually?

Mr. Straw: Of course. This is a matter of how we achieve a commonly agreed aim.

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): Is the Home Secretary saying that there is uncertainty in the very general definition in the Human Rights Act and that groups may not know that it applies to them? If that is not so, why can that definition not be used in this Bill?

Mr. Straw: There is uncertainty because whether the human rights convention applies to a body that exercises public functions has to be a matter for the courts to determine in the jurisprudence of the convention, which we are about to incorporate in United Kingdom law. There is obviously no argument about all the public bodies that exercise public functions, but because the boundary between a public body and a body exercising a public function has shifted markedly over the past 25 years, not least because of privatisation and outsourcing, some bodies and some individuals in the private sector who would be regarded as private in other circumstances—public limited companies, for example—none the less exercise public functions in respect of some of their duties.

I have given Railtrack and the water authorities as examples and one could think of many others. These days, private plcs exercise certain public functions in respect of the custody of prisoners—we had a great and perfectly open debate about that when we considered the Human Rights Act—but the question whether a person or body exercises a public function for the purposes of the convention has to be a matter for the courts.

On those matters and freedom of information, I say to the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) that there is a need for certainty in any event because, in respect of freedom of information in particular, the public bodies have to produce codes. I am working my way through whether, at the same time as providing the maximum degree of certainty in a schedule, we should not also not exclude bodies which, down the track, might be said to exercise a public function after all and therefore should have been encompassed by the Bill. I want to share my consideration with the House, but retrospectively inserting such a provision in a schedule may not be the appropriate way to achieve that.

Sir Peter Lloyd: I am trying to follow the Home Secretary's argument. Is he saying that the 1976 Act, which applies to the private sector, leaves a gap between the public and private sectors that needs to be filled by a list? I thought that he was extending that Act to the public sector so there ought not to be a gap, except where the Bill excludes a particular organisation.

Mr. Straw: I accept the logical neatness of what the right hon. Gentleman says, but that neatness does not apply completely, perhaps because we are discussing this issue before considering the contents of the Bill.

The Bill also introduces a positive duty to promote racial equality, which applies to public bodies but not to the private sector. A different responsibility is placed on the private sector, and in that respect I think the right hon. Gentleman may have a case. I am trying to be helpful to him, not least because of representations that he has made to me. In that respect, we may have to change the precise wording of the Bill, because I want this to be a matter for open discussion.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to make some progress I will happily give way to him later, as I always do.

As I was saying, clause 1 will extend the Race Relations Act 1976 in respect of public authorities by inserting new sections 19B, 19C and 19D in part III. Amendments tabled in Committee will also include section 1(1)(b) of the Act, which deals with indirect discrimination. New section 19B will make it unlawful for a public authority to discriminate directly against a person, or to victimise a person, on racial grounds in carrying out any of its functions. The provision applies to all functions that are not already covered by the existing provisions of the Act.

The provision will have a wide application. For the purposes of the new section, "public authorities" will include bodies, or classes of body, listed in a new schedule. The schedule lists the main central Government and local government bodies, including the police, Ministers of the Crown, Government officials and law enforcers. It includes Scottish public bodies and authorities, as equal opportunities are a matter reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament. Although the Scottish Parliament's consent to the Bill is therefore not required, under the arrangements set out by Lord Sewel in another place on 21 July 1998 there has been contact at both official and ministerial level on the Bill's application to devolved Scottish public bodies.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I will give way to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) first, because I said that I would.

Mr. Howarth: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way. He is always courteous in this regard.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the authorities mentioned in schedule 1 to which the Bill will extend coverage. There is a specific exclusion in respect of security, and GCHQ is specifically mentioned. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that is the case, and explain why GCHQ has been excluded?

Mr. Straw: National security is not entirely excluded, and the agencies referred to are not excluded in terms of employment practice. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will deal with that part of the Bill when I reach it in my speech.

Dr. Lewis: Would it be regarded as de facto evidence of discrimination if members of one ethnic or religious group were over-represented in prison in proportion to their strength in the population, or would each case of discrimination be viewed on an individual basis? It might be argued that some groups are over-represented at Oxford and Cambridge because a disproportionate number of their members pass the entrance examinations.

Mr. Straw: That arises acutely in the context of indirect discrimination. I shall return to that when I reach the appropriate point in my speech; if I have not answered the hon. Gentleman's point, I shall happily give way to him again.

There are some exceptions and omissions from the list of public authorities in the schedule, and I want to reassure the House about them. In most instances, omissions have been made for one of three reasons. First, the functions of some bodies are already clearly covered in the existing Race Relations Act: education bodies are an obvious example. Secondly, the schedule does not currently include non-departmental public bodies—quangos. We intend, where it is established in consultation with such bodies that they have functions not already covered by the Act, to add them to the list of public authorities by order. Thirdly, as I have explained, the schedule does not include private bodies carrying out public functions. One way or another, we intend such bodies to be covered by the Act in respect of their public functions.

That provision represents an important extension of the existing legal protection against racial discrimination. The Government will seek to strengthen the provision further in Committee by making it unlawful for a public authority to discriminate indirectly as well as directly, in line with my announcement to the House on 27 January.

The distinction between those two types of discrimination is this. Direct discrimination is where one person treats another less favourably than he treats, or would treat, other people. Indirect discrimination occurs

[Mr. Straw]

when a requirement or condition which, though applied equally to people of different racial groups, has the effect that the proportion of one racial group that can comply is considerably smaller than the proportion of another racial group, but—to respond to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis)—such a requirement or condition is unlawful only if it cannot be justified irrespective of racial group and if it is detrimental to the claimant who cannot comply.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's point directly, if it turned out that one racial group were markedly over-represented in the prison population, inquiries could be made about why that was. If it turned out that the reason was that courts, magistrates, juries, sentencers all had a down on that particular racial group, it would be very difficult to justify that proportion of people being in the prison population. On the other hand, if it turned out that the reason why they were over-represented was that they were committing more crimes, it would be entirely justified.

There is considerable case law on the subject, not in respect of that particular area, because it has not been the subject of the law, but in respect, for example, of employment practices—people from one racial group have complained about employment practices—and other areas. In one quite well-known case, someone from abroad complained that he was being indirectly discriminated against because one of the conditions for going on a Manpower Services Commission course was that he should have had work experience in this country. He said that he could not have had such experience because he had not been here.

The courts held that the commission was justified in its approach because it had nothing to do with people's racial origin: it was essential for the course that people had such experience. It might be said parenthetically that there would come a moment when that person could have had that experience. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: May I make some more progress? Then of course I will give way.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Government have given very careful thought to the decision to extend indirect discrimination provisions to the Bill. I say openly that there was anxiety across government about how exactly that would fall. There was concern to ensure that such a provision would be effective without leaving public bodies open to routine and unnecessary legal challenge in circumstances where their policies were entirely proper and justified.

Since the Bill's publication last December, I have listened carefully to the arguments about the issue, as did my colleagues in government. We concluded that, on balance, the risk of spurious challenge was outweighed by the principle of including indirect discrimination in respect of public sector functions in the Bill.

I put it on record that I am grateful to the many right hon. and hon. Members who made representations to me about the measure. I am also grateful to their lordships for their contribution.

Mr. Simon Hughes: All of us, I think, are grateful to the Government for having recognised the strength of the case and reasonably said that they would table amendments to deal with the indirect discrimination point. I wonder whether the Home Secretary can tell us at this stage whether he has reached a conclusion about whether to take the proposed easy route, which is simply to take two lines out of the Bill—which was put to him by the outgoing chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality and others, including some in the other place—or whether that is still up for debate. If the right hon. Gentleman were able to give a simple answer and support the simple proposition, it might get simple reward from hon. Members on both sides of the House this afternoon.

Mr. Straw: My intention was to take the simple route. Some people sometimes think that I take the complicated route, but I am not up for that. If my memory is failing me, I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman.

It would be appropriate to place on record not only my thanks, but the thanks of a huge number of people, for the work of Lord Lester of Herne Hill, who over the years has made probably a greater, more singular, contribution to the development of race relations legislation than anyone else in this country. It was he who—behind Roy Jenkins—was the architect of the Race Relations Act 1965, the Race Relations Act 1968 and the Race Relations Act 1976. I have no hesitation in saying that I have listened very carefully to the advice that he has offered.

The Government also intend—I have made it clear—to table in Committee an amendment to place a statutory duty on public authorities to promote race equality. The Government regard the promotion of equality as a positive way of eliminating unjustifiable indirect discrimination and, distinct from that, what the Stephen Lawrence inquiry called "institutional racism". Our setting of targets for ethnic minority recruitment, retention and promotion and our guidelines for mainstreaming race equality into policy development and implementation offer concrete examples of how race equality can be promoted.

The Government's commitment to placing the promotion of equality by public bodies generally on a statutory footing was announced in our equality statement, on 30 November 1999. We have since said that we shall reinforce that commitment by tabling a Government amendment to enshrine the principle in the Bill, leaving room for consultation on how the duty will operate in practice.

Both those amendments will considerably strengthen the Bill and help to create the right legislative framework to bring about the step change in race equality that the Government are seeking to achieve.

I should like now to describe the special provisions relating to immigration, asylum and nationality, in new section 19C.

The extension in the Bill of the Race Relations Act 1976 will cover the work of immigration staff. That includes all staff working in the Home Office immigration and nationality directorate and the immigration service in the United Kingdom, and—I make this clear—entry clearance officers based overseas.

The Bill provides various consequential measures to secure a proper alignment between the various statutory provisions covering race relations and those governing immigration, asylum and nationality. Those are necessary to allow our immigration laws to continue to be administered as Parliament intended, and to support the Government's policy of reforming and accelerating the immigration and asylum appeals system.

The House will be familiar with the measures in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to produce a new one-stop procedure for appeals. Those measures, once implemented, are aimed to support the achievement of our target that, by April 2001, the majority of asylum applications will be resolved within an average of two months, and appeals against a refusal within a further four months.

The operation of an effective and rational immigration system, however, necessarily and legitimately requires a distinction to be made between individuals on the basis of their nationality and, occasionally, their ethnic or national origin. For example—this may be stating the obvious, but it is quite important that it should be stated—the operation of our immigration control at ports must distinguish between our own citizens, who are free from immigration control, and other nationalities, who are not. There are different rules for those who enjoy free movement rights under European law and those who do not. The immigration rules therefore make distinct provisions for nationals who require a visa to travel to the United Kingdom and for those who do not. Some rules and policies apply only to Commonwealth countries or to specified nationalities.

The safeguards in the Race Relations Act 1976 covering acts of discrimination done in pursuance of other statutory provisions, as interpreted by case law, are—within the context of the Bill—insufficient to allow the immigration system to operate as it should. If consequential provisions were not made, Ministers would, for example, be unable to authorise special compassionate exercises when necessary for particular ethnic or national groups—as we did last year, when we had the special exercise to evacuate and provide protection to Kosovan Albanians—and immigration staff would be unable to perform their duties in accordance with ministerial instructions.

The powers in the Bill will be subject to very close safeguards. It will be unlawful for immigration staff to discriminate on grounds of race or colour or, in the case of nationality and ethnic and national origins, go beyond what is specified in immigration and nationality law or expressly authorised by Ministers. We are also considering making further changes to the Bill to provide independent oversight of the operation of those provisions. I hope to make further proposals on those changes in Committee.

New section 19D seeks to preserve the role of the criminal courts as the sole forum for determining guilt by exempting from the Bill's provisions decisions not to prosecute. The importance of that principle was recognised both by the White Paper on freedom of information and also by the Phillips royal commission, in 1981, which said:

> publicly calling into question a decision not to prosecute could amount to a trial of the suspect without the safeguards which criminal proceedings are designed to provide.

Clause 2 relates to appointments made on the recommendation or approval of Ministers and Departments, but not by them. It brings such appointments more in line with existing arrangements for other public appointments.

Clause 4 makes further provision on the public prosecution function to ensure balance between the rights of individuals who have been discriminated against and the Government's commitments on the criminal justice system as a whole. Striking that balance means that civil proceedings for discrimination may have to wait until related criminal proceedings have been finalised. Stays to civil proceedings will defer, but not prevent, the resolution of a claim for discrimination.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Has the Home Secretary made any calculation of the number of cases likely to be brought? As he said, the Bill will clog up the legal system, even if the charge against someone who complains of discrimination is heard before the complaint.

Mr. Straw: Unusually, the hon. Gentleman misheard me. I did not say that the system would be clogged up. I said that it could get clogged up if we did not take action in the Bill, but we are taking that action, with the approval of the House, so the legal system will not be any more clogged up than it is with the delays about which we heard on Tuesday. If I may make a partisan point in an otherwise non-partisan debate, on Tuesday the hon. Gentleman voted against a measure that will ease pressures on the courts.

There are some details about the costs towards the end of the explanatory notes to the Bill, on page 13. We do not anticipate significant costs arising. We have given our best estimates. However, a very large cost will hit public authorities and society as a whole if we do not legislate. The first cost that we should be concerned about is the moral cost, but there would also be a financial cost. If people feel resentful that they have been treated unfairly and unequally, they will not give of their best. Happily, the incorporation of the European convention on human rights is not a matter of dissension between the parties, but people would seek other, less effective routes round the race relations legislation to get their rights.

Clause 5 contains a further consequential measure, providing that claims of unlawful racial discrimination from individuals subject to immigration control that relate specifically to a decision in an individual immigration or asylum case will be heard by the independent appellate authority as part of the one-stop procedure on appeals. That is consistent with our policy that all outstanding matters in immigration and asylum appeals should be considered by the appellate authority at one time. We have sought to ensure that there is one appeal for anything related to immigration and asylum. As well as immigration claims, that covers those who decide to develop a subsequent asylum application and appeal and then to put in an appeal against deportation. That is what happens now.

We want all three appeals to be heard in one go. In addition, we have arranged that if people suddenly have a genuine—or perhaps more often not so genuine—case under the European convention on human rights, they must bring that forward at the time. Once someone has been through that process and made all their claims in

[Mr. Straw]

one go, they cannot then make a previously forgotten claim for racial discrimination as a result of the decision, which would then have to go before a separate tribunal, which could take months or years, suspending their removal. A claimant who substantiates their claim of discrimination within the immigration appellate system will then be able to apply to a county court, or to a sheriff court in Scotland, for damages. Those claimants not subject to immigration control who allege discrimination in other respects and have no direct recourse to the immigration appeal system—such as British citizens who feel that they have been the subject of discrimination by our immigration and nationality directorate—will be able to take their case direct to the county or sheriff court.

The second main purpose of the Bill is to increase the accountability of chief officers of police in race discrimination cases by making them vicariously liable for the racially discriminatory acts of individual police officers. This is achieved by clause 3.

In the existing Act, employers are held vicariously liable for the discriminatory acts of their employees, but police officers are office holders, not employees. Although the Police Act 1996 and the equivalent Act in Scotland make general provision for the vicarious liability of a chief officer of police, the courts' construction of the Race Relations Act has meant that that general provision does not apply to the Act.

That anomaly needs to be addressed, to bring the police into line both with other organisations and with its own general practice.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): When chief constables appeared before the Home Affairs Committee regarding race relations legislation—arising of course from the terrible murder of Stephen Lawrence—I asked them the following question: when police officers made racist remarks, was disciplinary action taken? I do not have real confidence that effective disciplinary action was taken when such remarks were made. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we really should say that there is no room for racists anywhere in the police force and that if people have racist views they should leave the police force—and the sooner the better.

Mr. Straw: Of course I accept my hon. Friend's comment at the end of his intervention. That view is shared by all chief police officers and the overwhelming majority in the police service. Let me place on record my thanks to the police associations for what they have done in respect of the Lawrence inquiry report. I single out in particular Mr. Fred Broughton for his considerable leadership of the police service and his support for the Macpherson recommendations. It is now a disciplinary offence to be racially discriminatory within the police service.

As my hon. Friend will know as a longstanding member of the Select Committee, we have changed the arrangements for police discipline to include a civil standard of proof and a criminal standard of proof. No one can ever be sure that what happened in the terrible Lawrence case could not happen again, but I am certain that the risk has been greatly reduced.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Yet again I thank the Home Secretary for his courtesy. Does he agree that there is a severe downside to branding the police as a racist institution? That was brought home to me when one of our own police constables in the Palace of Westminster said that one of the reasons why he had finally decided to retire was that he considered that he had been smeared as a racist by the report.

Mr. Straw: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but I do not agree. The Macpherson report made it clear that there is institutional racism not only in the police service but in a large number of other public authorities and some private bodies. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I was about to conclude, but I shall detain the House for a moment while I deal with it.

The Bill would not be necessary if there were not institutional racism in a wide variety of public bodies. Let me say to the House what I have said outside on a number of occasions. There has been institutional racism in the Home Office—and that is not to say that I have ever met a senior manager or a Minister in this Government or the previous Government who could be described as openly racist or harbouring racist beliefs. Everybody in the Home Office and in the police was perfectly well-meaning towards black and Asian staff: they looked at the promotion arrangements and, on the odd occasion when black and Asian staff complained that they seemed to be less well-represented higher up, they were patted on the head and told that the arrangements were perfectly straightforward and open and that anyone could apply for promotion. The implication was that the fact that black and Asian applicants were not getting through must be something to do with the quality of those applicants, rather than any fault of the system.

Shortly after we took office and I became Home Secretary, we started work in the Home Office looking at the attitudes of black and Asian staff. We tried to find out what they really felt and what problems lay behind their gross under-representation at any level above administrative assistant, which is the bottom administrative grade. The work was done by external consultants, so staff did not have to own up to their managers, and we did a similar exercise in the Prison Service.

What emerged was, first, that black and Asian staff were cross that they were not getting a fair crack of the whip. Secondly, they could point to many aspects of the promotion system that were benign in intent, but discriminatory in effect. For example, people had to fill in a form to apply for promotion, and it was usual for them to receive some encouragement to do so. That encouragement was, on the whole, dished out in the pub after work. Fewer women than men go to the pub after work, but no Asian women go to the pub at all. So Asian women were outside the net and were not coming forward for promotion.

We followed up the conclusions and we have changed the system. The hon. Gentleman surely knows of some classic research in which job applications were submitted containing exactly the same qualifications and background, but with one difference—one was in the name of Mr. or Mrs. Smith and the other bore a long, foreign-sounding name. The latter was always the subject of discrimination. We have tried to make changes in the Home Office to combat that. If people apply for a job, they will get an interview. There will be no shortlisting, so it does not matter what their name is. We have also increased mentoring.

Our efforts are now working and securing changes. The situation is by no means perfect, but staff in the Home Office have set up a network of black and Asian staff. In fact, I attended one of the most uplifting meetings that I have been to in the past three years, which saw 800 of our staff coming together voluntarily to work better with us to improve employment opportunities. We are seeing dramatic changes.

On the subject of the police, which the hon. Gentleman raised, the vast majority of the police—as Macpherson said—do not have a racist thought in their heads. Some have, and they should be drummed out of the police service—and the sooner the better. Like the police, the overwhelming majority of staff at every level in the Home Office do not have a racist intention in their bones. However, an institution can, because of its practices, work in a discriminatory way. That was what Macpherson said, and that is why he was right to say of the police, and all those other public authorities, that they were institutionally racist and that we needed to take action to deal with that. That is one of the reasons why I am so delighted that we are including indirect discrimination provisions in the Bill.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I confirm that what the Home Secretary has discovered in the Home Office was known in the Department of Employment in 1986, when the race relations employment advisory service produced a report. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the encouragement that he is giving to the Association of Black Police Officers to remove what some have seen as a concrete ceiling. Others have also been encouraged to do what they know is right. I suggest that those who doubt these things read an article in the *British Medical Journal* last week in which an Asian consultant wrote about having been told inadvertently that some jobs were for Indians and others were for whites.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman, who brings great commitment and experience to the subject, is right: it is still going on, and it will go on for as long as we are blind to the fact that it is going on or take the view of the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis)—I say this with respect to him—that there is an exact similarity between the way institutions behave and the way in which individuals in that institution think they behave. We ought to know enough about institutional culture to know that that is not the case.

I shall deal briefly with national security. The Bill amends the national security provisions in the Race Relations Act, and that is achieved by clauses 6 and 7. For anyone who is worried about that, it is to bring the provisions into line with the European convention on human rights—not to detach it. The intelligence and security agencies are covered in terms of employment, and we thought that those agencies were quite keen on the provision. We considered whether they could be included in the Bill as a whole, but we did not find a way in which it would be possible for people to put in section 65 requests for information and to have those compatible with the basic purposes of the intelligence and security agencies and their need for secrecy.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: No, I have answered the hon. Gentleman.

In conclusion, the House will be aware that, as Home Secretary, I am responsible for a significant number of the Bills that are being considered during this parliamentary Session. None, however, gives me more personal satisfaction than this one. The Bill comes out of a personal tragedy—the tragic murder of Stephen Lawrence, which brought to the attention of the white majority what it is like to be a member of a black or Asian community in Britain today.

The report into the death of Stephen Lawrence led the Opposition to welcome my announcement on 24 February 1999 of the Government's intention to carry out the first major update of the Race Relations Act since 1976.

The Bill is a very important one, and I am very proud to be responsible for it. It meets the commitments that the Government made in response to the Lawrence inquiry. It is an important part of this Government's wider agenda for achieving race equality and promoting the potential of a modern, multicultural society.

The Bill has already benefited from the scrutiny that it received during its passage in another place. I look forward to that scrutiny continuing in this House. I very much hope, given the nature and importance of the Bill, that it will be received warmly on all sides of the House as a major contribution to eliminating racial discrimination, and to achieving race equality.

2.2 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): We on this side of the House remain unreservedly and absolutely opposed to racial discrimination. For that reason, we will support the Second Reading of the Bill today. However, we have some concerns about the implications of various aspects of the Bill, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to those aspects which I shall raise. I hope that there will be a proper opportunity to explore them in detail throughout the Bill's later stages, because we believe that some have serious implications. It is important that the effects should be those intended, rather than those not intended.

Everybody in our society has the right to expect equal treatment from every institution, and that includes the public services. I welcome any sensible and practical measures to assist in the fight to eradicate discrimination from our society. I say "sensible and practical" because while no one would dispute that the intentions behind the Bill are honourable, we are concerned that the practical implementation of certain of the measures contained within it—and, perhaps more importantly, some of the measures that we know will be contained within the Bill when it comes back to the Floor of the House—could serve as a hindrance, rather than a help in the elimination of racial discrimination.

I wish to refer to the police service, which has become subject to intense scrutiny since the publication of the Macpherson report into the aftermath of the tragic death of Stephen Lawrence. The police service is an effective force in the fight against crime in this country. I pay tribute, as would the Home Secretary, to the courage and dedication of the men and women of our police service. They, as individuals, feel that they have been subject to much unwarranted criticism in recent months. They feel that because the service has been branded "institutionally racist" that that rubs off on them. That is a serious consideration.

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

The Macpherson report says:

"We accept that there are dangers in allowing the phrase to be used in order to try to express some overall criticism of the police, or any other organisation, without addressing its meaning."

The report goes on to define institutional racism. It says that it is the collective failure

of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

Sir Paul Condon, the former Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, told the inquiry that labelling the police as "institutionally racist" would mean that the public

will assume a finding of conscious, wilful or deliberate action or inaction to the detriment of ethnic minority Londoners. They will assume the majority of good men and women who come into policing . . . go about their daily lives with racism in their minds and in their endeavour.

He said that the use of the term "institutional racism"

would undermine many of the endeavours to identify and respond to instances of racism which challenge all institutions and particularly the police.

No matter how it was conceived, I believe that the way in which the term "institutional racism" has been bandied about has done a great deal of unnecessary and unhelpful damage to the image of the police service in this country. However, I would go further. I ask the Home Secretary to consider whether the very use of that phrase—which effectively absolves individuals from responsibility for racist acts and lays the ultimate blame on the institution—can hamper the fight against racism at a personal level. Might it not also have an adverse effect on the morale and public image of the men and women in the police service, the vast majority of whom do not act with racism in their minds?

We have already witnessed a rise in London crime rates at a time when the number of stop and searches has fallen dramatically. I believe that there is a clear link between those two facts. The August 1999 summary to the interim Fitzgerald report into stop and search noted:

This fall in searches is also directly related to a rise in crime over the same period.

We have even heard the Prime Minister, in response to the first rise in crime since 1993, personally urge police to step up the use of stop-and-search powers. I am sure that the police would like to carry out as many stop and searches as they deem necessary, but they say that they are reluctant to do so because of the what they consider to be the climate of hostility directed at them. A recent survey found that 71 per cent. of Metropolitan police officers had become more reluctant to use stop-and-search powers since the publication of the Macpherson report.

There can be no dispute that it is right to act swiftly against any police officer intent on conducting his or her duty in a discriminatory manner. However, it is plainly wrong for members of our police service to feel that they cannot carry out their duty solely because their actions could be portrayed as discriminatory, even if that was not in their minds—or even if discrimination had never crossed their minds at all.

I hope that the Home Secretary will reassure the House that the operational effect of the police service, and of other public services, will not in any way be threatened by the interpretations that could be placed on the contents of the Bill.

Mr. Straw: I thank the right hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. I can give her the assurance that she seeks, but I should like to take this opportunity to make two points. First, the changes in the Bill to make chief officers vicariously liable for the actions of individual officers will greatly help those individual officers, who as a result will not feel isolated, as used to be possible. It was an eccentricity of the courts that treated police officers—for these purposes, if not for any others—as office holders rather than employees. The change proposed in the Bill will help that.

My second point goes wider. In my judgment, the Bill contains nothing that should lead to any diminution in the effectiveness of policing. However, it contains a huge amount that will make the police service more effective. As long as people feel that they are the subject of discrimination—I am not talking about the police service—and that we do not live in a properly equal society, there are problems of disaffection and, ultimately, criminal behaviour. The Bill means that there will be even less excuse for criminal behaviour than there has been in the past.

Miss Widdecombe: I am partly reassured by that, but only partly. I will give the Home Secretary some examples when we look at the way in which the indirect discrimination provisions, when they are included in the Bill, will work. If the operational effectiveness of the police service is to be threatened in any way, we must look minutely at these provisions and think about them carefully.

On investigations into the police by the Commission for Racial Equality, I am not convinced that the CRE is the right body to examine allegations of racism in the police service. Surely it would be more appropriate for a single body to look at all complaints against the police, such as a truly independent Police Complaints Authority. We would then avoid having the PCA look into the operational aspects of a complaint of racism while the CRE was looking at the racial aspects. I hope that the Secretary of State will look at that issue before the Bill is considered in Committee.

I now turn to the inclusion of the indirect discrimination provisions, which the Government intend to include by way of an amendment at a later stage, despite previously expressing their deep reservations about including provisions on such discrimination in the Bill. In another place, Lord Bassam commented that outlawing indirect discrimination would have uncertain and potentially far-reaching effects on the Government's ability to make policy. He went on to argue that there would be too many frequent and counter-productive court challenges, and that indirect discrimination did not fit well with law enforcement. Can the Minister who winds up the debate explain why the Government have made this U-turn in their attitude to indirect discrimination?

The Home Secretary said in a written answer, when he announced the new policy:

the risk of spurious challenge is outweighed by the principle of including indirect discrimination in respect of public sector functions in the Bill.—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 247W.]

Will he confirm that indirect discrimination will be included in the Bill to improve the practical effectiveness and fairness of our public services, and not simply as a rhetorical gesture to a perceived principle—a gesture that might do more harm than good and would not serve anybody's interests in the long term? I hope that the Home Secretary's change of mind on indirect discrimination will not be quite as disastrous as I believe his change of mind on abolishing the right to jury trial will probably be.

Can the Secretary of State tell us about the exact nature of the public services that might be affected by the inclusion of indirect discrimination provisions? For example, will police beat routes be open to challenge in the courts? The Home Secretary should think about it if he does not understand. How will the national health service be affected? What about the siting of fire stations, police stations and hospitals? Public bodies dealing with transport, including Transport for London, will presumably be covered. Will decisions on bus and rail routes and on timetables be open to challenge? Those are areas which were originally thought could be open to challenge. If we are being told that the Government have found some way of fining the measure so that such challenges will not be made, I would like to hear it. If not, and those things will be open to challenge, I would like to hear what practical effects that might have.

Mr. Straw: The detailed points that the right hon. Lady raises can be answered by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State and in Committee. However, the House may be a little confused: the right hon. Lady says that she supports the principle of the Bill, but it is unclear which part of its contents she supports. I hope that she will not get herself into the position, which I forbore from mentioning, that her predecessor got into in 1965 and 1968 on a similar tack.

As to the right hon. Lady's examples—and I am very happy to provide her with all the information that I considered—the way in which the courts have interpreted section 1(1)(b) of the Race Relations Act 1976, which outlaws racial discrimination that is indirect only if it is unjustified, show that the courts have been very accommodating to the public authorities. I gave the example of the Manpower Services Commission and there is a stream of others. In one of the examples that she gave, it would have to be palpable that a senior police officer was organising the beats in order to be racially discriminatory, which I doubt. If he was doing it to ensure that the area was properly policed and that he was covering the areas of highest crime and highest complaint, there would not be the least argument.

My final point—and I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene—is that I have been perfectly open about the Government's anxieties about whether it was safe to incorporate section 1(1)(b). As a result of continuing discussion inside and outside Government, my colleagues and I were persuaded that it was safe to do so.

Miss Widdecombe: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that response. He asked me about my support for the Bill. We have said that we support the principle, and that the provisions that currently govern the private sector should be extended to all parts of the public sector. There is no argument about our adherence to that principle.

Mr. Straw *rose—*

Miss Widdecombe: Let me finish, because the right hon. Gentleman asked me the question—which he should not have done in an intervention, anyway. We are concerned about the addition, at a late stage, of indirect discrimination provisions. The principle may be fine, but we know well that if we make bad law around noble principles, the consequences are nasty. We are trying to do our duty—to scrutinise the likely consequences and possible effects of this measure.

It is all very well for the right hon. Gentleman to brush aside what I have just said as if it were of no consequence. Why, then, did his Minister, in another place, make exactly these points and say that that was why the Government were not going to include indirect discrimination in the Bill?

Mr. Straw: I was not brushing aside the right hon. Lady's comments as if they were of no consequence—I was giving her an answer.

The right hon. Lady will come to regret her assertion that one is not allowed to ask questions in interventions. I will bear that in mind the next time I have the Floor. Indeed, I will never let her forget it.

The right hon. Lady talks about it being fine to apply to the public sector that which already applies to the private sector. That was the killer argument in respect of indirect discrimination. Section 1(1)(b) already applies to the private sector. Therefore, it becomes very difficult—not impossible, because I tried it—to argue that it should not apply to the public sector as well.

Miss Widdecombe: It is all right for the Opposition to ask questions of the Government in interventions. That is what we are supposed to do, because the Government have Executive responsibility. I again ask the Home Secretary the question that he has persistently refused to answer. I will even sit down and let him reply. Why, if this is so obvious and I am being so unreasonable, did his Government take exactly this line until very recently, with Lord Bassam enunciating the sort of arguments that I am making now?

Mr. Straw: I have not, on this occasion, accused the right hon. Lady of being wholly unreasonable. There is no great secret about this. There was a process of discussion and debate about this in Government. The right hon. Lady knows the processes of Government, to some extent better than I do. At least I did not have to argue with my ministerial colleagues in the Home Office.

An initial view was formed about where the balance of argument lay, and that is obvious from the record. I do not think that we should be criticised for having listened to the arguments, not least to the debate in the other place. People cannot have it both ways. It was always a relatively finely balanced argument. Lord Bassam spelt out our anxieties, but I am pleased to say that the more I went into it, the more I could assuage colleagues about

[Mr. Straw]

where the balance of the argument lay. The point about the provisions already applying to the private sector was very important when it came to weighing that balance.

Miss Widdecombe: I hope that we shall be able to test at length in Committee the concerns that the Government previously held but which they claim to have resolved in a very short time—indeed, a record time, even for a Government of many U-turns.

Mr. Simon Hughes: On the basis that I, too, may ask questions, will the right hon. Lady reflect that while it may have taken the Government a little time to be persuaded by arguments about indirect discrimination—she may not yet be quite persuaded—the time taken has been rather longer in the context of European Union law? EU courts and member states have accepted that a law that did not outlaw indirect discrimination in the customs union would have made that union impossible. The argument has been won in other areas of law, as her party accepted when in Government, even if it has not yet quite been won in this area.

Miss Widdecombe: It will be won only once we have given it thorough discussion and examination. The worries so recently entertained by the Government, which we still hold, must be resolved. A parliamentary process exists for doing so, and I hope that we shall not be as rushed as we were last night. The Home Secretary looks puzzled by that remark, but we were debating one of our own Bills—the Representation of the People Bill—and had 35 minutes in which to discuss 100 Lords amendments. I hope that this Bill will be given the most thorough scrutiny.

I have a question for the Home Secretary. He will say, "No, no, no", but I should like to hear why not. Why will not his plan to introduce a £10,000 bond for those who wish to enter the UK from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh—but nowhere else—be in breach of the Government's proposed indirect discrimination legislation? He appears to have no answer to that. Does he?

Mr. Straw: As I recall, the Opposition supported that proposal. It is a bit rich of the right hon. Lady to complain about it. She supported almost all our proposals, including abolition of the white list, opposing only the introduction of severe penalties for truck drivers who bring in clandestine immigrants.

Miss Widdecombe: Is it not discriminatory?

Mr. Straw: No, it will not be discriminatory. We are running a pilot scheme before final decisions come to be made about the bond scheme. Wherever we pilot it, it is not discriminatory because it is a pilot.

Miss Widdecombe: Ah. So if the pilot is successful, the £10,000 bond will become universal? Is that right? Is the Home Secretary saying yes to that?

Mr. Straw: I return to the explanation I offered the House on the amendments on immigration. Immigration and asylum law, by definition, distinguishes between people of different nationalities, and sometimes ethnic origins, so the Bill contains perfectly sensible savings. That is the answer to the right hon. Lady's question.

Miss Widdecombe: So indirect discrimination will apply to individual immigration officers, but not to Government policy. Okay.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: Is the hon. Gentleman speaking for the Government or the Opposition today?

Mr. Hughes: I wish I were in the Government and speaking for them, but that must wait another month or two.

In the interests of trying to resolve an important point, may I say that I have asked myself the question that the right hon. Lady is putting to the Home Secretary, and have concluded that the exemption that allows nationality to be a reason for exemption from indirect and direct discrimination law is the reason why that would be permitted? There may be another issue about whether applying the nationality test might have other indirect consequences, but the white Indian—the Anglo-Saxon Indian—will be discriminated against under the Government's proposals in the same way as an Indian of Asian origin.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman goes a long way to bail out the Home Secretary, and does so with rather greater clarity than the right hon. Gentleman. However, despite what he has said, I am worried. If the Bill will apply to the immigration and asylum system in general, might it not lead to many appeals on grounds of racial discrimination, causing yet more delays in the system and probably increasing even further the famous backlog of asylum cases? Given the enormous pressures that the immigration and nationality directorate is already under, will such a Bill simply make the system even more ineffective?

It is not impossible to imagine a scenario in which almost every legitimate, reasoned decision taken by the IND would be subjected to the appeals process to delay possible removal from the UK rather than because of rational claims of racial discrimination. If that happened, it would undermine legitimate claims of discrimination, and be grossly unfair to those whose claims for asylum are genuine or who have a valid reason for wanting to enter the UK.

Will the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department tell us the estimated increased cost to public authorities and the legal aid budget that will result from the Bill? If he cannot, will he write to me? The Government described the costs as "significant" in the explanatory notes to the Bill, yet they have described calculating any such costs as an "impossible" task. On what basis, therefore, did the Government decide that the costs would be significant, and if that is indeed the case, will departmental budgets be able to cover successfully the significantly increased burden placed on them? Has the Home Secretary undertaken a detailed study of the financial implications of the inclusion of indirect discrimination in the Bill? If he has, may we have the benefit of those calculations?

Working for better race relations does not have to be restricted to acting sternly against our organisations and institutions, and imposing sanctions and prohibitions. It must be a reasoned and responsible partnership that acts in everybody's interests to ensure that all members of society feel they are treated equally and fairly. We will, therefore, support the Bill at this stage, in the hope that it will improve race relations, but we have a responsibility to ensure that our public services remain effective and efficient, that they are not hampered by spurious legal challenges and that any legislation is implemented with those aims in mind.

I look forward—perhaps a trifle optimistically—to a sensible and careful consideration of all elements contained in the Bill, and I hope that effective and meaningful race relations will result.

2.27 pm

Mr. Piara S. Khabra (Ealing, Southall): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his comprehensive proposals to address racism. I should like to outline how bad race relations were during the 1960s and early 1970s before the passage of the Race Relations Act 1976. Racial discrimination was entrenched in the minds of people who never hesitated to show their feelings in public. In addition, racial violence against individuals was common. I shall give some examples of the sort of treatment that ethnic minorities received in public places at the hands of racists.

In my constituency, in the mid-1960s, public houses used to refuse drinks to non-white customers. That deliberate and naked racism confronted members of the non-white minority. I once went to a public house with a couple of friends, and I asked at the bar for drinks. We were refused by the management, and we faced a barrage of racist insults and physical threats. The same thing happened in other public houses.

I complained to the Race Relations Board, but it had no power to prosecute publicans. It could only investigate, which was not helpful in any way. I emphasise that I regularly receive racist hate mail, both from within this country and from abroad.

After campaigning and lobbying for a long time, I was happy when the Labour Government passed the Race Relations Act 1976; that was a step in the right direction, although it did not have the teeth to bite. The Commission for Racial Equality and local community relations councils were set up under it. However, despite that legislation and extensive campaigning by the CRE, race equality councils, community organisations, trade unions and the Labour party, the practice of racism by individuals, employers and public authorities never stopped. It is time to give further powers to public authorities under race relations legislation to deal with any form of racism.

I welcome the Bill. It is a considerable improvement on the 1976 Act in several respects. I speak as someone who, as a community leader in Southall, was calling for improved race relations in 1976. I gave evidence as to what was needed to the Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration in May 1973. Although we still need to improve outdated legislation, we live in a much more tolerant society than 25 years ago when the 1976 Act was introduced. It is important that new legislation reflect those changes.

The purpose of the Bill is to extend the 1976 Act to a wide range of the functions of public authorities that are not covered by it. I welcome the extension of the Act to all activities of the police and other bodies that involve direct discrimination or victimisation.

I was pleased that, while the Bill was in the House of Lords, the Government announced their decision

> to extend the indirect discrimination provisions to public service functions.

An individual will thus be able to mount a challenge in the courts on those grounds. Ministers, officials, law enforcers and other office holders in public authorities listed in the measure will be subject to that provision.

I welcome especially clauses 1 and 2. Clause 1 introduces new section 19B, which declares unlawful discrimination by public authorities. Subsection (1) makes it unlawful for any public body or office holder

> to discriminate, in carrying out any of its functions, against another person.

Clause 2 amends section 76 of the 1976 Act, which deals with public appointments. It will bring within the Act Crown appointments and those made by Departments and Ministers. At present, those posts are not protected under the employment provisions of the 1976 Act. Where Crown appointments are dependent on ministerial or departmental recommendations or approvals, the Bill provides that there must be no discrimination at any stage of the process.

In the wake of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, I am pleased that the Metropolitan police are showing a determined effort to cut out racism in their ranks. That will be greatly helped by the recruitment of ethnic minority policemen and women. I am keen to promote police work as a career for the ethnic minority in my constituency.

However, I am a realist. I know that attitudes do not change overnight and that legislative safeguards are necessary. In the long run, I hope that they will not have to be used in cases of racial discrimination—because there will be no such cases.

I welcome the Government's announcement that the Bill will also lay a positive duty on public authorities to promote racial equality. Its operation in practice and its enforcement will be decided after consultation. I am sure that, during the remaining stages of the Bill, the Government will listen carefully to the CRE's proposals for the operation, monitoring and enforcement of that duty, and that they will also take into account proposals made by other interest groups.

I agree with the view expressed by the CRE that the Bill could serve as a tool to expose how racial discrimination by one public authority could lead to discrimination by another. For example, the commission pointed out that, over several years, discriminatory allocation of council housing led to the concentration of ethnic minority tenants on certain sink estates. It would not be surprising to find that, as tenants on such estates, ethnic minority households were also discriminated against by public bodies providing other services, such as education, health or policing.

The Bill would enable such discrimination to be challenged, regardless of whether it occurs directly—on racial grounds—indirectly because of a bad address, or both.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the CRE several times. He obviously knows much about that organisation. Will he enlighten the House as to why it went through a stormy patch when the West Indians and Asians were at loggerheads? The matter was well reported by one of the commissioners, Mrs. Cluff. Does he think that that was a case of discrimination by one group against another, or not?

Mr. Khabra: The CRE was set up in 1976 to address the issue of racism in this country. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's party was not happy that an institution was established to fight racism.

It would not be surprising to find that public bodies providing services such as education, health or policing discriminated against ethnic minority tenants on estates such as I described. In my constituency, where the Tories were in control for 13 years, that happened on many council estates.

The Bill would enable such discrimination to be challenged. I agree with the CRE that

> a positive duty to promote racial equality would require all the relevant authorities to examine the outcome of their policies and practices and to identify and change those that are discriminatory.

Labour Governments have always been at the forefront in combating racial discrimination. The Labour party, the trade unions and many other groups campaigned in that fight for many years despite the fact that the Conservative Government had no intention of introducing legislation to root out racism in this country.

The Labour Government introduced the Race Relations Acts of 1968 and 1976. I am proud to be an ethnic minority Labour MP when a Labour Government are introducing another vital piece of race legislation that will benefit not only many of my constituents, but all ethnic minorities throughout the UK. That is in contrast to the Tories, who in their rule did nothing to ensure that public bodies were subject to the full force of the 1976 Act despite the fact that they were in power for 18 years. They allowed unemployment among the ethnic minorities to grow steadily, which in turn left them feeling totally disillusioned with politics.

I have campaigned for inclusive politics all my political life and from long before I became a Member of Parliament. I welcome the Bill as a step in the right direction towards that ultimate goal.

2.40 pm

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra). He has long personal experience of the issues covered by the Bill, and I am sorry that his involvement in them has led him to be in continuing receipt of hate mail. That is extraordinarily unpleasant.

I shall touch on some things that the hon. Gentleman said in his speech with rather less agreement, but I am glad that the Government have introduced the Bill. However, my welcome for it would have been much more muted, if the Home Secretary had not announced his intention to table amendments to extend it to cover indirect discrimination in the public sector, which is not covered by the Race Relations Act 1976. As the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the shadow Home Secretary, have said, it must be wrong that the state, which should protect all its citizens, may discriminate unfairly on the basis of race when private organisations cannot. It has become plain that that anomaly must be removed if ethnic minorities are to feel confident that public institutions give them equal respect and value. I am sorry that that was not done sooner, not least by the Government of whom I was a member.

I return to the points made by the hon. Member for Southall and to the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald asked of the Home Secretary. The anomaly was not removed earlier because it is assumed that Governments are always virtuous and look after everyone, so that the law is not needed. It is assumed that they have loftier purposes than private organisations and may sometimes need to discriminate to achieve these higher ends for everyone. It follows that Governments are such a complex mystery that disgruntled people may not discern their higher purpose or practical necessity and so bring a stream of vexatious actions that undermine or frustrate wise policy and good administration. There is something to be said for those views, and I shall return to the last point in due course. But they go a long way to explaining why the previous Government left matters as they were and why the present Government introduced the Bill in its present form and intended to extend the law to cover only direct discrimination in that part of the public sector not covered by the 1976 Act.

Despite the Macpherson recommendations, the Bill was initially prepared only to make direct discrimination by subordinates unlawful while it would have preserved the immunity of Ministers, senior decision makers and the policy-making process. I am glad that pressure from both sides in the other place caused the Government to think again, and I was happy to hear that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald is prepared to be convinced, too.

We all know that the genesis of the Bill was the Macpherson inquiry into the police handling of the appallingly unhappy case of the Stephen Lawrence murder. I declare my interest as parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation as recorded in the Register of Members' Interests. I emphasise that I seek to advise the federation; I do not speak for it and I am not doing so in this debate, except perhaps to say that it has long made genuine and consistent efforts to create an environment in which black and Asian officers feel valued and at home in the police service. I am sure that its chairman, Fred Broughton, will appreciate the Home Secretary's kind and well justified reference to him.

I am sure that it would harm the police's interests if they continued to be outside the full range of the 1976 Act, especially if the rest of the public sector were brought within its scope. Suspicion, from which they already suffer, would continue to multiply without any satisfactory opportunity to put it to the test. Reform would continue to be ignored by a large swathe of public opinion and its effectiveness would be discounted if there were no access to the courts. But it is understandable that the police, like the other parts of the public sector now to be brought under the 1976 Act, should be apprehensive about how the extended law will work and how it will impinge on their operational effectiveness.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): My right hon. Friend is on to an important point. For example,

the Kent police are involved in intelligence-led policing and one of the things that they do is keep a close record of the friends of villains. That is one way of extending their net of whom to finger. If institutional changes affect that form of policing, the police are in dire danger of being picked up on the day that they move against someone who happens to be innocent—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is too long.

Sir Peter Lloyd: I hope that my hon. Friend will have a chance to develop that point further. If he is suggesting that the extension of the provisions for indirect discrimination will make it harder for the police to gather and follow up evidence on the contacts of the individuals whom they know to be criminals, I do not think that it will have that effect.

Let us consider the example of stop and search, which has often been referred to, including by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald. The fear has been expressed that the possibility of challenges in court will further reduce the police's ability or their confidence to use that necessary power. However, the evidence is that the power has been undermined already by criticism and complaint, and the police are now reported to be reluctant to use it even when they should. I am sure that the only practical remedy is for stop and search procedures to be clearly on all fours with the law, so that their robust and necessary execution stands up in court. The natural response is that that is easily said, but hard to achieve without making stop and search ineffectual. I understand that argument, but the law gives the police the power to stop and search when that is operationally justified. That is a similar point to the one that I made earlier in response to my hon. Friend.

When the powers are challenged, sensible decisions by the courts will give the police more confidence to use them effectively than in the present twilight world of misused statistics, media criticism and their own disciplinary proceedings carried out with an eye on what the newspapers will say. The same is true to a greater or lesser extent of the immigration service, the Prison Service and those who work in health and safety and other parts of the public sector. It is right that people who have been treated unfairly by any part of the public sector because of their race or colour should have a means of remedy. It is socially corrosive when they do not.

Both the complainant and the individual or organisation that is complained about will have to be able to rely on the court's ability to get to the heart of the issue and apply the law with common sense and proportion. The Bill's success will depend on the wisdom and insight demonstrated by the court. By success, I mean creating among every ethnic group the conviction that they are being treated fairly, without creating among officials the belief that they can no longer do their job effectively.

That is made more difficult by the fact, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald also referred, that Macpherson lighted on the phrase "institutional racism" to describe the underlying problem. Unfortunately, it has journalistic panache, and I cannot see any alternative phrase displacing it. Not many people would seriously argue with the report's definition of the phrase, on which the Home Secretary accurately and eloquently expanded in response to an intervention. However, I am afraid that most people do not listen to these debates or read the small print in reports. They absorb headlines, and the phrase, unexplained, powerfully suggests a deliberate, officially sanctioned policy of treating unfairly people from racial minorities. That is not fair to any part of the public sector—not the police, the immigration service or the Prison Service.

If that impression is allowed to continue, other public sector groups, as well as the police, will feel resentment and a sense of injustice at what they presume the public thinks them guilty of. The same process will also lead ethnic minorities and others to believe that their worst suspicions have been justified. We are in danger of finding ourselves in a confrontational situation in which both sides feel unjustly treated and in which it will be harder to achieve the positive attitudes necessary for rooting out the unfair assumptions and practices that are wittingly, or more often unwittingly, manifested in parts of the public sector.

As I said, the Government and their senior advisers are bound to have the added worry that making indirect discrimination in the public sector unlawful will open up official policy and procedures to interminable challenge that they discriminate in their effect on different ethnic groups. That fear is not as real as is often made out. Only 3 per cent. of cases in which the law presently applies are concerned with indirect discrimination, although I can well believe that the proportion will rise among cases in which the public sector is concerned. However, that need not become a matter of acute concern. After all, the law does not ban policies that have a disproportionate effect on different social groups if the policies are justified in their own terms and are applied in a manner that produces the least disproportionate effect possible.

The fears of the immigration service, particularly concerning asylum, which are shared by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald, were spelled out by the Minister in another place and mentioned by the Home Secretary. Those fears do not take into account the way in which the law is supposed to work. I have no doubt that the Bill will lead to changes in the way in which the public sector manages itself, but there is no reason why it should put well-founded, justifiable policies at risk. It will make the implementation of some of those policies fairer than it is now.

That happy state of affairs will not necessarily be arrived at easily or quickly. Public sector policies and practices are complex and varied. It is easy to see discrimination where none exists, and where it does exist, it is easy to mistake the cause and the remedy, particularly where indirect discrimination is alleged. The wisdom of the courts would be tested if, unaided, they had to resolve every such complaint. We badly need an expert body to investigate complaints of indirect discrimination that has the confidence of the complainants and the respect of the public sector organisations being complained about.

The Commission for Racial Equality was set up to fulfil that role, and it has performed a number of constructive investigations, including in the Ministry of Defence and the NHS. I know better its campaign to get racism out of football, in which it sought to work with football clubs and the football authorities, supporting them in a mostly successful effort to tackle a problem on which the clubs and authorities had not properly focused before.

[Sir Peter Lloyd]

That approach will be badly needed if the Bill is to work effectively. I am not at all sure whether the CRE is now well enough resourced or whether it has a sufficient range of skills, expertise and experience to do this much more demanding job in the public sector as thoroughly as it should be done.

Statistics showing disproportionality in some aspects of public policy do not prove discrimination, as so many people think. They may be a symptom that should be investigated, but they are not proof. There needs to be an independent body with knowledge of the public sector, capable of looking behind the figures and the complaints, to advise whether there is an issue to be addressed and, if there is, able to help the department concerned to address it so that there is seldom, if ever, any need to come to trial.

I hope that the Minister, in his reply, will be able to tell the House that the Government have thought very hard on that point, because much of the Bill's usefulness, especially the duty that it is placing on public sector organisations to promote racial equality, will, in large measure, depend on it.

2.57 pm

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Nobody should doubt the Bill's importance, although the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), said that she is convinced of its importance and then proceeded to make a speech in which it was not clear whether or not the Conservative party supports the Bill at all, in so far as it refers to indirect discrimination. I can only suggest to the right hon. Lady that a little time spent quietly with the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), whose enthusiasm for and commitment to this cause we all appreciate, might be very useful before the Bill goes into Committee.

Nobody should doubt, either, the significance of the Bill being introduced by a Labour Government who are going further than the recommendations of the Macpherson report. The Bill extends the Race Relations Act 1976 not only to the police but to the functions of all public authorities. The Government are right to have signalled their intention to extend the Bill to encompass indirect discrimination.

The Bill is not only needed by those who will be, because of the colour of their skin, protected by it, but it will be good for everyone who lives in Britain, whether black or white. For anyone who does not feel compelled by the Bill's purpose of furthering the cause of equal rights and opportunities, I quote what President Kennedy said in 1963:

> Who among us would be content to have the colour of his skin changed and stand in his place?

Civil rights should be at the heart of any responsible Government. Discrimination, wherever it is found, is a curse. Hon. Members will know from my past in the House that I have always taken the view that wherever we find discrimination, we should root it out, because discrimination in whatever form it takes is abhorrent and repugnant. It is a weapon that enforces division, and there should be no compromise of basic principles.

I regret the fact that the shadow Home Secretary did not take the opportunity this afternoon to state her commitment to ensuring that discrimination will be rooted out not only as it relates to ethnic minorities, but in other facets of our society, such as in matters of gender or sexuality. That should mean that ours is a society in which there is no second-class citizenship for any British man or woman anywhere.

Although we can look back on the strides that we have made towards creating an equal and more just society, no hon. Member should fail to observe how much further we still have to go. There is a choice about the kind of nation we want to be and the direction in which we want to move. We can move in the direction of division, and we can tolerate that division. It is my view that we have tolerated division for far too long. We can also move in a direction which removes division—the direction of one nation.

The division with which we live—the division between white and black, whatever the degree of tolerance that some people would proffer—makes us, in truth, an intolerant society. That intolerance will be fed by fear and hatred, and hatred will breed violence and lawlessness.

The other choice, which is a harder route to pursue, is to live together as one nation—not a nation that subjugates the identity of a minority to that of a majority, but a nation that celebrates its diversity, in which men and women respect one another for their character, not for the colour of their skin. For that, we will need understanding, compassion, wisdom, justice and a sense of doing what is right.

There are still too many in this country and, regrettably, in the House whom we must seek to persuade if we are to change. Our culture must change. Although I shall not focus my remarks today on the issue of immigration, we should not let this moment pass without commenting on the shadow Home Secretary's proposal to bring back the primary purpose rule, which the Government rightly abolished.

It is a dreadful contradiction of the essential decency of this nation that a political party would consider introducing legislation which even the Conservative candidate for London mayor has described as "disgusting and immoral". That pernicious, divisive rule discriminated particularly against people trying to move to Britain from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Does the shadow Home Secretary believe that Britain is a better country for such racist discrimination?

Perhaps the House should not be surprised by the way in which some Tories will use discrimination for short-term political gain. The shadow Cabinet Office Minister recently said that immigration was

> an issue which . . . played particularly well in the tabloids, and has more potential to hurt.

Such a view should be repugnant to any decent person. It should be condemned, not championed, by the Leader of the Opposition. It beggars belief that anyone could contemplate using the topic of immigration to hurt, or discrimination as a weapon to stir up prejudice and thereby secure votes; yet such prejudices lie deep within some in the Conservative party. That was one of the reasons why I left that party.

The Conservative party will whip its Members to keep discrimination in place on section 28, yet on a day like today it will signal to its Members that the debate is of so little importance that they can attend other business

elsewhere. In other words, when discrimination can be used against people, there is a three-line Whip, but when it cannot, Conservatives Members can take the day off.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Does not the hon. Gentleman recognise that that is an unfair point, given that we are not opposing the Second Reading of the Bill?

Mr. Woodward: Some Conservative Members may support the Bill, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, on section 28, for example, his party felt so strongly that it could not allow a vote of conscience. On an issue such as the Bill, it would send a strong signal to the country if the Conservative party had a three-line Whip—if its Members were present and if they were prepared to stand up and say that the Bill mattered. Belonging as they do to a party which for 18 years did nothing to implement the recommendations of the Commission for Racial Equality, perhaps it is not surprising that they are not so prepared.

In March last year, during the debate on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) told the House:

> It is fair to say that some unpalatable truths have to be faced, one of which is the fact that no Government have ever received a mandate to turn the United Kingdom into a multiracial society.—[*Official Report*, 29 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 819.]

What a great excuse for indifference.

Regrettably, the hon. Gentleman is not alone in his indifference. During 18 years of Conservative government, very little legislative progress was made towards better race relations. Twice the Commission for Racial Equality submitted reviews arguing that public bodies should be included in the scope of the Race Relations Act 1976, and twice that recommendation was rejected. Indifference reigned.

Tragically, it has taken the death of Stephen Lawrence and the inquiry into the police investigation following his death to achieve those demands, almost a quarter of a century later.

The House knows that the Conservative Government also refused to set up an inquiry into the police investigation after Stephen's death. That was, rightly, one of the first acts of the present Home Secretary in 1997.

The Bill will ensure that public bodies, the police and the Prison Service will fall within the scope of our laws to beat discrimination. The amendments to bring indirect indiscrimination within the compass of the Bill are crucial, as are those to promote racial equality. Fairness and equality before the law are the only decent course that we can follow, because discrimination is indecent, and the pursuit of decency is a moral quest.

Why has it taken Stephen Lawrence's death and so many other deaths, so many cases of discrimination, to achieve the Bill? Dante wrote:

> The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a time of moral crisis preserve their neutrality.

What neutrality and what indifference we have seen—indifference not least from some members of the Opposition.

Only three months ago, on "Newsnight", the then shadow Chancellor, now charged by the Conservative party with responsibility for foreign affairs, said of the Bill:

> I think people listening to this will think that this will have very little to do with the concerns that they have.

What an appalling statement. What an indictment of the role of leadership. Where is the essential decency in such an admission?

Does the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) think that the majority of decent people in Britain are not troubled by the death of Stephen Lawrence and the failure of the police investigation of that death, or about why and how the family was so badly treated afterwards; or about the family of Michael Menson, a young musician with mental health problems, who was stopped by three men in Edmonton outside a telephone box and turned into a human torch; or about Ricky Reel, who left home one day and did not come back, and whose body was found in a river; or about Errol and Jason McGowan, an uncle and nephew who were both found dead within months in highly suspicious circumstances?

Do those on the Conservative Front Bench think that people do not worry about such things? Do they subscribe to the view of the present shadow Foreign Secretary? What does it say if our most senior Opposition politicians will not take a leading role in raising the issue from neutrality and indifference to one of pressing need?

Would those politicians willingly change the colour of their skin? Would they be happy to settle for the barriers to opportunity that still confront the black man or woman in this country, or the same expectations of poor health? Would they exchange their lives for that of the Bangladeshi? There is a terrible culture of contentment, too easily seen among some people, even in the House.

As the hon. Member for Aldershot told the House last year, he regretted

> that some people who have come here freely and others who have sought refuge in this country appear no longer content to learn and accept our native customs and traditions, but wish to assert their own.

He told the House of his fears when he described

> the threat of indoctrination in our schools to make children "value cultural diversity".—[*Official Report*, 29 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 819.]

His views are not unique; they are shared by noble Lords, such as Lord Tebbit, who fears that multiculturalism will divide our society.

The hon. Member for Aldershot is not alone even in this place. He justifies his views by saying that minorities represent only 6 per cent. of the population. His advice is that they need to be more understanding of us and our centuries-old culture. There we have it: them and us; black versus white; division at the heart of our society and our policy making. That is wrong, wrong, wrong.

How are we to achieve a better society if we accept that corrosive division? How will we improve confidence in our police—or, indeed, life for our police—if we ask them to be the ambassadors of that policy of division? Such divisiveness and the acceptance of the existence of two nations should not be tolerated. I am glad to say that it is not acceptable to the new Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, who is determined to root out such attitudes, not only among the police, but among those who claim to support the police.

Yet some people still tolerate division and a society that is hostile and unequal, separated by a racial chasm. How can it be right for white Britain to continue to ask of its black citizens extra patience and perseverance that white people have never required of themselves?

Dr. Julian Lewis: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I am a third generation descendant of an immigrant family.

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

My family recognised that it was incumbent on us to adapt ourselves to some extent to the history and culture of the country to which we were coming. It is not unreasonable to ask that of people who have chosen to make their lives here.

Mr. Woodward: It is not unreasonable to ask anybody to adapt to a situation, but there is a difference between adapting and being forced to reject one's entire ethnic culture. The hon. Gentleman's comments lie behind many observations that Conservative Members make.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: During 18 years of Conservative Government, there were at least five people in the Cabinet whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents came to this country with almost nothing. Can we be sure that, in the next two or three generations, the same can be said of those who are black and Asian? That is the test.

Mr. Woodward: That is a perfectly fair point. However, I suspect that it will take a long time.

I ask hon. Members who speak of electoral mandates that have not been sought to create a multi-racial society to consider what the young black man or woman can still feel all too easily in Britain. Anyone listening to this afternoon's debate could be forgiven for believing that there is not much of a problem, that our discussion is an accessory debate that we do not need to hold. What do many black people feel when they watch television commercials that tell them that life is impossible without the latest product, but they have not got a financial prayer of buying it?

As Robert Kennedy once asked, what must these people's frustrations be? Young men and women, who desperately want to be part of our society, find themselves repeatedly excluded. What must they feel when they know that the chances are that they will receive only a second-rate education, that their children are four or five times more likely to be excluded from our schools, that they are unlikely to get a decent job and that they will be confronted by prejudice, direct and indirect?

Some who listen to this afternoon's debate may wonder why we are discussing the definition of institutionalised racism. The shadow Home Secretary clearly does not accept it. I remind the House of the words of the Macpherson report:

> The term institutional racism should be understood to refer to the way the institution or the organisation may systematically or repeatedly treat . . . people differentially because of their race.

It is not about individuals but about the net effect of the system.

If we consider the net effect of the system in Britain today, a pretty damning picture is revealed. Seventy-five per cent. of ethnic minority people live in metropolitan areas. Too often, they are concentrated in the poorest and worst parts of those cities, and live in run-down and overcrowded housing conditions. They know that they are more likely to suffer ill health.

How must it feel for young black people to know that they are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to be unemployed? A black woman—I accept that I am using a general term—knows that her chances of being unemployed are three times greater than if she was white. How must it feel to know that one's pay will be low, that others will get the top jobs, that poor conditions will prevail at work, that one's family will be twice as likely to live below the poverty line?

We must always be conscious of the danger of banding groups together. Nearly 85 per cent. to 90 per cent. of Pakistanis or Bangladeshis live well below the poverty line. What does that tell those people about the opportunities that are available to them, and about their inclusion in—or exclusion from—our society?

What does our system of justice say?

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Woodward: In a moment.

We all worry about being victims of crime. However, most crime is random and could happen to anyone. Racist crime is different. The victims know that they were chosen because of the colour of their skin. Black people take extra steps to make their homes secure; they often stay home at night. Victimisation is worse because it is often repeated. Often, it is deadly. As the hon. Member for Aldershot has often reminded the House, ethnic minorities may make up only 6 per cent. of the population, but their members constituted one in six of all homicides in the past three years. I give way.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. turncoat Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), but if the United Kingdom is so bleak after his new party has been in government for three years, why do so many people come to these islands from so many different parts of the world? They come here not because it might be a little better than Bangladesh, but because they have heard that Britain is a fair and prosperous country.

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Gentleman obviously feels self-satisfied when he makes such remarks, which only trivialise the debate. I shall not reply to the nonsense expressed by the hon. Gentleman. It does nothing to recommend his party, and nothing to recommend this country as a decent, civilised society.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Woodward: No, I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

While there seems little hope of having crime cleared up for many black people, the chances of black people being suspected as criminals are disproportionate. Black people may constitute only 6 per cent. of our society, but one in six of those stopped and searched are from ethnic minorities.

Despite the comments of the hon. Member for Aldershot, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis believes that that is a serious problem. In one of our recent conversations, I was pleased to note that he did not draw the crude conclusion of the shadow Home Secretary, that there is a simple causal link between the change of policy last year and the exponential rise in crime in the past 12 months.

We all accept that stop and search is a useful tool in the fight against crime, but stopping people simply because their skin is black should have no place in the

criminal justice system. Searching people because their skin is black should have no place in the criminal justice system either. Stop and search should be based on facts, not prejudice. Yet the figures demonstrate why black people feel threatened and persecuted. The law should protect everyone; many black people feel that it does not protect them. As a society, we must never accept that police misconduct is an unavoidable price to pay for cracking down on crime. We should not have to choose between them.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the borough police commander in Kensington, who has developed effective intelligence-based policing in respect of stop and search? That has resulted in the number of stops and searches decreasing, the disparity between the number of black and white people who are stopped and searched narrowing and arrests increasing significantly. That proves that intelligence-based policing is progressive in terms of equality and effective as a crimefighting strategy.

Mr. Woodward: I congratulate the police in that area. That example, contrary to what the shadow Home Secretary seems to believe, is being pursued in other parts of the world. In America, for example, Boston community leaders have participated in such schemes. Crime is falling, trust in the police is rising—particularly in minority communities—and that pattern is being repeated in such places as Chicago, San Diego and Houston.

Like any other individuals, black people, like white people, will sometimes be genuine suspects, but that should not deny them the same rights and the same protection in police custody. There is surely no satisfactory explanation for why 29 per cent. of those who die in police custody are black when 6 per cent. of the population are black. It is deeply worrying to all hon. Members—or at least it should be—that only one of the 75 cases of the death of a black person in custody recorded by the Institute of Race Relations resulted in the prosecution of the police, and in only one case has the family of the deceased received compensation.

As Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities too often feel mistreated and, in the past, victimised by police, reports of deaths in police custody increase fear and mistrust, regardless of the cause. We need to understand ethnic minorities' lack of confidence in the investigation of those deaths. I say to the Home Secretary that surely it would be better to have a policy under which every death in police custody would be investigated by a completely independent tribunal. That would go a long way to restoring the confidence of ethnic minorities in our capital city and elsewhere in this country. They need to know how and why those deaths happened—racial bias, poor training or both?

There has to be a problem when such a body as the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reported three years ago that

> it is noted with serious concern that among the victims of deaths in custody are a disproportionate number of members of minority groups. That police brutality appears to affect members of minority groups disproportionately. That allegations of police brutality and harassment are repeatedly not vigorously investigated. And perpetrators, once guilt is established, not appropriately punished.

Based on the many inquiries into alleged police brutality, there can be no doubt that they do not provide reasonable explanations—whatever they are—for the numerous accounts of lax or hostile policing reported in the United Kingdom.

The Bill will rightly apply to the Prison Service. It is of course right in certain cases that people who commit crimes go to prison, but what does the knowledge that they are six times more likely to go to prison than a white person say to the young black man or woman? We need to understand more about why they end up in prison. It is simple to condemn them, but very difficult to understand and change the patterns.

The Bill will bring discrimination against ethnic minorities, when in prison, within the compass of civil rights. My goodness, it is needed in prison as much as elsewhere. In 1998, the Prison Service reported 218 incidents of racist violence and abuse in prison, and that from a prison population of almost 20,000 ethnic minority people. A Home Office study of 501 inmates across eight prisons found that more than half the black inmates interviewed had been victimised by staff on the basis of race. What is wrong with our system when the victims of racist attacks in prison do not have the confidence to report them to those who will do something about them? The Bill will go a long way to creating that culture in which those matters are rightly reported.

That is the picture not only for adults. What is true for the young man or woman is also true for the young black child. The House knows that I have been a trustee of Childline for many years. Last year, it produced an excellent study of racism and bullying. We found that black children are far more likely to be bullied at school and far more likely to be bullied persistently. The 1999 National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children report entitled "Protecting Children From Racism and Racial Abuse" concluded:

> Racism and racial bullying will be commonplace in the life of young people and ethnic minority children especially.

Mr. Rowe: Did the Childline inquiry establish the disturbing fact that bullying in Scottish schools is disproportionately against white English children? If so, can he comment on that, too?

Mr. Woodward: The comment to make on that is extremely simple: wherever bullying is found, it is a very bad thing. If the Conservative party had chosen to listen to the children's charities and talk to the professionals about section 28 and the reasons for its reforms before adopting its three-line Whip, it would have learned that homophobic bullying is a major problem in schools. If the hon. Gentleman wants to take an interest in bullying, I can only suggest that he contact some of those charities before casting his vote on the Local Government Bill.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Woodward: I will not, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have time to make his own speech.

This generation and this Parliament did not create most of the conditions and circumstances with which British society lives today, but they have the opportunity and responsibility to deal with them. Millions of people—

[Mr. Woodward]

British people—with different-coloured skins all want to be part of that society and to share its opportunities. Britain is not a nation defined simply by its education system, its incomes, its geography or its borders. It is defined by its shared hopes and shared dreams and the principles and aspirations of all the people who live here and make up this country.

Multiculturalism does not have to be feared; we have to desire it. The question is not one of political mandates, but of doing what is decent and right. If we get that right, we can make one nation of two, but the enemies of that common purpose are not those who are black or even those who are white. They are prejudice, intolerance, fear and indifference. That is why we need the Bill. It may be small, but it has a huge moral question at its heart. We must ask whether it is right to continue to impose a lesser start in life on members of entire ethnic groups and to expect of one part of our country a degree of acceptance and resolution that we would never ask of someone who is white. Shall we be equals or shall we be divided?

Unlike the shadow Foreign Secretary, I think that British people know and care about what we are discussing today. They want an end to the violence and lawlessness. They do not think that discrimination is a good thing. They do not think that it should be tolerated. The vast majority of people in this country, white or black, want to live together harmoniously and with shared goals and hopes. They want justice, whether they be black or white, and the Bill is one more step towards that fairness, that justice and that equality.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Representation of the People Act 2000

Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (Amendment of Rules) Act 2000

3.29 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I begin by observing that the Queen works quickly—at least today she has, because we only finished consideration of the Representation of the People Act 2000 in the early hours of this morning. I am glad to know that she has been on the job today early on.

The hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) made a very good speech, as he did last year, from the Tory Benches, on sexual orientation equality issues. He is clearly committed to the equality agenda and I congratulate him on what he said. I share much of his view; indeed, my hon. Friends and I always have. I must tell him, however, that I have never thought it right for someone who was elected under one set of colours to adopt another set of colours without the authority of the electorate. I think that a Member who dissents from the view of his or her party—*[Interruption.]* I have never believed that Members should cross the Floor without obtaining the view of the electorate. It is entirely honourable for those who feel that their party has left them, or they have left their party, to continue to sit as independents. *[Interruption.]* I am aware of many historical examples, but I am presenting my personal opinion clearly. I have never found it acceptable for Members to cross the Floor from any party to any party, and that includes my party. Whatever views a Member may hold, I think it is always right for that Member to ensure that the electorate also accept that he or she should be more at home in another party.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Not for the moment.

As the hon. Member for Witney and others have said, the Bill is important. It is important because it touches on important issues mentioned by many speakers today. The right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) gained considerable experience of dealing with these matters when he was a Home Office Minister. I thank him for that service, which he performed extremely well. By telling us, quietly but none the less horrifically, that he continues to receive hate mail regularly, the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra) reminded us that we are a long way from a tolerant and accepting society.

The Home Secretary himself made clear how important the Bill was to him. I have no doubt about the Government's commitment, and indeed the Home Secretary's personal commitment, to equality issues. I am relieved that, in relation to issues on which I thought the Government were inadequate and weak at the outset, they have been persuaded, and have been honest enough to say they have been persuaded. That means that the Bill will eventually be much stronger than it was originally.

For my constituents, and for those of many of us who represent multiracial communities, these are day-to-day issues. As the hon. Member for Witney said, they matter hugely to such communities. Twenty-five per cent. of my constituents are black or Asian. It is not just that many experience discrimination, and find—this was referred to earlier—that they have a greater chance of being excluded from school or doing less well there, or of being arrested or detained by the police, or of going to prison, or of being out of work. Nearly every week, people come to my surgery and tell me that they are being racially harassed, simply because of the colour of their skin.

As was graphically represented in a Benetton advertisement a couple of years ago, people are not born with a sense of difference; it is taught and it is caught, and if that happens it is because we as a society are doing something wrong. If we are doing something wrong, we need to put it right quickly, because every harassed individual, every attacked individual and every wrongly imprisoned individual means that society is not doing its job entirely successfully.

Only the other week, we saw another example of that locally. Black youngsters on their way home, for no reason other than the fact that they were black, were assaulted by older white males. That is not acceptable in any United Kingdom constituency: all possible action must be taken to deal with it, by us and others.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I know that my hon. Friend represents an urban constituency. Is he aware of a report published by the National Association of Citizens Advice

Bureaux a year or two ago about racism in the south-west, subtitled "Why don't they go back to Birmingham"? For many people living in rural areas, where there are far fewer black faces, the experience of racism and racial attack can be worse than in urban areas, where there may be a larger concentration. In fact, the view in rural areas is often, "There are very few black people here, so it is not a problem"—but it is often a bigger problem.

Mr. Hughes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) had personal experience, of which the House is aware, of the invidious position in which members of small minority ethnic communities can find themselves in what are in any case small communities. I visit other constituencies that are much less multicultural than mine, and, when I spot just one or two black or Asian people going about their business, I reflect on how difficult life must often be for them and their families. Indeed, many people have testified to that.

We have had a Home Office-filled agenda this week. I do not know whether it is a record, but we have dealt with three Second Readings of major Home Office Bills in four days. On Monday we dealt with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, which was necessary and, at least in significant parts, good. On Tuesday we dealt with the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill, which was unnecessary and entirely bad. The encouraging thing about today's Bill is that I can tell the Government that we consider it necessary and entirely good, although it does not go far enough. The Government have accepted that, and have undertaken to go further. The Bill will get better, and we welcome the Government's commitment to improve it.

This Bill deals with two issues that are central to the way in which we run our society and our state. One is an issue that we have debated several times this week: what are the rights of the citizen relative to those of the state? The other, which we have not debated this week, is the question of the rights of one individual relative to those of another. The Bill is both a liberty Bill and an equality Bill, which is why we should be particularly careful to support it enthusiastically and ensure that we get it right.

We have come a long way. As has been pointed out, the Race Relations Act 1976, which was ground-breaking legislation, has in many respects stood the test of time, but it is not before time that we now seek to amend it. The life of a generation probably elapses between the act of legislation and the effect of that legislation fully filtering through to the society on whose behalf laws such as this are passed. What we do this year will probably not be entirely effective for 10 or 20 years. We must remember that legislation is only the beginning: it simply provides a backstop, or a framework. Of itself, it is not enough. To their credit, the Government have also promoted the Human Rights Act 1998, which will be implemented this year and which will be another helpful weapon in the armoury.

As the Home Secretary graciously did, I pay tribute to Lord Lester of Herne Hill, who has been active in these matters since the 1970s, and who has contributed greatly to the winning of the argument for the Bill's extension and to persuading the Government of how much further we need to go. I also pay tribute to the Lawrence inquiry judge and to his assessors, who eventually produced a controversial but necessary statement—a statement that came from, in a sense, an unexpected quarter. When he was appointed, there was some question about whether Sir William Macpherson would produce proposals that would be seen to take up the concerns of minority communities, but he did, and the way in which the Government have accepted and adopted those proposals is also welcome.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Commission for Racial Equality, which, over the years, has persisted in putting its case effectively. Its outgoing chairman, Sir Herman Ouseley, continued to do that regularly and effectively. We should be grateful to the CRE as a body—it has become more effective over the years—and for all the ways in which it has helped us all. I wish its new chair every success, and hope that he follows in the footsteps of his predecessors.

One of the controversial issues is the extent to which the Bill will make the police feel uncomfortable as they change their practice. There is much good practice in the police. The inquiry's view that the police were institutionally racist should not be taken by police officers as a criticism of each or any of them individually. The report is clear about that. It expressly says in its conclusions that one should not confuse racism of individuals with a finding of institutional racism of the police force as a whole:

> we do not accept that it was universally the cause of the failure of this investigation, any more than we accept that a finding of institutional racism within the police service means that all police officers are racist . . . It is incumbent upon every institution to examine their policies and the outcome of their policies and practices to guard against disadvantaging any section of our communities.

The perception is that we needed the jolt that was provided by the inquiry to move institutions on. Two days ago, I was at the Local Government Association fire conference in Southampton. A recent report has been published about the fire service, which needs to move fundamentally if it is to be no longer a racist service, but an equal opportunities service. Many organisations need that change. We need it here. This institution needs to become less racist. We are not a representative Parliament, and our parties are not representative.

For 25 years, local government has had a duty to tackle racial discrimination and to promote race equality. That has still not been achieved. The Local Government Association's report just last year said:

> Local government has a worse record than that of the economy as a whole for employing Black, Asian and other ethnic minority people.
>
> 25 per cent. of authorities do not have a written policy to provide services fairly to all sections of the community.
>
> 51 per cent. of local authorities do not monitor their workforce with respect to equal opportunities.
>
> Only 10 per cent. of authorities that monitor their staff have workforces that reflect the local Black, Asian or other ethnic minority population.
>
> Black, Asian and other ethnic minority people are under-represented in senior positions in the local government workforce.
>
> Only 3 per cent. of councillors are Black, Asian or other ethnic minority people ...

So even the part of government that has been working on the agenda for a quarter of a century has not yet achieved, or fully delivered. So much worse are we here, and so much more do we need to do. I welcome what the Home

[Mr. Hughes]

Secretary said about the way in which he has addressed those issues in the Home Office. Each Department of Government and each public authority needs to ask itself those questions.

In that context, may I say how welcome it is that the CRE and Operation Black Vote piloted an initiative involving me and several colleagues in the House taking part in a work-shadowing scheme, in which young black or Asian people from other walks of life work with us, as part of trying to build a new generation of people and a more reflective, representative Britain? If the young person who is working with me, Imran Ahmed, a 21-year-old of Pakistani origin, is the same as all his colleagues on the scheme, they have the potential to show how hugely society will benefit from much greater participation by people such as them.

We have at last had the concession from the Government that they will support an amendment to the Bill, so that the Bill's provisions cover not only direct discrimination but indirect discrimination. From our point of view—Lord Lester made the point clearly in the other place—that was always necessary. The legislation could never have been adequate if it did not oblige public authorities to act in a way that was neither directly nor indirectly discriminatory.

I have a question about that. I find it difficult to understand how the Government could have been advised that the Bill complied with the European convention on human rights—it is still on the Bill—when it did not include indirect discrimination. I do not understand how the advice can have led them to that conclusion. I should be grateful if Ministers explained how they started off in that direction, even though they have now been persuaded otherwise.

Because they are important, I want to mention the two definitional things that hon. Members have wanted to make clear in the debate. Indirect discrimination is not the same as unwitting or unintentional discrimination. It is something that people do not necessarily think about at all, but that has the indirect consequence of being discriminatory—for example, the way in which people recruit, advertise or involve people in another activity.

Likewise, institutional racism is not necessarily intended racism. The ideas are not linked. We have to be careful to distinguish them. I hope that, just as the Government have changed their view on that, we will soon receive full-hearted support from the Conservative Benches on the matter, which the Conservative shadow Home Secretary today appeared to withhold. We need individual change and institutional change. Both are needed soon.

On one issue, we need to think beyond the Bill. It could be done in Committee, but, if not, it should be done elsewhere—and soon. I do not argue that there should be separate organisations that specifically concentrate on gender equality issues—the Equal Opportunities Commission has done that—and race equality issues, but there is still a case for something that brings those together and allows common views to be expressed.

My colleagues and I have argued for a long time that some form of overarching equal opportunities commission that respects the different competences would be a good thing. It would serve us well if we as a society did something about that.

Linked to that, we need to go back to the issue of having an independent Police Complaints Authority. We need to work out how the different adjudicating authorities can come together, so that we do not have the CRE exercising certain functions and the PCA exercising others. The point was made earlier and I support it. There is quite a big issue here about how we achieve effective, speedy and patently clear adjudication on issues of racial inequality, racial injustice and racial prejudice, and other discrimination.

As important as any legislation is the process of education. If we do not educate better against discrimination, we are not dealing with the cause of much of the prejudice and the discrimination in our society.

My hon. Friends and I will happily support each and every one of the four major changes that the Government indicate they want to make to the Bill. We have argued for the changes in the other place. I hope that it is not least as a result of our efforts and those of Lord Lester and Lord Dholakia that they have been included: the indirect discrimination provision; the provision to allow for positive action; the provision to ensure that the immigration service is included—that does not mean that people cannot discriminate on the basis of nationality, but it does mean that they cannot discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, or practise other unreasonable discrimination—and the statutory duty to promote equality.

There is a duty on all of us personally, as well as collectively, to promote equality. We will do it only if we think about it all the time. That is why, if police officers have to stop and think before they arrest or search someone: "Am I sure that I am doing it because of the crime and not because of the person and the person's characteristics?" we will make progress. If all of us—all public servants—work in a society where we always ensure that we and others are not acting because of our innate, unacceptable prejudice, we will make progress. The Bill is progress, but it is the beginning of the next chapter, not the end.

3.49 pm

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. There have been some very good speeches, and I am sure that my speech will be entirely inadequate in comparison. I commend especially the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward). After hearing it, I am happy to accept him as my hon. Friend.

I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that racism is pernicious and evil. Racism distorts the life chances of individuals and of whole communities. It can, and does, lead to minorities living in fear. Worse, it leads to physical assaults and to death, as we have witnessed only too often in the United Kingdom.

Racism also, however, damages its perpetrators, locking them into a cage of hatred and twisted bitterness. However, that cage also locks them out—out of our multicultural society and world, with the opportunities on offer—by distorting their personalities and limiting their humanity. Racism, essentially, is a failure of both intelligence and humanity.

Racism is also a disaster for society. It actively promotes social disharmony. Racism, by freezing the opportunity available to some members of society, limits the possibilities of social development and progress.

The Race Relations Act 1976 was a giant step forward in protecting the rights of Britain's minorities, and in promoting the opportunities open to them. Britain can be proud of that Act and of the protection that it afforded minorities. Such protection does not exist for minorities elsewhere in Europe or in very many other parts of the world.

The 1976 Act itself was a consequence of something that is too easily dismissed—Britain's innate, genuine tolerance. The action that we took in 1976, before 1976 and after 1976—and the action that we shall take today—could succeed only by building on a spirit of good will and tolerance. Such tolerance exists in my city of Bradford, where people are daily, weekly, monthly and yearly making efforts to promote good race relations.

I also have every confidence in my police force, and in its efforts to build good race relations and to tackle racism. It would be a mistake if this debate were to go down the road—which it has not done so far—of attacking police. Police work in the most difficult circumstances and in the most awful situations. Quite often, the errors that they make in race relations occur as a consequence not of racism, but of a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity. It is essential that, within any race relations programme, cultural sensitivity programmes should be made available to all our public servants, including police.

Playing the race card—shouting "racist" when it is not appropriate to do so—to avoid the consequences of one's own crimes or actions is as bad as institutional racism, direct racism or indirect racism. I hope that people who play the card will realise that, in doing so, they are doing a disservice to themselves and to their communities. We have all heard of the shepherd who cried wolf too often. False alarms detract from the progress on race relations that we are making generally.

I am not saying that we have tackled the problem of racism. Although we have made great progress, we have not tackled the problem. Racism is very real, it is a very real threat, and we have constantly to be vigilant in dealing with it. That is why I have always supported calls by the Commission for Racial Equality and other bodies for strengthening the 1976 Act, and why I wholeheartedly welcome the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill.

Race relations legislation is not about policing thoughts, but about changing behaviour. It is about putting down in statute the markers distinguishing between acceptable and entirely unacceptable behaviour. I welcome the Home Secretary's decision to heed the calls to include indirect discrimination within the Bill's ambit.

The Bill advances race relations legislation in several important spheres. It extends the provisions of the 1976 Act to cover a wide range of public authorities, including police, that currently are not covered by those provisions. The Bill also makes chief police officers vicariously liable for the acts of discrimination committed by their officers. It also imposes an enforceable, positive duty on public bodies to promote racial equality. That is an extremely important step.

I have a few questions to ask the Minister. Although some of the questions have already been asked by hon. Members, I should like to reinforce the points that they make. How do the Government plan to include indirect discrimination in the Bill? That issue has not been addressed. Although we have been told that an amendment to that effect will be tabled, we have not been told what it will provide.

What is the definition of public authorities? Which public authorities will be covered by the Bill? Although some authorities have been included in the schedule, what mechanism will be used to add other authorities to the schedule or to another list? Have the Government excluded the immigration and nationality directorate from the Bill's ambit?

Have Ministers given any thought to the important issue—which does not fall within the scope of this legislation—of religious discrimination, which is a growing concern among my constituents, especially my Muslim constituents, who perceive discrimination directed at them not because of their colour, but because of their religion?

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman—who, like me, is a member of the Home Affairs Committee—for giving way. Could he be more specific in describing the discrimination that he says that Muslims are suffering? I should be very interested to hear what he has to say about it.

Mr. Singh: Indeed I can. Currently, it is perfectly legal for an employer to put up a sign outside his factory gate or shop saying, "Muslims need not apply". It would be very difficult to do anything about that under the provisions of the 1976 Act. Muslims in my constituency believe that there is discrimination against them because of their religious identity. That perception comes from stories in the media demonstrating growing Islamophobia within society.

Mr. Howarth: May I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that his constituents should not perceive an anti-Muslim phobia in this country? The United Kingdom has, for example, a growing number of mosques. During the Gulf war, when I was doing television interviews, I had to go past the Saddam Hussein mosque, in Birmingham. No Muslim thought to cover up the mosque's "Saddam Hussein" sign, which was pretty offensive to those of us who felt that our troops were engaged in a fight against Saddam Hussein. I believe that there has been much tolerance towards Muslims in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Singh: There has been a lot of tolerance towards all minorities in this country for a long time, along with the intolerance of people with extreme racist views. One problem with religious discrimination is that, while people of the Jewish and Sikh faiths are protected by the 1976 Act because they are regarded as ethnic groups, Muslims, who are not an ethnic group because Islam is a universal religion, are not protected. Muslims want to know why they are not protected.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): My hon. Friend is talking about Islamophobia. The study conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation demonstrated clearly for the first time with ample evidence that Islamophobia was emerging. More work needs to be done on that. Does my hon. Friend recall that study?

Mr. Singh: I do recall that study now that my hon. Friend has reminded me of it. I recommend it to the

[Mr. Singh]

hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), my colleague on the Home Affairs Committee, because it will probably illuminate him far more than I can on the subject.

Sir Peter Lloyd: I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments about notices in his constituency saying "No Muslims need apply". As such a notice would have a disproportionate effect on a particular ethnic group, I would have thought it quite likely that it would be possible to prosecute such employers. Has the hon. Gentleman thought of doing so? Has he advised those affected to seek such a prosecution?

Mr. Singh: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. The notice was in a neighbouring town, not in my constituency. What he suggests is feasible, but the fact remains that religion is not included in the 1976 Act, and yet two religious groups—Jews and Sikhs—are covered by virtue of their ethnic origin.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): My hon. Friend was talking about research on Islamophobia. He will be aware that the Government have commissioned Derby university to undertake some research on religious discrimination. An interim report has been published and we hope to publish a report later in the year.

Mr. Singh: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for those remarks.

The Bill is another giant step forward for race equality in this country. Discrimination exists and we have to tackle it. The Bill will tackle it by including public authorities. Some contributions to the debate about racism and ethnic minorities assume that all members of ethnic minorities are victims and all suffer from the same problems. That is not true. Many ethnic minority groups are succeeding. That is a tribute to our society. We need to look more specifically at the problems that particular ethnic minority groups face. We do nobody a service by lumping everybody together and asserting that ethnic minorities are all poor and disadvantaged. Many have moved forward in our society and are making huge contributions in industry, the economy, art, literature, television and, dare I say in the case of one or two of us, in politics.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been the subject of much criticism in recent weeks, not least concerning the case of General Pinocchio. However, he and his team deserve great credit for their real achievements on race equality. That needs to be put on record. That is not a sycophantic comment. Anyone who knows me well knows that I may be many things, some good and some bad, but I am not a sycophant. There have been some positive speeches from Conservative Members and I hate to bring a partisan tone to the debate, but I have to say that, while the Tories have reverted to extremist type by playing the race card over asylum and immigration once again, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has quietly and professionally made progress. He and his team abolished the discriminatory primary purpose rule that the Tories brought in and have threatened to bring in again.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is my hon. Friend aware that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has suggested that the Conservatives—were they ever to be re-elected—might consider reintroducing the primary purpose rule?

Mr. Singh: I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. I heard about that today in the Chamber in a contribution by another hon. Friend. The world outside should know that and I hope that the message goes out from the Chamber. If the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on the Conservative Front Bench is willing to intervene and say that the story is not true, I should be happy to accept his word.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): To satisfy the eager anticipation of several Labour Members, I should make it clear that we shall look at a number of options on what to do about the problem of bogus marriages. I think that Ministers accept that there is a problem, just as we do. However, we have not committed ourselves to any particular policy or course of action that we might include in a future manifesto.

Mr. Singh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that explanation. My constituents will read his remarks with care. They will worry that measures against bogus marriages may mean that genuine marriages will not be accepted if the Conservatives come to power again and that there is a real possibility of the primary purpose rule being reintroduced. It was discriminatory from the outset, as was proved in practice. It divided families—man from wife and mothers or fathers from children—for years.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being generous in giving way to me again. I remind him that the option of a new primary purpose rule, which the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) wants to keep open, was described by the Conservative candidate for mayor of London as "enormously offensive", "disgusting" and "immoral". The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) seems to want to keep open the option of returning to such a policy.

Mr. Singh: In that case, I am not surprised that the Conservative candidate for mayor of London is rapidly distancing himself from his party. Perhaps he will shortly announce that he is standing as an independent.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has brought back the right of appeal on visitor's visas—a right that the Tories took away. He has introduced a criminal offence of racially aggravated violence, while the Tories turned a blind eye to racial harassment, racial assaults and racial killings on the streets of Britain. My right hon. Friend launched the Lawrence inquiry, which the Tories refused to do, because they did not care about the deaths of young black people on the streets of Britain.

With this Bill, the Home Secretary has launched a crusade against racism in public life, while the Tories pander to prejudice on the basis of emotions. The Home Secretary's and the Government's record on racism is one to be proud of. Labour's vision of a modern and fair Britain in which racism and discrimination have no part is one that I am happy to share and be proud of.

4.10 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I am sorry that the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) felt obliged to conclude with a rather partisan coda that spoiled the effect of his speech. Until a few moments before he sat down, I thought that I would be able to say that I agreed with almost every word that he had said. So I shall draw a veil over what I thought was a rather ill-judged closing passage and focus on the larger part of his speech with which I agreed, in particular the proposition that he advanced that, not just on both sides of the House, but more importantly in all our constituencies, there is a broad-based commitment to openness, decency and the desire for a successful multi-racial society. He was right to say that. He was also right to say that it is our obligation to ensure that that commitment by our constituents is converted into law to provide an administrative framework that delivers the objective that the overwhelming majority of them share.

Anyone who knows anything about the political history of Britain over the past 30 years will recognise that, despite the decency to which the hon. Gentleman rightly referred, race relations is a sensitive subject. Because of that, I have always thought that it should be approached against the background of a clear statement of the principles on which we seek to construct our policy.

This afternoon, hon. Members on both sides of the House have sought to examine the pragmatic consequences of policy. Of course, as practical people we must do that, but if a policy is to be successful it must be firmly rooted in principle. I want to focus my remarks on the two principles that are firmly embedded in the Bill and that I wholly endorse. Because I endorse them, I am pleased to welcome the Bill.

The first principle should, in the modern world, be wholly unarguable. Indeed, both principles should be wholly unarguable, but the first should never have been controversial. It is that any law that imposes standards of behaviour on private citizens ought to apply equally to public authorities. If we stand for nothing else, surely to goodness we stand for the principle of freedom under law, and if that phrase means anything, it means that the law must apply to every section of the community and should not provide a let-out for the public sector from principles that legislators seek to apply to the private sector.

I regard that principle as the bedrock of good law. It is of course the polar opposite to another principle that we have endorsed in this Chamber in large parts in the past century—the principle of Crown immunity, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) accurately described as the principle that public officials do not need to be constrained by law because they are motivated by such high principles. He described that principle in language so flowery that it reduced it to the absurdity that it is. It is clearly wholly wrong.

Let me detain the House for a moment with an example that is way outside race relations, but illustrates the absurdity of Crown immunity in practice. When I was a health Minister, I discovered that the national health service, the nation's principal public health institution, was exempt from waste disposal regulations. As a result, in the disposal of clinical waste, the NHS was one of the major polluters of the environment in Britain. The law on waste disposal did not apply to the NHS as it was part of the public sector and therefore could claim Crown immunity. Exactly the same principle lay behind the Race Relations Act 1976, which sought to apply a framework of law to private citizens and corporations, but to exempt the public sector. The law is flawed in practice.

The second objection to Crown immunity is that it is not just wrong in practice and in the practical consequences that flow from it, but that it is fundamentally wrong in principle. Indeed, if the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) were here, the debate might inspire him to make the speech that many of us have heard him make about the consequences of the English revolution and the importance of the King and the Government working within a framework of law. We ought to be committed to the principle that the public sector and the private sector should live by the same legal framework, and to the extent that the Bill gives effect to that important principle, it is long overdue and most welcome.

I said that two principles lay behind the Bill. The first is the abolition of Crown immunity and the application to the public sector of the principles of law that have applied to the private sector for a generation.

The second principle used to be somewhat more controversial, at least in the tabloid press. I am pleased to say that it is now much less controversial, but in my view it was right all along. I am a strong supporter of the principle that the law should prevent discrimination on grounds of race, colour or creed. It is important to be clear about what we say on that subject.

It is sometimes said that the framework of race relations legislation is a manifestation of the nanny state. I cannot count the number of times that I have been told that we cannot change human nature. Of course that is true, but legislators can define acceptable standards of behaviour. I do not believe that it is acceptable behaviour in a civilised society to discriminate between one citizen and another on the ground that one citizen is Jewish and another is not, one citizen is Muslim and another is not or one citizen is Afro-Caribbean and another is not. I believe that action, not motivation, is the key. The hon. Member for Bradford, West was absolutely right about that. Queen Elizabeth I said:

> We do not seek a window on men's souls.

It is not the motivation that matters, but the action, and race relations legislation seeks to confine the action within acceptable standards of public behaviour.

There should no longer be any doubt about the commitment of this House to a framework of law that outlaws discrimination between one citizen and another on grounds of race, religion or ethnicity.

Those are the two principles on which race relations should be built and they are embedded in the Bill. They are the reasons why I am strongly in favour of it, but I wish now to examine some of its detail, because one or two of its aspects and the history of its presentation leave me slightly uneasy. If we start from the point of view of principle, as I have sought to do, it is odd how cautious some of its text has turned out to be.

The proposed section 19B started off, as several hon. Members have pointed out, by outlawing direct discrimination in the public sector but would have continued to allow indirect discrimination. I am delighted that the Government have changed their mind, but I do not think that it is churlish to say that—given the

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

principles that I have just expounded—there should never have been any doubt about it. It should have been axiomatic from the beginning.

The same caution that led the Government to exclude indirect discrimination from the Bill lies behind the trouble that the Home Secretary got into when he was called upon to define the public authorities to which the provisions of the Bill will apply. The Bill, as drafted, does not impose duties on public authorities. It merely requires them to obey the law that, as private citizens, all the rest of us have had to obey since 1976. I can understand that the Government would need a schedule containing a definition of public authorities if the Bill imposed a new duty on public authorities that will not apply to private individuals, but the Bill will simply extend the ban on discrimination that currently applies in the private sector to the public sector. However, the Government then seek to say that the principle applies only to the public authorities listed in new schedule A1. That prompts the obvious question—which public authorities are not included in that schedule and why? To put that point more emotively, which public authority believes that its capacity to deliver its objectives demands that it maintains the freedom to discriminate against the Jews? That is the effect of the Bill as it applies to any public authority that is not in the schedule.

The principle that the House should demand be applied is that anybody who wishes to be free to discriminate on grounds of ethnicity or race should have to justify that highly questionable proposition. One of the groups that seeks an exemption from the overall provisions of the Bill is Ministers in the exercise of their immigration and nationality law responsibilities. That is definitely a questionable proposition. I accept, of course, that those who deal with immigration law have to be able to discriminate on grounds of nationality, but it is difficult to understand in what circumstances they might wish to discriminate between one individual and another on the ground of ethnic origin.

The Home Secretary referred to the example of refugees from Kosovo. Surely the whole point about refugees from Kosovo is that it is their Government who discriminate on grounds of ethnicity: our immigration law should consider the risk that an individual would face outside this country. That is what we should use as the basis for discrimination, not ethnicity or racial background. When will a Minister need to be able to distinguish one application from another on grounds of ethnic or national origin? Why are Ministers preserving for themselves an exemption from the provisions of the Bill?

The new section 19D that will be written into the Race Relations Act 1976 states that the prosecution authorities should be free to decide not to prosecute on the grounds of racial discrimination. The justification for that offered in the explanatory notes is:

> This exemption will prevent it being possible for a claimant to use the Act to discover the reasons for a decision not to prosecute, preserving the role of the criminal courts as the sole forum for determining guilt.

I understand the desirability of that, but—set against the principles that I outlined—it is a large derogation of principle to say that the race relations legislation should not apply to a prosecutor making a decision not to prosecute a citizen. That will put the prosecutor outside this key framework of law.

The questions that arise from the Bill for me are not connected with its principles, because every hon. Member should embrace them. My question to Ministers is why they have felt the need to be so cautious and to maintain for themselves potentially large derogations from those important issues of principle. I hope that when the Minister winds up or in Committee, he will be able to respond to those concerns and to demonstrate that the Government share—as I believe they do—a commitment to ensure that our race relations legislation is built on the two key principles that I started with. First, the same law must apply to the public and private sector, and secondly, for both public and private sector, discrimination on grounds of race or ethnicity is no longer—and never has been—acceptable behaviour.

4.28 pm

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and I especially welcome the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) about the strength, vitality and importance of the ethnic minority communities in this country. People sometimes express surprise about the relative lack of ethnic minority communities in my constituency, but I would dispute that. People fail to understand the nature of English history if they do not recognise the great strengths that the waves of immigration have brought to the United Kingdom.

I also wish to contribute to the debate because in recent years, to my deep regret, the city of Lancaster has very publicly become associated with an appalling example of racist abuse and harassment. I know all about that problem and wish to ensure that we can move on to a positive future.

This is an excellent Bill and it should be welcomed wholeheartedly by every hon. Member. My speech will be the shortest this afternoon because I do not want to say much about the Bill except to welcome the restatement by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary of his intention to introduce an amendment to enshrine the principle that public bodies should have a positive duty to promote equality. That is a profoundly important proposal. If it is properly enforced, it should cement the profound and irreversible change that our society needs if it is to enjoy and gain from the welcome fact that we are a multicultural and multi-racial society.

I hope that the consultation on how the principle will be developed will give public bodies a positive power to intervene in race relations issues, and the certainty that they will be called to account if they do not use the powers properly.

I have held elected office for the past 13 years. I have dealt with issues, as a ward councillor, concerning people who remain my neighbours and who are my constituents and who became the victims of racial abuse and intolerance. In that situation, public bodies were almost powerless to intervene. I do not intend to rake over the coals of all that, because the new positive duty can help us move for the future and can help Lancaster city council build upon the progress. The test of the new power for public bodies will be whether Lancaster city council and other public bodies in the city are able to build on the progress and resolve the problems.

The most striking aspect of the Macpherson report was the clear definition that a racist incident is any incident perceived to be racist by the victim or by any

other person. We must understand and appreciate how significant that is. We need to understand how racism is perceived by people on the receiving end. As a councillor, I worked with many people who were embroiled in a terrible dispute. I tried to understand why people held some of their attitudes, and tried to make them appreciate the significance of a thoughtless remark or careless gesture to the person on the receiving end.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I have been agreeing with a great deal of what the hon. Gentleman has said, but I am worried by the element of subjectivity that he has introduced with his point about how an incident is perceived. I am Jewish and, from time to time, people involve me in incidents that I do not like. It would not do the Jewish community any good at all if I always assumed that those people were motivated by anti-semitism. I ask the hon. Gentleman to think again about perception by the victim.

Mr. Dawson: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, as he helps me to take my argument further. Recently in Lancaster, a great friend and colleague of mine—the leader of the city council—became the victim of campaign of abuse and vilification. He is Jewish, and he takes his religion seriously. All of us in politics are there to be shot at and we must take the flak that follows unpopular decisions. However, that campaign was so concerted that the impact it had on that individual was probably disproportionate to the impact that it would have had on someone from a different racial background. I do not suggest in any way that the campaign was motivated by anti-semitism or racism, but I am trying to say that we should be more aware of the possible impact of our words.

If for thousands of years—and in the recent past especially—the history of one's race has been one of scapegoating and victimisation, someone's hurtful words might have an impact that was never intended by that person.

Dr. Kumar: Surely we should look at the victim's feelings about how he or she has been treated. The same situation used to apply in terms of domestic violence until the definition was changed. If a victim feels that an attack was racist or anti-semitic, we should look at their definition, and at whether the incidents are systematic and there is ample evidence. That would answer the point made by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

Mr. Dawson: I agree with my hon. Friend that this is about appreciating the views of victims and understanding the impact of racist actions and abuse and thoughtless action.

I hope that the new power will be dynamic and creative and will encourage and enable councils such as my own to invest in communities and deal with the issues of racial equality, and with difficult situations. I hope that public authorities will support the proposal by holding events to celebrate different races and cultures. We must give local authorities a clear role in disseminating information and bringing communities together. That will help to build coalitions. So much of my work as a councillor was in trying to build coalitions of like-minded people, and to bring people together in understanding, tolerance and harmony. That is an essential part of what we need to do.

I hope that the new duty on public authorities can spread the message to all parts of the country—not just places such as Bermondsey, where 25 per cent. of the community comes from ethnic minorities. I hope that the message spreads to those communities that are under the illusion that they do not need to get involved in race relations issues because they have no significant ethnic minority communities. We must spread the message that one of the great advantages of this country is the fact that ours is a multi-racial and multicultural society.

4.40 pm

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you will accept that my Ulster Unionist party colleagues and other hon. Members from Northern Ireland are unable to attend this debate because the Northern Ireland Grand Committee is sitting elsewhere in the building to consider the Northern Ireland appropriation order. I trust that the House will understand if I leave once I have delivered my brief comments. However, I hope to return before the debate is wound up.

We welcome the Home Secretary's decision to include indirect discrimination in the race relations legislation. The Commission for Racial Equality has conducted three reviews of the Race Relations Act 1976 and, in light of the Macpherson report and the on-going debate in Parliament, it seems clear that change, via the legislation, is long overdue.

Given the findings of the Macpherson report, and the serious instances of institutional racial discrimination that it uncovered, it is paramount for the protection of ethnic minorities that the public sector become as accountable for its policies and practices as the private sector. To exclude areas of the public sector from the legislation—such as the police force, the Prison Service or the immigration service—and from the requirement to combat and pull out the roots of institutionalised racism would render the Bill fruitless.

At a time when the United Kingdom has never been more ethnically cosmopolitan, such an omission would serve only to alienate further those ethnic communities who often feel themselves pushed toward the periphery of society by institutionalised racism. Public bodies must be obliged to deal with this institutionalised problem. Ministers, their Departments and other statutory bodies must be held to account for both direct and indirect discrimination in their sectors. That will enable all communities to feel that they truly have equal opportunities, rights and respect, regardless of their race or religion, and to see structural prejudice and injustice as things of the past.

However, the Bill needs to define clearly not only what indirect discrimination means, and to whom it applies, but which groups are an ethnic minority or a religious minority. The present legislation falls short on such details. It leaves the United Kingdom's 1 million Muslims in limbo, because they are not a collective ethnic or national group and so are unprotected from unfair indirect discrimination. Religious minorities, like ethnic communities, must be protected from structural prejudice—as they are in Northern Ireland.

Clause 1(19)(c) of the Bill states:

> Section 19B does not make it unlawful for a relevant person to discriminate against another person on grounds of nationality or ethnic or national origin in carrying out immigration and nationality functions.

[Mr. Roy Beggs]

For example, that enables immigration officers to rule in respect of individuals on grounds of ethno-national origin as well as nationality, as long as they are acting within the immigration or nationality laws, or the confines of ministerial orders. That leaves the door wide open for indirect and direct discrimination against ethnic communities, and against refugees who may be seeking humanitarian aid in this country.

The Commission for Racial Equality and the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities argue that that omission in the legislation leaves open the possibility of unchecked discrimination, by immigration officials, on the grounds of nationality or ethnic origin. The Ulster Unionist party endorses the CRE's proposal that the clause should be amended and that national, ethnic or religious origin should be considered only in cases of humanitarian concern.

The recent hijacking crisis at Stansted airport highlights the problem. It has emerged in the press that many of the Afghan passengers, who had just been held hostage for days on end, perceived that they were treated with contempt by immigration officials, who encouraged them not to seek asylum in Britain. Before being sent back to Afghanistan, many of those held hostage complained to their translators of intimidation and coercion by immigration officials keen to remove them from British soil. However, the correct balance must be found: the United Kingdom must not be seen by economic migrants as an easy opportunity for illegal entry.

Furthermore, clause 1(19)(d) excludes from challenge as unlawful discrimination acts leading up to a decision not to institute criminal proceedings against suspected criminals. In other words, acts taking place between the police response to a suspected crime and the decision not to prosecute are excluded. The CRE has rightly pointed out that the provision inhibits the ability of individuals to appeal against direct or indirect discrimination by the police or Crown Prosecution Service after they have been arrested.

That brings us to address the growing need for a statutory duty to promote racial equality, as we have had in Northern Ireland since the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The significance of a positive legal duty is that it will oblige public authorities to act to prevent discrimination before it happens. That is much better than using the law for redress, as it will pre-empt discrimination and nip it in the bud, while at the same time saving huge sums of taxpayers' money.

In Northern Ireland, a number of racial discrimination cases are pending, whereas before the 1998 Act there were none. We hope to see the number fall in coming years as the statutory order takes effect and institutionalises equality of opportunity across Northern Ireland's communities.

We in Northern Ireland have welcomed all those who have chosen to settle with us and who have enriched our society. Many nationalities are represented—for example, Chinese, Pakistani and Indian—as are people from the Irish traveller communities. Together, they constitute about 1.5 per cent. of the total population.

Although these communities are small by comparison with ethnic minorities in other parts of the United Kingdom, the problems that they encounter are the same, and their struggle against direct and indirect discrimination in this country is just as difficult. The Ulster Unionist party fully supports and endorses their appeals for such structural discrimination to be firmly dealt with in this Bill.

Northern Ireland's ethnic communities are represented by bodies such as the Chinese Welfare Association and the Indian Community Association. The leaders of those bodies, and NICEM executive director Mr. Patric Yu, have described the difficulties of indirect discrimination that ethnic minorities face in many public sector areas, especially with regard to immigration control and employment opportunities.

However, we are aware of the Home Secretary's fears that the Bill will prevent the police from doing their job properly and that they will be hampered in tackling crime in areas where there are large ethnic minorities. We are well aware of the difficult and delicate work that the police have to undertake, and the problems that that might provoke in police stop-and-search operations, for example. We, however, believe that once institutional racism is eradicated from private and public bodies, people from ethnic minorities will feel more comfortable joining public services such as the police, and will respond positively to any such structural change.

As for the argument that the Bill will introduce an atmosphere of racial tension that does not already exist, we believe that, on the contrary, it will simply deal with the existing problem. The ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland have no means of redress against claims of racism. The bodies that are facing claims from individuals within ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland are having to reassess their policies and attitudes from the top down. The Home Secretary should learn from this example, and bring the legislation up to date.

Furthermore, with regard to the Government's concern that fresh new policies face delay and disruption from challenges of indirect discrimination, we believe that the solution is for the Departments to get it right first time. Institutionalised anti-discrimination should become a thing of the future, as it is in Northern Ireland, and institutionalised racism a thing of the past.

4.50 pm

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I welcome the fact that the Government have the opportunity, after all those wasted years since the late-1970s, to widen the scope of the race relations legislation.

It seems extraordinary that in 1976 Parliament thought that it was not necessary to extend the scope of the Race Relations Act 1976 to public bodies. In a way, that was understandable, if we consider the context in which racism existed at that time. It was very well described by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra), who said that there were many occasions on which he would go into a pub and be refused service. He would be asked to leave and subjected to the most appalling abusive language, simply because of the colour of his skin.

At that time, it was not unusual for boarding houses to have in their window signs saying, "No blacks, Irish or dogs". I suppose that it is hardly surprising that the scope of the legislation did not go quite as far as we would have liked. The problem was so pervasive, and incited people to hatred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) referred in his thoughtful speech to the Tory party's indifference to this issue when it was in Government from 1979 to 1997. When Norman Tebbit was a Minister, he came to the House and said that he would present the report of the Commission for Racial Equality to Parliament in the way a head waiter would serve a bottle of coca-cola. That probably says it all.

Furthermore, I find it extraordinary that the present Conservative party has had more to say about General Pinochet than about Stephen Lawrence.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend mentioned the indifference of the Conservative party. I listened with care to the remarks of the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) and I agreed with his point about discrimination on grounds of ethnicity as well as nationality in immigration cases. However, does my hon. Friend recall that the previous Government, whom the hon. Gentleman supported, introduced a provision whereby British women were separated into two classes? Those who were born here could have their husbands join them here, while those who were not born here could not.

Jean Corston: I do indeed recall that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing it to my attention. Should my daughter, who was born in east Africa, have decided to marry someone from another country, she could well have fallen foul of that provision.

The atmosphere of that time—the advertisements that appeared in windows and on pub doors, the way in which jobs were advertised by word of mouth—shows that direct discrimination can be quite easily categorised and dealt with, although it takes a very long time to achieve success.

The Labour Government of the time took careful note of the United States legislation on discrimination and decided to import into their sex discrimination and race relations legislation the notion of indirect discrimination. That of course covers an organisation or person who applies a condition that is objectively non-discriminatory, but is discriminatory in effect, as in a sign saying, "No blacks, no Irish, no dogs".

Let me give an example, although it has nothing to do with race. When I was a child, it was not possible to be a police officer unless one was 5 foot 6 inches tall. That excluded many women. I do not say that the police necessarily intended to exclude women; it had probably crossed no one's mind that women would ever want to join in large numbers. That requirement has gone, because the police have recognised that it was indirectly discriminatory.

The impetus behind the Bill is the Macpherson report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, and the shabby, shameful and inadequate way with which it was dealt. Opposition Members and spokespeople clearly find the idea of institutionalised racism difficult. I do not allege that any Conservative Member of Parliament is sexist, or that any one of them would say or think it was inappropriate for women representatives to sit on the Conservative Benches. However, the effect of the way in which the Conservative party works is that few women can reach the House as Conservative Members. That is institutionalised sexism.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: The hon. Lady must understand that the selection of Conservative candidates is entirely in the hands of the party. We do not have the kind of apparatchik arrangements of the Labour party. Often, selection committees are made up largely of ladies. If they choose men rather than ladies as their candidates—and a lot of excellent ladies are coming forward—that is their choice. One hopes that the hon. Lady understands that we allow choice.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman are taking us a long way from race relations.

Jean Corston: The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) makes my point for me. The Labour party had to deal at local level with the way in which party members selected men as prospective Members of Parliament.

I am pleased by one of the Bill's most important provisions—the positive duty to promote equality. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for that. Contrary to what was said by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), the impetus behind that provision was not provided only by a few Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords. I chair the parliamentary Labour party's civil liberties group, which the Home Secretary told about the Bill last autumn, saying that it would include direct discrimination, of course, and that it might include indirect discrimination. He added, though, that there were limits to that approach, and that the Bill might also have to include a positive duty to promote equality. The idea came from the Home Secretary himself, in conversations with many people as the Bill was prepared.

Existing race relations legislation operates on the provision of goods and services and in employment. As a lawyer who practised in discrimination cases, I can say that the effect of the law and its ambit are almost certainly confined to employment—how people are treated at work. If we had had just direct and indirect discrimination, and left it at that, what on earth would it have done for someone like Mrs. Lawrence? She was not employed by the Metropolitan police; she had no direct employment relationship with the force at all. Suppose she had tried, under the provisions of the Race Relations Act, or even of this Bill in the absence of the positive duty, to go to a public body such as the Commission for Racial Equality and say, "Well, the police were very nice to my neighbour when her cat was stuck in the tree, but they did not treat me very well when my son was murdered." She would not have got very far, because there was no relationship between her and the Metropolitan police, either in relation to the provision of goods and services or in relation to employment.

That is why a positive duty to promote equality is so important—not only for the police but for all public bodies. The job of such bodies is to deal with members of the public; they must clearly be seen to apply equality provisions.

Racism and the failure to promote racial equality go far beyond the ambit of the police. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney referred to the prison service. In 1996, my hon. Friend the Paymaster General and I visited Dartmoor prison to speak to black constituents who had alleged that they were not being treated well. I also wanted to speak to staff about the death in custody of my constituent Dennis Stevens.

[Jean Corston]

On the wall of Dartmoor prison was a finely worded Home Office statement about anti-racism—such as may be found in many prisons. I asked the governor of the prison whose duty it was to enforce that statement. He said, "No one has ever asked me that, and I have never thought about it." With respect to the governor, I thought that it was his duty. The provisions of the Bill will ensure that public bodies take to heart the purpose of the duty to promote equality.

I point out to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench that we need to know how that duty will operate; organisations need to establish appropriate mechanisms. Some are doing marvellous work. As I have mentioned in other debates, at the Trinity road police station in my constituency, the central police district has produced an excellent booklet entitled "Faces of Britain". It provides guidance for police officers on how they should treat members of different ethnic communities. It gives details of religious and social customs and beliefs. It sets out how officers should behave when they enter the homes of people from those communities. It is a splendid example of the way in which police officers can carry out their duties in a multicultural society so that everyone feels respected and equal.

Racism is still pervasive. My hon. Friend the Member for Southall said that he still receives hate mail—so do I. In Bristol, I have readily identified myself as someone who is utterly opposed to racism. It is not unusual for me to receive letters threatening me with nasty and permanent injury because of the stance I have taken.

Such letters are frequently unsigned. I could imagine the tone of voice in one letter that I received—it was clearly from a man. He said, "I fought in the second world war for this country. You keep speaking up for these other people." The King's African Rifles fought in the war, but they were not threatened as I was at the time as a child growing up in Hull. There were no racial boundaries when it came to the support of our cause in the second world war. Even if there had been, they would be irrelevant to the way in which we run modern society.

When I was small, one of my aunts went to see "South Pacific" while she was on honeymoon. She came back, full of that marvellous musical and especially keen on one song, which I learned. However, it was many years before I realised that "South Pacific" was about racism—at the time, it was just a musical with nice songs. The song that she liked so much is particularly instructive. I use it sometimes when talking to children about racism. It goes:

> You've got to be taught to be afraid
> Of people whose eyes are oddly made
> And people whose skin is a different shade.
> You've got to be carefully taught.
> You've got to be taught, before it's too late,
> Before you are six, or seven or eight,
> To hate all the people your relatives hate.
> You've got to be carefully taught.

That sums up pretty well the seeds of racism. If schools say, as they do routinely day after day, that children should be brought up to value and respect each other and to treat each other as equals and if we say that that should happen in Parliament and at work, we shall succeed only if everyone, whatever they do, recognises that they have an equal place.

5.5 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I apologise to the House because I had to leave the Chamber earlier. I have two constituency engagements tonight, and I hope that the House will not regard my action as discourteous because no discourtesy is intended. I have been here since 1.15 pm, as the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) will know.

I was interested in what the Home Secretary said at the beginning of his speech. He ascribed good relations in this country since 1976 to the Race Relations Act 1976, which was passed not by a Labour Government, but more specifically by Parliament.

Jean Corston: What?

Mr. Howarth: The 1976 Act was passed by Parliament.

The Home Secretary was wrong to ascribe the success—I think that it has been a success—of the assimilation in this country of a large number of people from many countries around the world and different cultures to an Act of Parliament. We cannot change minds merely by changing the law. We cannot enforce a change of character or a change of view in that way.

The real tribute should be paid to the British people. They have been remarkable in the way that they have adjusted to the changes that have taken place rapidly in some parts of the country. The hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) will know very well what I mean, as will the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra), who I am sorry is not present at the moment. At least 50 per cent. of the people in his constituency have origins in the Indian subcontinent. We should pay tribute to the people of Southall. They do not live in grand country houses at the end of long drives surrounded by parkland. They live in terraced houses, cheek by jowl with their neighbours and they—and not the landed gentry—have borne the brunt of the changes in society.

That brings me on to the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), who made a particularly nauseating speech. I warn the House that I recognise that my speech will be rather different in tenor from those that have been made before. I do not apologise for that, because this is the place where we should be able to express our views. I recognise that it is a sensitive subject and I will endeavour to talk about it without inflaming emotions and passions in the House. However, I feel strongly about it, and just as strongly as other hon. Members, albeit in a slightly different way.

As I said, I thought that the speech of the hon. Member for Witney was nauseating, in part because he was in charge of the Conservative party's whole campaigning operation. When did he advise Conservative Ministers that they should adopt a different policy on this issue? Where are the letters to suggest that he did? I suspect that they do not exist. He campaigned vigorously for the Conservative party, attacked this Government and then, overnight, switched sides and suddenly found that everything that the Conservatives had done was nauseating and anathema even though he had stood at the last election on the Conservative party's manifesto, much of which he had helped to draft. That smacks to me of gross hypocrisy.

The hon. Gentleman also referred frequently to decency in his speech, which, I thought betrayed his obsession with other areas of discrimination that are not the subject of the debate. I should have thought that he was obsessed with the promotion of indecency rather than that of decency.

Mr. Woodward: On a point of clarification, I had no hand in drafting the 1997 Conservative party election manifesto. I was involved in drafting the 1992 manifesto, and the then Conservative party chairman, Christopher Patten, and I shared with the then leader of the party an absolute abhorrence for any form of discrimination. As a matter of record, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), would very much want to distance himself from the kind of racist observations that I fear may be lurking behind the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman can throw insults at me, if he likes, because frankly they are just water off a duck's back. If he distanced himself from the 1997 manifesto, he had had five years in which he could have told Ministers to take what he thought of as a more robust attitude towards this issue. Suddenly he is sitting on the Government Benches and declaring himself hostile to everything that we stand for, but he kept remarkably silent until he had got his safe seat under his belt.

I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who explained why he could not stay, is no longer in his place. I oppose the Bill, but he made a point of principle when he said that there is a case for applying to the public sector that which is applied to the private sector, and a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends would agree that that is right in principle. However, my right hon. Friend gave me an opportunity to get myself off that hook by saying that he was nevertheless a pragmatic man, and I think that the Bill has something to do with pragmatism.

I am pleased to share my duties on the Home Affairs Committee with the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh). He is an excellent member of that Committee. We may have our differences, but we get on well together. He made the fair point that ethnic minorities in this country are doing very well, and he was keen to paint a balanced picture.

Since the hon. Gentleman spoke, I have discovered information from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Exeter university which shows that the richest ethnic group is not native Brits—whites, if one likes—but Chinese. In terms of family wealth, native Britons come third after Chinese and Indians. The idea that ethnic minority communities are all in the lower wage bands and among the poorest is not borne out by the facts. I found also a statistic showing that black women earn on average more than white women, at £6.10 an hour to £5.19 an hour. I am told that the figures came from *The Guardian*, so Labour Members will know that they must be true.

I want to make three key points, and I do not want to detain the House, although I suspect that my contribution will be rather different from the others, so I hope that the House will be indulgent towards me. The Bill clearly has its origins in the Macpherson report, and as I said in the debate on the report a year ago, I regard it as intellectually shoddy and devoid of logic. I advanced that argument because Sir William Macpherson's examination of the behaviour of each and every policeman responsible for the investigation of the awful, tragic murder of Stephen Lawrence revealed that none would have acted in a different way if the victim of that murder had been a white boy.

The only person who was singled out for any criticism was Detective Inspector Bullock, and that was because he was insensitive in referring to Stephen Lawrence and his friend Duwayne Brooks as "those two coloured lads". Poor Detective Inspector Bullock was unaware that to use the word "coloured" was a sign of insensitivity.

Having established that there was not a single case in which a single police man or police woman involved in the investigation of that murder had acted in a way that was racist, the committee under Sir William was driven to the conclusion that it would have to find something else, so it came up with the idea of institutional racism. That is a cop-out.

The report and the reaction to it have been severely damaging to police morale throughout the country, but especially among officers of the Metropolitan police force. Officers at all levels, from the top all the way down to those with whom some of us in the House come into contact, feel anger, bewilderment and a sense of having been beaten senseless by the criticism. They see their senior officers beating their breasts and saying "Mea culpa—it is all our fault and we must change", yet the report on which we are invited to base a change in the law could not find that a single police officer had acted dishonourably, save for the one example that I gave, which I do not consider a very serious example.

Fiona Mactaggart: I rise mainly to challenge the picture that the hon. Gentleman paints of the police response. Not long ago I attended a meeting of police of all ranks, members of the Thames Valley police in Slough. At the meeting they considered how they should respond to the Macpherson report, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that they found it enhancing and empowering. In my constituency people of all races live together side by side, benefiting from that. The Macpherson report has given my local police force a route map showing how they can improve the quality of their service to the community, and they are pleased to have it.

Mr. Howarth: Of course the police would say that; they cannot say anything else. I at least have the privilege of representing a constituency and having a voice in the House, where I can articulate my views. If a common or garden copper expressed such views, he would be at serious risk of impairing his promotion prospects or possibly of being dismissed from the service. I shall deal in a moment with a man who has been dismissed from the service.

Reference has been made to stop and search. A year ago, in the aftermath of the report, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis told us that in Tottenham, stop and search fell by 48 per cent. and crime went up by 25 per cent.

[Mr. Howarth]

I make no apology for quoting again the remarks that I quoted a year ago, made by the chairman of the Police Federation in Hampshire, who said:

> Law-abiding ethnic communities have never caused problems for the police service, and indeed in Hampshire we have always enjoyed good relations with community leaders . . .
>
> The main concern is in dealing with criminals who just happen to be black or Asian.
>
> It is this element which I fear will attempt to capitalise on a well-intentioned report and try to use it to their advantage.
>
> The phrase "You have only stopped me because I am black" in light of this report will understandably cause officers concern.
>
> It will be exploited by that criminal element who attempt to hide their criminality behind their colour and attempt to thwart proactive policing by falsely alleging persecution on the basis of race rather than the truth.

I believe that police officers will be intimidated into being soft on stop and search. The Home Secretary's argument that the Bill will not make the individual police officer liable, but will make the top man vicariously liable does not meet my objections. If a police officer is referred to his superior officer as the subject of a complaint, and the chief police officer is vicariously liable, and if there is a growing list of complaints against a particular officer, of course he will be hauled up before his boss and have questions asked about him. [HON. MEMBERS: "So he should."] If so, the police officer will hold back from enforcing the law equally and impartially for fear of being accused of racism.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the shadow Home Secretary, referred to a report that was conducted by Dr. Marian Fitzgerald and commissioned by the Metropolitan police. It found that there was support for stop and search among black youths. I hope that the police are encouraged by that. It was striking that those who had been searched were no less inclined to say that the power was necessary. A black school boy commented that police

> need to be able to do their job properly and as part of their job they have to stop and search people.

I take some encouragement from that. However, the police are nervous about enforcing the law. Far from improving matters, the Bill will make them worse.

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I do not intend any discourtesy, but I have already spoken for 14 minutes and I do not want to speak for too long.

Let us consider the case of PC Steven Hutt, which was the subject of a big article in *The Daily Telegraph* the Saturday before last. He was dismissed from the police service because, in a lapse of self-discipline, which he acknowledges, he said to a lad who had been arrested:

> Sit down, you black bastard.

I quote it so that I am not accused of holding back from what the chap said. He knows that what he said was wrong; all hon. Members know that it was wrong. However, it seems wrong for a man of unblemished record and 19 years of service to be drummed out of the police service after he had been provoked by a youth.

The black mother of the youth believes that the sentence is disproportionate, as does the Police Federation. PC Hutt is being made a scapegoat for the Government's policy of trying to instil a rather crude form of political correctness in our police force. The article states:

> Mr. Hutt has another champion. Jerry—he would not give a surname—is a bouncer at a Fulham pub. The two men became friendly through Mr. Hutt's anti-hooliganism duties.
>
> "I know all about racism. I have been stabbed for being black, and my personal belief is that everyone is racist to a certain extent," said Jerry, 34. "I am not saying that we are best buddies, but Steve and I are mates and he's a good guy. The country is screaming out for good policemen like him and a severe reprimand would have been enough. But we're talking politics."

The Government are playing politics with our police service, and a wholly disproportionate penalty has been given to a man who is widely acknowledged in both communities as an extremely successful policeman. We are considering political correctness gone mad. It is unforgivable to expect police officers to keep up with all the twists and turns of what language offends specific minorities.

I thank the hon. Member for Witney, who did me one service. He saved me from having to repeat some of the points that I made a year ago by quoting extensively from my speech. I hope that he will be pleased to know that I stand by every word, and shall continue to do so.

The Bill springs from an ideological desire for every institution to be a microcosm of society. It will damage the effectiveness of policing in this country. We expect our armed services to defend our country and not act as a crucible for social experimentation. The job of the police is not to act as a microcosm or reflection of society. It is the police service's job to enforce the law, and the job of our armed forces to fight for this country.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: Although the hon. Lady shares a birthday with me, and her father was a great man, I shall not give way to her.

My real fear is that the Bill will be a licence to anyone subjected to stop and search or any other intervention by the police to complain that they have been picked on—discriminated against—because of the colour of their skin. That will result in a tidal wave of complaints. The Home Secretary made it clear that he differentiates between such complaints and charges that the police may level against the individual concerned, but we shall nevertheless find our courts clogged up with a whole load of cases because complainants will not have much to lose. He is living in cloud cuckoo land if he is not prepared to acknowledge that. If the Bill becomes law, it will provide complainants with the means by which to accuse the police of having acted in a racist fashion.

The Bill will have an adverse effect on police morale and recruitment. I do not have the figures for Hendon, but I hope that the Minister will tell us how recruiting is going. I understand that not many recruits are coming forward—certainly not enough to meet the 1,000 shortfall in Metropolitan police numbers in London.

The Macpherson report made one interesting comment with which I agree. On page 316, it says:

> We must at the same time warn some of those who are most vociferous in their condemnation of police officers that they should guard against their own racism. Not only during our Inquiry but in

general there is readiness without justification to assume and to say that because police officers are white they must be acting to the disadvantage of minority ethnic communities. Racist prejudice and stereotyping can work and be evident both ways.

Not one Labour Member acknowledged that to be the case.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: It is self-evident.

Mr. Howarth: It is not self-evident, because racism is always perceived to be one way. Before I refer to remarks made by Sir Herman Ouseley, the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, I want to point out that, as well as a flood of claims, a serious cost to the Exchequer will arise from the proposals. The explanatory notes, which the Government have kindly provided, set out a whole series of costs on page 13. There

are likely to be additional costs to public authorities in relation to defending cases, settling cases, and paying damages if they lose cases.

We can say that again. They continue:

It is impossible to calculate what the overall financial effects of the Bill will be for those authorities

specified in the Bill. Furthermore, they say:

Additional public expenditure on the legal aid budget is also likely to arise from the new provision introduced in clause 1 . . .

In addition, there are likely to be significant costs to the legal aid budget arising from cases starting in the Immigration Appellate Authority . . .

Enormous costs will arise from the Bill—not only financial, but costs in terms of police morale, good race relations and effective policing.

I am not only against the Bill. Personally, I should like all the race relations legislation to be removed from the statute book. [HON. MEMBERS: "Disgraceful."] Hon. Members may say that, but I do not believe that it serves any useful effect, save to stir up trouble. By and large, I believe in a less regulated society. I certainly oppose the measure and I should have been happier if the race relations legislation—

Mr. Woodward: Now we know.

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. Gentleman does not know that he is obviously not very well informed.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman presents himself as a defender of the police, but I suspect that the vast majority of officers—good and decent people who work for us—would be appalled by his views on the race relations legislation. I want to place it on record that I think that they would dissociate themselves from his position.

Mr. Howarth: The Minister is frightfully excited about that. I dare say that some policemen disagree with me, but others may agree. We live in a free society and I am expressing a view. I cannot see anything outrageous in suggesting that we should remove a degree of regulation.

Let me finish by quoting the views of Sir Herman Ouseley, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality—an organisation that has itself been riven by internal feuding between the West Indian and Asian communities. That organisation, which claims to be able to represent the interests of good race relations, was consumed by such problems for months, if not years.

According to Melanie Philips, in an article in *The Sunday Times* in December 1998, Sir Herman rejected the

validity of a common culture,

adding that black children needed to be taught black culture. Melanie Philips believes that this approach spelled

disaster for black children in Britain.

Without access to English culture, without command of its language, appreciation of its literature or a grasp of the history of its institutions, black children will be unable to play an equal part in a society which assumes such access as a given.

I agree with Melanie Philips. I feel that there is an element of racism in Sir Herman Ouseley's comment that black children need to be taught black culture. What about English children being taught English culture? If I said that in the House, I would be accused of being a racist.

I do not believe that the Bill is in the interests of good race relations. I shall not oppose it, because there will be no Division and I have to keep a constituency engagement, but I have made it clear that I do not support it, and if further opportunities arise I shall vote against it.

5.31 pm

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): It is a privilege to speak in the debate.

I am sure that, if my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) had any doubts about the wisdom of crossing the Floor, listening to what we have all just heard has dispelled any that remained. I hope that the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) will take the opportunity to repudiate the remarks of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), and to condemn them as being unacceptable in his party.

The hon. Gentleman painted a scary picture of the possible impact of the Bill, and spoke of cloud cuckoo land. I wanted to point out that he was condemning something that already applies in the private sector and has applied for the past 25 years, but—having not taken my intervention—he answered my point by saying that he did not think it should have applied during that time, and that people should not have such protection in any sector. I think that that view will be widely condemned by his constituents, and by people throughout the country.

Along with speakers in all parts of the House, including Conservatives—particularly the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd)—I welcome the Bill. We face great challenges as a Parliament, and Government face great challenges in building an inclusive society. We must ourselves challenge bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. We must ensure that people's life chances are determined on the basis of their merit rather than their background, the colour of their skin or their ethnic origin.

As others have said today, the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the Lawrence family's struggle for justice shine a light for all of us who seek to get the law right. Everyone, I hope, can empathise with the sense of injustice, the suffering and the pain experienced by Neville and Doreen Lawrence. The British people responded positively and constructively to the courage and dignity shown by Mrs. Lawrence, a mother who had

[Mr. Stephen Twigg]

lost her son in tragic and terrible circumstances, and Mr. Lawrence, a father who, although his son had been murdered, could not secure justice from the system.

Like many others, my constituency in suburban north London has a rich ethnic and cultural diversity. It contains a long-established and vibrant Jewish community, the largest number of Cypriots—both Greek and Turkish—outside Cyprus, a significant and growing Asian community and many people from African and Caribbean backgrounds. My constituents see that diversity as a source of great strength and opportunity for our local community. Overwhelmingly, there is acceptance and, indeed, celebration of that diversity. It is a community in harmony.

Tragically, however, that harmony sometimes breaks down. Last autumn, Abdul Osman, an 18-year-old black student at Southgate college, was killed in Southgate. Michael Menson was murdered in the neighbouring constituency of Edmonton. I have spoken in the Chamber about events in the Oakwood ward of my constituency, where a small group of white youths conducted a sustained campaign of racist harassment, directed mostly against the Asian community, but also against the local Jewish community. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary took the opportunity of visiting my constituency to meet some of the families and business people who had been affected by that campaign of racist harassment.

That is a good example of where harassment can be tackled. The various local agencies—the police, local authority, local schools, as well as the people themselves in that area—came together through the Enfield racial incidents action group and the Oakwood focus group to examine ways of tackling both the causes of racist crime and the racist crime itself. As a consequence, the latest statistics from that part of my constituency show a significant fall in its incidence.

It is salutary to remember that the full weight of race relations legislation does not apply to the public sector, yet we already see some good examples of excellent practice, as I have described, including in the police. The former Prime Minister, Lord Callaghan of Cardiff, who in the 1950s and 1960s was a consultant in the House to the Police Federation of England and Wales and, later, the Home Secretary when the race relations legislation was going through, has made the point that has been made by many hon. Members: the police should never have been exempted from the legislation. The Bill is welcome, but it should have been introduced 25 years ago.

As other hon. Members have said, it is worth reminding ourselves of the Britain of the 1960s and 1970s—a Britain in which hotels had signs saying, "No dogs, no Irish, no Blacks", where north London golf clubs regularly excluded Jewish people from membership, and where pubs and shops could and did refuse to serve people simply on the basis of the colour of their skin.

I remember as a 10-year-old in the mid-1970s going with my parents to demonstrate against the National Front as it marched through the streets of multi-racial north London, seeking to spread its message of hate and division. Looking at the debates in *Hansard* on earlier race relations legislation, I find it shocking to read the arguments that were used. Perhaps it is less shocking when we realise that they are still used today, as we have heard—arguments that, generally, would be regarded as unacceptable in 2000 when considering race, although such language is regularly used in the House of Commons and, more particularly, in the other place when Parliament discusses discrimination on the ground of sexuality.

The Race Relations Act has had a powerful impact in shaping public attitudes. I do not believe that any hon. Member has asserted what was implied by the hon. Member for Aldershot—that changing legislation will in itself change conditions and determine people's attitudes. The process is far more sophisticated and complicated. I believe firmly that legislation can and has made a difference. Progress over the past 25 to 30 years has been real, but we still have a long way to go.

Institutional racism is not a term that was invented by Macpherson. It was not referred to only in the light of the Stephen Lawrence case. There is nothing new about the concept. The report of Lord Scarman's inquiry, which was set up following the disturbances in Brixton almost 20 years ago, addressed institutional racism. It said:

> If . . . the suggestion being made is that practices may be adopted by public bodies as well as private individuals which are unwittingly discriminatory against black people, then this is an allegation which deserves serious consideration and, where proved, swift remedy.

Two decades later, we finally have the opportunity to provide that swift remedy, which Lord Scarman called for in the early 1980s.

The Bill is too late for the Lawrence family. It is too late for the family of Michael Menson. It is too late for the other families to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Witney referred. I am not saying that, had the Bill been in place 25 years ago, those tragedies would not have happened; they may well still have happened. However, if the Race Relations Acts had covered the public sector from the outset, we might have had the type of sea-change in institutions, such as the police and other public bodies, that we are now starting to witness. The culture of institutional racism could have been challenged, and families such as the Lawrence and Menson families could have been relieved of having to go through the additional burden of having to fight for justice when they were having to cope with bereavement. That is the point of the Bill.

Like other hon. Members on both sides of the House, I welcome the shift announced by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to cover indirect as well as direct discrimination. However, I shall not deal at length with that matter, as other hon. Members have done so in full detail. I have no doubt, however, that discrimination today is more subtle and sophisticated than it was 20 or 30 years ago. We are less likely to see the overt differential practice and treatment that various speakers have mentioned, but we are more likely to see requirements created, the outcomes of which in practice disadvantage ethnic minorities. When those requirements cannot be justified, surely it is our duty to make them unlawful. That, I believe, is what indirect discrimination is all about.

If we were not to address indirect discrimination, we would be failing to meet the challenge set by the Macpherson report to extend the full force of race relations legislation. There is also a good case to be made that we would be creating a recipe for legal confusion and unnecessary complexity. The distinctions between direct and indirect discrimination are not always clear or simple—legal experts in the sphere of discrimination

themselves often disagree about whether something constitutes direct or indirect discrimination. My fear is that, if we took only the half step forward and extended provisions to cover only direct discrimination by public bodies, we would be failing those members of the public who are seeking a legal remedy to correct a civil wrong.

Like other hon. Members, I very much welcome the proposal to amend the Bill to create a positive duty on public authorities. That follows similar provisions in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in the legislation creating the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, as well as in the legislation establishing the Greater London Authority. It builds on widespread existing good practice, some of which I have already mentioned, and it has been widely welcomed not only by the Commission for Racial Equality, but by the Confederation of Indian Organisations, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Runnymede Trust.

The creation of such a duty is an essential further step if we are truly to root out all the forms of racism that disfigure and divide our country. I very much hope that, in Committee, the Government will ensure that that positive duty is clearly and explicitly enshrined in the Bill.

As other hon. Members have said, the Commission for Racial Equality has made the point to Members of Parliament that the Government should consult on the details of the operation, monitoring and enforcement of those new provisions once the legislation is amended.

Excellent work is already being done in schools and community organisations across the country. The Bill is not imposing something new or alien, but simply building on existing good practice in many parts of the country. I believe that its provisions can go hand in hand with the Government's plans for citizenship education to form part of the national curriculum from 2002. Such education is about celebrating the diversity of modern Britain, not teaching people about only some aspects of our culture. It is about recognising that modern British society is made up of many different forms of culture. I hope that tackling racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia will be an integral part of the new citizenship curriculum.

Late last year, I had the privilege of seeing such good practice in action when I joined a seminar at St. Ignatius school, a local secondary school in Enfield, to discuss the holocaust. The seminar was led by two students, John Prendergast and Joseph Egan, who had joined a Holocaust Educational Trust delegation to Auschwitz and came back to report on their visit and discuss the historical context of the holocaust and its lessons for today. That is a good example of what we should include as part of citizenship in the national curriculum.

By creating a positive duty on public authorities, we can ensure that such good practice is spread throughout the country. The Bill will open the door to real progress towards racial equality. Strengthening race relations legislation is good not just for the minority ethnic communities, but for all of us.

As many have said during the debate, after almost three decades of legislation, there is no room for complacency. We are fast approaching the first anniversary of the appalling London nail bomb attacks in Brixton, Brick lane and Soho. They serve as a potent reminder to the House that racism and bigotry have not gone away. It is only right that we act now to do all that we can to root out racist discrimination in all its forms. We cannot afford to wait another 25 years. I commend the Government for bringing the Bill before us.

5.47 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I shall make a very brief contribution from my perspective as a Member whose constituency is not metropolitan, but largely rural. It has a small ethnic minority community and the issue of racism does not assume as much salience as perhaps it should.

It would be wrong to assume that the Bill was not of the utmost relevance to everyone in the United Kingdom, because it has to do with the nature and values of the wider society to which we belong. It would also be wrong to assume that people from all over the country were not profoundly troubled by the death of Stephen Lawrence and the failure of the subsequent police investigation—matters that have spurred on this legislation.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that the Bill represents a step change in race relations and that society would have to pay a very heavy price if we did not legislate—a moral cost and a cost of greater disaffection and higher crime rates. Those are matters that affect us all and we have a common interest in ensuring that we have a fair and tolerant society.

I pay tribute to the eloquent comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Witney (Mr. Woodward) and for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), who bore testimony to the issues that we should tackle to create a fairer and more tolerant society. It is high time the Race Relations Act 1976 was updated. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) that, as Lord Callaghan said recently, with the benefit of hindsight, not including the police within the ambit of that Act was a serious omission. I welcome the fact that the Bill will extend the provisions of that Act to the police and all public authorities that are not currently covered.

The Government are entirely right to acknowledge the recommendations of the Macpherson report and to recognise the existence of institutional racism. As a society, we have learned much since 1976. There has been a process of education here and in the wider society about the nature of institutional racism.

I am pleased that the Government are committed to tabling an amendment to outlaw indirect discrimination. I am pleased that the Government are taking such a robust approach. I am also pleased that they are prepared to table an amendment to place a duty on public bodies to promote social equality.

In conclusion, the Bill is part of the Government's wider agenda of promoting equality of opportunity and creating a genuinely tolerant and inclusive society, and I welcome it.

5.51 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) on his speech, which was a model of the bipartisan support for the Bill. I may speak for slightly longer than he did, but I shall attempt not to try the patience of the House, particularly as I have not been able to listen to all the speeches that have been made this afternoon. However, I have heard some good speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House.

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

My speech is based partly on my own experience and partly on that of a doctor. I shall relate the doctor's story in the first person as it is better than saying that he or she is Indian. Let us imagine that I came to Britain in the late 1970s with a British passport. I spoke the language fluently, played Bob Dylan rather well on my guitar and had qualifications. I could not have been better equipped, but it has not all been plain sailing. The story does not end in total misery, as I became a consultant. However racism is not behind me—it does not stop when one finally attains a senior position.

I should say in passing that I do not relate this story because the national health service has not been trying to put things right; when my wife was Minister for Health and then Secretary of State for Health, she worked very hard to get the NHS to overcome some of the difficulties that I am about to describe.

I now return to the doctor's story. No one taught me, but criticism was rife when I failed. This is the one characteristic of racism that I find most distressing. My white friends received gentle instruction, but I was largely excluded unless I asked. At every stage in my career I have had to outperform white doctors in order to get a job.

In my senior house officer post there was no in-house teaching of any sort. When I told my boss that I was leaving, he was aghast. He took me aside and, in the presence of his clinical assistant, said, "Do you realise you are resigning from a white job?" I apologised profusely, but left.

I was delighted when I got my first general surgical rotational job. I had a boss who liked me, but a ward sister who did not. No matter how hard I tried, she reported me and took pleasure in disliking me. How can one tell that dislike is racist? Because it is instant and intractable.

The most racist job that I did was as a rotating registrar in surgery in the east midlands. The consultant ignored me from the outset and spoke only to my senior house officer, a white doctor. He taught me nothing. If I could not negotiate the rectosigmoid junction at colonoscopy it was, "tut tut". If the senior house officer could not do it, it was all encouragement and teaching.

I went to the fellowship examinations in London with a white fellow registrar in general surgery. He was asked to describe a cholecystectomy. I was asked rather aggressively to describe a hemilaminectomy, but only after the examiner had determined that I had no experience in the procedure. I failed, he passed. I got antidepressant pills from my general practitioner; he was given a research post.

After four years as a rotating senior house officer and registrar, I received my first summons from the higher surgical training committee. "Do you really think that you will become a general surgeon?", they asked. I was 28, had two fellowships, had written two papers and was completing a recognised registrar rotation in surgery in a teaching hospital. I had encountered no problems with my attitude or capability. "Yes," I replied.

It was at that point that someone else appeared. He sat down and all eyes turned to him. He did not beat about the bush, although I had never worked for him. He told me I was being quite unrealistic. He went on to remind me that I was Indian and he took me through the fate of all the previous Indian registrars in the city I was working in. "So you see, not one has made it," he said. The six other consultants present just sat there studying their pens. The committee had found me unsuitable for further training because I was Indian. I decided to move but to give my love for surgery one last go.

The story continues with an application for a research fellowship and I congratulate the editor of the *British Medical Journal* on putting it into last week's issue—volume 320, 4 March 2000, for anybody who wishes to read the rest of that personal view.

That story was published in this millennium but it is not so different from what I found when I was a junior Minister in the Department of Employment and I talked to the unions in ACAS—the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. I do not think that they will mind my saying this, because things have moved on since 1985. At that time, I asked the unions why there were no black or Asian field officers in ACAS. I was asked in return, "How do you know that they would be acceptable to all employers?" That attitude has changed.

I listened to the 24 members of the race relations employment advisory service, and I congratulate Sir Michael Quinlan, then the Permanent Secretary at the Department, for agreeing to let two of the people from that service come into the Department. That Department had, in effect, responsibility for equal opportunities on grounds of sex and disability, as well as race, and Sir Michael produced a report to which—I hope—people in Departments still occasionally refer. It showed that even when a Department tried to do the right things as well as advocate them, it can fail, directly and indirectly.

The Bill will make a difference, but not the biggest difference. Law at its best is obeyed, clear and fair. There are plenty of examples of areas in which race relations legislation already bites, but is not always obeyed. I shall not give the details of one example, but I helped a police officer and the Metropolitan police to come to an agreement and settle an employment case for probably a third of the cost of fighting the issue out. Both those who have reason to complain, and those against whom they complain, can often get together to resolve issues and learn from that.

The people who really have to learn are top and middle management. In some parts of the public service, people are determined to make things better, but some are willing to sit at a higher level without ensuring that a regular routine improves matters at a lower level. I shall give an illustrative example. When I asked a slightly complicated question of the Home Office about at what stage and at what cost each claim by a Metropolitan police officer for discrimination on the grounds of race came in, the answer was that it was too expensive to provide the information. I suspect that it was too expensive—or at least would have cost more than £200. However, if there were so many cases that providing the answer would have been too expensive, I would have welcomed an answer that added that more extensive information could be made available reasonably easily.

In my view, the Metropolitan police service is doing much more than it has done before, and in five years it will be able to look back and say that its progress since 2000 has been marked. I also acknowledge the presence of the ethnic teams from the armed forces, at the party given in the Locarno rooms of the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office yesterday. The people there talked about their work in trying to overcome perceptions of racial inequality in the services. Things are not yet completely right, but I welcome the existence of those teams which can provide the positive action needed to make progress.

I would have liked to make other points, but as I missed part of the debate I shall not trespass on the good will of the House.

I have two final points. First, race and sex are not disabilities, and they should not be a handicap. Secondly, the people who have the responsibility for putting things right are not the victims, but white, middle class men in full-time occupations. They are the ones who have to meet what Richard Stone, a member of the Lawrence inquiry, called our challenge and our responsibility. We are the people who should be able to say to future generations that, in part because of what we did, the colour of our skin is no more important than the colour of our eyes or hair. People may notice it, but it tells them nothing more about us.

6 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth)—who said that he would not continue to be in his place—talked of my constituents bearing the brunt of other races in Britain. That phrase provoked me to speak in the debate, as it suggests that the contribution of other races to our community has all been negative. I am confident that many of his constituents enjoy the services of an excellent Chinese restaurant, which is provided by one of those races which has migrated to Britain. I say that in the sure and certain knowledge that probably no constituency in this country does not have such an example.

In my constituency, people have come from Poland, the Punjab and Pontypridd to work, and the children of Slough learn about the richness of all those different cultures and communities as part of their daily experience. It is a question not of bearing the brunt, but of learning about the world of which we are a part and obtaining new and rich experiences.

The hon. Member for Aldershot described the inadvertent racism of a police officer as though the police officer were the victim. He failed to understand why the real victim is not the person in a position of responsibility who can and should learn about the consequences of racial abuse, but the person who cannot learn to change the colour of their skin. That is why having legislative protection against racism is an absolute signal of a civilised society.

Racial violence and abuse work like terrorism. There is not just one victim, but everybody who shares that ethnicity and could be a victim is victimised by it. That is why it is a serious public duty upon us all to protect people who share that kinship with the victim and feel threatened. I am glad that we are moving to bring to an end something that horrified me—the fact that there are communities in this great city who were more afraid of the police than of the criminals who threatened them. The Bill is about putting an end to that kind of society.

The hon. Member for Aldershot talked about people coming from Bangladesh to Britain as though the only reason they did so was to better themselves. Some did, but people now come from Bangladesh to Britain to be with their mums, dads, husbands, wives and children.

Ms Buck: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Bangladeshi catering industry now has a larger turnover than the coal, iron and steel industries combined?

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed. We must not fail to recognise not just the cultural contributions made by different communities which, from Anglo-Saxon times, have come to Britain, but also their economic contribution to the success of our island.

I was impressed by the speech of the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs), who has reason to know the consequences of unthinking prejudice on factors over which people have no control. The moves towards equality in Northern Ireland provide a beacon for the process here. In that context, I hope to seek assurances from the Minister on issues which I hope will be looked at in Committee.

First, I am worried about the power in the Bill that allows discrimination on ethnic as well as nationality grounds in the administration of immigration. For example, out of two people with Yugoslav nationality, we might be willing to accept as a refugee only one—not as a result of discrimination on ethnic grounds, but because only that one is a genuine refugee. The Bill evinces a certain muddle-headedness that must be sorted out.

Secondly, I hope that the bond scheme will not be restricted to the Indian subcontinent. If the granny of a constituent of mine from Jamaica were refused a visit to the United Kingdom, why should not my constituent have the right to put up a bond as an insurance that that granny would go home? I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to study that possibility, and not to rule it out.

The Bill's definition of a public body is also a little shaky. That problem was solved in the Human Rights Act 1998, and the Bill should adopt the same approach. Increasingly, organisations such as Group 4 are taking on public responsibilities, and they want to be certain that they are covered in the same way as public bodies. The clear definition of public bodies in the 1998 Act is better than what is proposed in schedule 1.

I was pleased to hear of the research being conducted into Islamophobia in Britain. I hope that the Minister will assure the House that he will consider extending more effective protection to the Muslim communities against the consequences of that phobia in future. I recognise, however, that that cannot be accomplished in this Bill.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said earlier this week that he had not put forward a single Bill that had not been improved in Committee. He has announced already that he is planning to improve this Bill in Committee, and I am glad of that. I hope very much that some of the points made today will be included among the matters being considered by the Committee. I do not want to end up with a Bill that is merely good: I want it to be excellent, and to make it clear that everyone in the country is of equal value, with equal rights and an equal opportunity to be served by the state.

6.8 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Let me begin by stating that I agree wholly with the objectives set out for the Bill by the Home Secretary in his introductory speech. I share his commitment to seek to build a society in which all British citizens, regardless of race, colour or religion,

[Mr. David Lidington]

have an equal and honoured place and are encouraged to make the greatest possible use of the talents and energies given to them by God.

Although I shall not agree with everything said by Labour Members, whether Front Benchers or Back Benchers, and although I shall certainly have questions about certain aspects of the Bill, I do not doubt for a moment the personal commitment of Ministers, nor the sincerity of their intentions in bringing this Bill before Parliament today.

There is sometimes a temptation on the part of politicians, whichever party is in power, to place a little too much confidence in the power of the law alone to transform things. We do not change attitudes—certainly not in the short term—simply by passing an Act of Parliament. However, I accept that the law has a part to play here.

I thought that some of the speeches of Labour Members, including that of the Home Secretary, did not make enough mention of the beneficial effect of the traditions of tolerance, respect for diversity and respect for individual freedom that have been characteristic features of British society as it has evolved over recent centuries and which the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) talked of in his contribution. The hon. Gentleman said, and I agree, that what has been achieved has been underestimated in some parts of the House. While we should recognise, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) said, that a great deal still remains to be done, we can take legitimate pride in what Britain has done for racial integration in coming to terms in recent decades with the arrival in this country of a large number of people of various ethnic origins.

Two things are very striking in the debates on immigration and race relations that took place in the 1960s. To some extent, the predictions that a large proportion of the population of British cities would in future be formed from people from ethnic minority communities have been borne out. However, the prophecies that that would result in riots, racial conflict on an unprecedented scale and communal tension that could not be cured have been proved demonstrably false.

The duty that falls on us as legislators and political leaders is to take forward into a new century the success that previous generations have had. We must build on the success that many British blacks and Asians are making of their lives in the United Kingdom, whether in business, sport, art, literature or even politics. I say in passing that I shall regard it as a happy day, which I confidently expect to come after the next election, when there are black and Asian Britons sitting on the Conservative Benches of the House of Commons as well as on the Labour Benches.

The hon. Member for Bradford, West also warned of the risks of creating a cult of victimhood. I think that he was right to say that although the prime responsibility rests with those who are entrusted with positions of authority and leadership, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) also said, the leaders of the ethnic communities also have a responsibility to help to bring about the tolerant and plural society that we wish to see evolve.

Much has been achieved, but we still face great challenges. The Home Secretary, along with the hon. Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) and for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), talked of how British society has been influenced and shaped over many centuries by successive waves of immigration to these islands. It is also the case that each wave of immigration has been accompanied by conflict, discrimination and resentment on the part of both the host and the incoming communities. Before I was elected, I spent much time studying the minutes of the Privy Council of the 16th century. In, I think, Essex and Suffolk, there were riots and violence because of the arrival in East Anglian villages of groups of Dutch people fleeing Spanish persecution in the Netherlands. The powers of that age had to deal with that problem, just as we must take account both of successes already achieved and the challenges that remain.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Does my hon. Friend agree that when a new community comes to live in a host country, one of the inevitable initial problems is language? Does he agree that, as with my grandfather who could not read or write English properly until the end of his life, what really counts is that children and grandchildren of an immigrant community make the effort to integrate with the English language and the English culture? Does he agree that we must pay due attention to the need for incoming communities to adopt the language of the host community?

Mr. Lidington: We could have a long debate about educational minority support grants and section 11 funding. I agree that fluency in both written and spoken English is an essential passport for many people from new immigrant communities to entering the mainstream of British life. The communities themselves are certainly responsible for that, because they have an interest in taking advantage of opportunities here; but those of us who exercise leadership in politics are responsible for doing all we can to ensure that the opportunity to gain proficiency in the English language is given as soon as possible to those who need help.

Immense problems remain, as hon. Members on both sides have said. We must be honest about the mistrust of our police forces among British blacks and British Asians, particularly among young men from those communities. I saw that mistrust when I was a candidate for an inner-London seat about a decade ago. It is disturbing, and it merits political action on its own terms. However, mistrust also makes the police less effective in fighting crime, because it means that they are denied information and evidence that they need to secure convictions, including the conviction of those who are terrorising members of the ethnic minority communities themselves.

I have no doubt that the problem of mistrust of the police among young British blacks and Asians has been worsened by the mishandling of the investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence by the Metropolitan police. However, the roots of the problem go deeper than that. They derive in part from the experience of discrimination—perceived and actual—and from a belief that the police, and the white majority, have not taken racial harassment or racial attacks sufficiently seriously. The hon. Member for Bradford, West was unfair in his strictures on the previous Government, who took some steps towards improving the priority given to this problem.

The matter was brought home to me only just after my election to this place in 1992. On one of the first occasions that I visited the Aylesbury mosque, I saw some extremely offensive racist graffiti that had been painted on a wall nearby. Yes, they were offensive, and if the wall had been plastered with graffiti about the Conservative party, I should probably have complained and grumbled a bit. Indeed, during the previous Parliament, one might have borne that with a certain amount of equanimity—Labour Members may soon have to learn to do the same.

However, when I talked to members of the Muslim community in my constituency, I was struck by how the graffiti had taken on tremendous significance—they felt they showed how they were seen by other people in the town. Although I understand that those responsible for that graffiti were caught and convicted, members of the Muslim community felt—rightly or wrongly—that that act made their acceptance within the community of Aylesbury less secure than it had been or than they wanted it to be. For that reason, I came to the view that we have a duty to ensure not only that we understand that racial harassment and racial attacks are evil in themselves, but that they have a profound social effect because they poison community relations in a town or district.

Sometimes, young people from the ethnic minorities—although not exclusively—receive some brusque treatment from police officers. I shall mention the difficulties of the police later in my speech. However, those of us who make a point of supporting the police also need to bear in mind that the experiences of my noble Friend Lord Taylor of Warwick or the Bishop of Stepney demonstrate that there is a genuine problem, which, to their credit, the police are actively trying to address.

The other half of the problem is that the police themselves feel beleaguered—especially in London and other great cities. They, too, often go in fear of physical attack or threat. We are rightly offended and ashamed by the fact that the murderers of Stephen Lawrence are still free to swagger around the streets of south London. The grief and sense of loss of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence can never be assuaged by anything that we do in this place. However, it is also true that the murderers of Keith Blakelock are walking around free somewhere in north London. The people who maimed Richard Coombes and drove him from the career that he loved are still walking free. Their families' suffering can never be assuaged by Act of Parliament.

The police rightly feel that they have been unfairly traduced in some of the debate consequent on the Macpherson report. A detective constable told me that, on the day the report was published, he had attended Southwark Crown court where he gave evidence as the officer in charge of a case that resulted in a long custodial sentence for a man guilty of racial attacks. The constable said that, even after all the efforts of the Scotland Yard press office, that case merited about two inches somewhere on page 8 of a newspaper. It had taken weeks of painstaking police work and dedication to assemble the evidence to secure that conviction, but that seemed to be of no account in the hurricane of criticism that descended on the force in which he served.

When we talk about labels such as institutional racism, we should be clear about several points. I am not persuaded that the failures of service experienced by the Lawrence family and other people in that case were exclusive to people in the black community. I know of a fair number of white youths who feel that the police treated them roughly and brusquely when they were stopped. There is a wider problem that the label of institutional racism does not accurately describe.

As my right hon. Friends the Members for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) pointed out, the label of institutional racism—whatever the wording in Sir William Macpherson's report—has led, in practice, to a widespread belief among police officers that they have all been branded as racists. Many people think that that is the charge that has been levelled at the Metropolitan police. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham said, the last thing that any of us wants is a state of affairs in which the use of the label aggrieves the police, fuels resentment among ethnic communities and brings about the very state of confrontation that we all want to end.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: I am listening carefully to the balanced approach that the hon. Gentleman is taking—in stark contrast to the speech of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). When I spoke earlier, I suggested that the hon. Gentleman could take the opportunity to repudiate the remarks of the hon. Member for Aldershot. I would be grateful if he would do that.

Mr. Lidington: I was about to say that I do not agree—I have made that clear in what I have said hitherto—with much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) said. However, the House would be foolish if it ignored the fact that the opinions that he quite legitimately expressed are shared by many of our fellow citizens. It is right that those arguments should be addressed maturely in debate rather than being simply pilloried and branded, which is not the way forward. He expressed his concerns about the Bill's possible impact on stop and search, and those concerns are shared quite widely by many people who would probably share the principled opposition to racism that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate outlined in his speech.

One police superintendent told me that he was under great pressure from ethnic community leaders in his patch to reconsider his stop-and-search practices. He had done so, and he found that his officers had indeed stopped a disproportionately large number of people from a particular ethnic minority. However, he then described the difficulty that he faced. When he examined the papers case by case, he discovered that his officers had stopped frequently a relatively small number of people who had been identified through intelligence-led policing as villains who were involved in the type of street crime that stop-and-search techniques are extremely useful in deterring and in helping to secure convictions for. He asked how he was supposed to reconcile good, intelligence-led policing with what he believed were the demands on him to reduce the number of stops to match the ethnic proportions of the population that he served.

The Home Secretary said—I hope that the Minister will confirm this—that such police officers need not worry because other factors to justify stop-and-search should give them legal protection. However, the officer's question needs to be addressed seriously and we shall have the opportunity to consider it in Committee. It is important to guard against the law of unintended consequences.

[Mr. Lidington]

The hon. Member for Bristol, East (Jean Corston) said that it was a great mistake not to have included the whole public sector in the 1976 Act. When I read the Committee proceedings on that Bill, I found it striking that the nature and scope of exclusions from its provisions were barely discussed. It is incumbent on us carefully to consider the detail of the Government's proposals to make sure that we do not end up putting into statute a provision that will have unintended, unwanted consequences.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: The whole House would support that point, and I hope that the Standing Committee will do so when it comes to consider the Bill. I underline my hon. Friend's point by stating that four of my middle-aged black friends have been stopped. One, Bill Morris, has not, as far as I know, possibly because he is the general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union and has a driver. Bishop John Sentamu, our colleague Lord Taylor, the Liberal peer Lord Dholakia and Neville Lawrence were stopped. I do not know of a single white friend of my age who has been stopped. That is the underlying problem, and an outside audit of what the police do would be helpful to them.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend makes his point well, and I agree with him.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra) called for legal challenges to housing allocation and education policies, and I will want to explore in Committee exactly what the Bill will entail for services other than policing. Lord Bassam said, during debates in another place, that the Government were concerned that a legal challenge on grounds of indirect discrimination could

> potentially include any age-based policy because of the different demographic profiles of different racial groups, and also any regional policy because of the different regional spread of different racial groups.

He went on to say that

> challenges could be mounted to those policies that are helping individuals from ethnic minority communities the most.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 December 1999; Vol. 608, c. 130.]

There is a need to explore further the reasons for the Government's change of heart.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the definitions of public bodies and the cost of the proposals. Those, too, are matters that we want to explore. I shall want also to explore further who should carry out investigations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham said that if the Bill is to work, our purpose must be not to identify scapegoats but to help and encourage individuals and organisations in the public sector to improve the way in which they apply in practice the commitment to equality of opportunity that already exists on paper and in declared policy.

When I read the Lawrence report, one of the sentences that I found most striking came near the end, and it was made by the coroner at the inquest into Mr. Lawrence's death. In his concluding remarks, following the jury's verdict, he said:

> We must teach our young, both in the family and in our schools that each individual, regardless of their race, regardless of their colour, regardless of their religion has the right to live peacefully without any fear or intimidation.

That is an accurate description of what virtually every Member of the House is committed to.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West, I believe that one of the tests for us is whether in the next two or three generations we see British blacks and Asians in the Cabinet and as High Court judges, chief constables, senior commanders in the armed forces and permanent secretaries of Whitehall Departments, and know that they are there not by extraordinary achievement, but simply as a natural reward for the talent, application and drive of individual British citizens.

I want a society, and I want my children to grow up in a nation, where everybody, no matter what ethnic or cultural group they originally came from, can not only take pride in their history but feel that they are inheritors of the political, cultural and artistic tradition of Britain, and that at the same time they are helping to play their part in and to shape the future of the mainstream of British life. It is against that objective that I look to test the legislation before us.

6.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Bill fulfils a commitment to early legislation made by the Government in response to the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. It will significantly improve the ability of members of the public to hold to account public authorities that act in a racially discriminatory manner. It will make a difference. I hope that the Stephen Lawrence case will be seen as a watershed in race relations in Britain, from which we can go forward. The Bill is part of that key process.

During the debate we heard a number of strong speeches from both sides of the House. Having heard the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), I am proud that he has decided to join the Labour party. He is very welcome to the party and spoke enormously well on our behalf today.

There were strong speeches also from my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol, East (Jean Corston), for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh), for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra), for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg), for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) and for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart).

We heard good speeches from the Conservative Benches. I thought that in many ways the best speech of the day was that from the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), who made an important contribution to the debate. The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) also showed that many in the Conservative party support the creation of a successful multicultural Britain. I welcome that.

It is a pity that the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) let the Conservative party and the House down, with a speech of monumental littleness and saloon bar prejudice. He posed as a defender of the police against race relations legislation, but as a former parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation and as a Home Office Minister, I know that most police officers in Britain would want to dissociate themselves from the hon. Gentleman's speech and his prejudice. They would have been appalled by it, just as I hope that they would have agreed with the comments of the parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation, the right hon. Member for Fareham.

I welcome the support for the Bill from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench, which was enthusiastic and principled. I welcome, too, the Tory Front-Bench support, which seemed to be carefully worded. It was the classic approach, particularly the opening speech of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), supporting the objective and endorsing none of the detail, but picking apart some of the substance. At least, that seemed to be the right hon. Lady's approach. I was pleased to note that the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), who also speaks from the Opposition Front Bench, adopted a far more positive approach to the Bill and to tackling racism in Britain than she did. The hon. Gentleman taught his right hon. Friend some lessons today about how these issues should be addressed. *[Interruption.]* It is always nice to sow disunity on the other side. I had hoped for a broader approach. It would have been helpful if we had had a more positive response from the right hon. Lady. It would have sent out from the House a good all-party message, not just to ethnic minorities, but to everyone in our society, that we are determined to make sure that we are a success as a multiracial Britain.

Mr. Dawson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the one disappointing aspect of the summing-up by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) was his lack of commitment to the concept of institutional racism? It is crucial that the subtleties of that key concept are well understood in all parts of the House in order to make progress.

Mr. O'Brien: I agree that that is an important concept, and there has been much misunderstanding of its meaning. If we have time, I shall say a little more about how that misunderstanding has produced some of the problems to which the hon. Member for Aylesbury referred. Some police officers seem to have misunderstood the concept and construed it as a personal criticism, whereas we are highlighting the failures of an institution. Many of us, including me, are members of an institution that has many failings, although its policy is positively anti-racist. It is possible for an institution to have failings and an anti-racist policy.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I agree with the Minister that the one sadness of debating such issues is that the Conservative party, inside and outside the House, sends mixed messages. Some Conservatives make clear their commitment to an anti-racist Britain, while others appear to pander to prejudice and bigotry. Until the Conservative party sorts that out internally and adopts the enlightened side of the argument, many people will not accept it as a responsible custodian of a multi-racial, equal Britain.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is right. We are receiving very mixed messages from the Conservative party. Its mayoral candidate describes as "disgusting" the policy of reintroducing the primary purpose rule that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald retains as an option.

Miss Widdecombe: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: In a moment. We hear that the right hon. Lady wishes to restore a rule that caused great damage to British families, especially British-Asian families. One of our first actions was to get rid of it. The Conservative mayoral candidate appears to agree with us that its restoration would be a disgrace. Yet the right hon. Lady disowns the views of the mayoral candidate; she wants to keep open the option of reintroducing the primary purpose rule.

I hope that the right hon. Lady will stand at the Dispatch Box and reassure the people of Britain who come from Asian families that they will not face the appalling, prejudicial primary purpose rule that the previous Government used when the right hon. Lady was a Home Office Minister.

Miss Widdecombe: I ask the Minister to be a little franker—I believe that that is a parliamentary word—in his description of what Steve Norris said. When he used the words "immoral", "disgusting" and "disgraceful", he was referring to the Minister's proposal to introduce a £10,000 bond for people from selected countries. Steve Norris confirmed to me that that was the context of his remarks. Even before the newspaper report, he had already made those comments about the Minister's bond.

Mr. O'Brien: I am appalled that the right hon. Lady stood at the Dispatch Box and made no effort to reassure the Asian people of Britain that she would not seek to restore the primary purpose rule. We now know that she wants to reintroduce that appalling rule.

The Conservative mayoral candidate has not repudiated his remarks in *The Times*. He said that the Conservative party was proposing to bring back a rule that was enormously offensive. He also said that it was disgusting, immoral and missed the point.

Miss Widdecombe: Your bond.

Mr. O'Brien: The report refers to the right hon. Lady's wish to restore the primary purpose rule. She has had every opportunity to deny that wish. I shall give her another. Will she now tell British-Asian families that, if she got the opportunity—I hope she will not—to restore the primary purpose rule, she would not do it?

Miss Widdecombe: I can tell families in all parts of the community in Britain that our policies will seek to promote good race relations and tackle all abuses of our immigration or asylum systems. The policies that we shall introduce to tackle those abuses will be announced in due course at an appropriate time, not in response to newspaper reports or mischief from the Minister, who is ruining what was hitherto a sensible debate.

Mr. O'Brien: Once again, Asian British people will note the right hon. Lady's failure. In *The Independent* on 25 February, she suggested that it was inconceivable that the Conservative party would not promise at the next election to restore the primary purpose rule. We have given her the opportunity to deny that, but now we know.

Mr. Singh: Does my hon. Friend agree that the right hon. Lady's comments amount to an accusation that legitimate marriages between people living here and in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are abusive?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right that the right hon. Lady appears to be besmirching the name of a large number of British Asian families. Will she now—

Miss Widdecombe: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: In a moment. Will the right hon. Lady give the commitment that she will not seek to restore the primary purpose rule as Conservative party policy? I ask her once again.

Miss Widdecombe: I ask the Minister, very straightforwardly—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer!] No, no. Does he agree with the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) or will he acknowledge that there is some abuse in respect of using marriage as a way into this country? Is there any abuse or not?

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Lady knows perfectly well that the rules require that marriages be genuine. The primary purpose rule is not about that; it is an anti-family Tory policy.

Fiona Mactaggart: The provisions to prevent entry through made-up and abusive marriages are powerful, but the primary purpose rule was clearly instituted to prevent genuine marriage in the arranged tradition and therefore discriminated against communities for which that is the way to form families. I urge my hon. Friend to continue to press the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on this matter because it concerns many Asian families in my constituency.

Mr. O'Brien: It is clear that for many black and Asian people in Britain—many of whom were born here, as were their parents—some Members of the House have a very long way to go to understand that we need to create a proper multi-racial Britain which is fair, which treats families equally and which does not discriminate against people whose families are perhaps in another part of the world.

Ethnic minorities in this country all too often have to face disproportionate exclusion from many of the better things in British life. They are often disproportionately victims of bad housing and school exclusion and are twice as likely to be unemployed. Their average pay is lower than that of white people, and we will build up problems for the future unless we address discrimination and racism.

Anti-racism is not about helping black and Asian people; it is about our future—white and black. We all live in a multicultural society and we all have a choice: either we make a success of multicultural Britain or we do not. If we fail to address those issues, our children—white and black—will pay the price of that failure. That is why all of us, white and black, have a vested interest in the Bill and in anti-racism. We must make Britain a success as a multicultural society.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald also asked whether the Government have done a U-turn on indirect discrimination. We have not changed our mind about the desirability of including it in the Bill—we were always in favour of that in principle—but we were concerned about the risks of spurious challenges to Government policy. Having listened carefully to the arguments, we are convinced that the principle of including indirect discrimination outweighs the risks about which we were initially concerned. The Government have been open. We have listened and reflected carefully, which is what the parliamentary process is all about.

Nor have we changed our mind about the need for a positive statutory duty to promote equality. We set out that commitment in our equality statement of 30 November 1999, before the publication of the Bill. What we are doing now is reinforcing that commitment by enshrining the principle in the Bill, leaving room for consultation on how the duty will operate in practice—as promised in our equality statement.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was worried about the police, and in particular about powers to stop and search. I join her in paying tribute to the police, who do a difficult job. When I was an adviser to the Police Federation, I came to understand very well the difficult work that it does. The Bill will not prevent police officers from carrying out their duties, but it will make it unlawful for them to do so in a manner that discriminates directly on grounds of race.

Section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 requires officers to have reasonable suspicion that an offence has been or may be committed in order to conduct a stop-and-search operation. Under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, officers must have that reasonable belief. Reasonable grounds for suspicion or belief will depend on the circumstances, but there must be some objective basis. A police officer who goes beyond his powers and stops someone, say, solely on the grounds of race, or otherwise treats someone unfavourably on such grounds, could be challenged on the basis of direct discrimination following the enactment of the Bill.

The Bill will enable discrimination in the use of stop and search to be challenged wherever it is not as a result of the inclusion of indirect discrimination in the Bill. Indirect discrimination is about requirements or conditions with which one racial group is better able to comply than another. In stop and search, no particular requirement or condition is imposed on an individual who is stopped or searched, and, at least, no requirement that cannot be complied with. Indirect discrimination would not apply in that context. The law places the onus on the police officer to have reasonable suspicion or belief to stop and search. Direct discrimination and victimisation, whether witting or unwitting, would apply, and would provide an appropriate remedy.

Probably the best answer to the concerns expressed by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald came from the right hon. Member for Fareham, who said that it would be wrong for the state, which should protect all its citizens, to be allowed to discriminate, in the person of its police officers, against those citizens when the private sector could not do so.

The Police Federation has come in for criticism on some of the issues, but I join my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and others in saying that Fred Broughton has sought to overcome some of the cautious approach to

race relations that characterised comments by the federation in the past. He wants it to be much more open, and hopes that many future members will be black or Asian. That reflects well on him and on the federation.

The right hon. Member for Fareham said that the police would be harmed if they continued to be outside the Act. I agree: suspicion would continue to multiply. The effectiveness of stop and search, for example, would be discounted when there was no access to the courts if people felt that it was being used inappropriately. I do not think that the extension granted by the Bill will in any way undermine the ability of the police to do their job effectively. Stop and search has already been the subject of criticism.

In my view, the only legitimate route involves sensible court supervision of the way in which things are done. That will help the police to know where they stand with stop and search. As the right hon. Member for Fareham said, it is socially corrosive when individuals have no remedy for a grievance.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said that, before stopping and searching a person, a police officer should ask himself, "Am I doing this for a good cause?" I agree, and I do not think that that applies only to the police. All of us who exercise power in one way or another should ask, "Why are we doing this?". Racism, unwitting or otherwise, undermines the fabric of Britain's multicultural society. I think that the police should join the rest of us in coming within the ambit of the laws that are necessary to protect our society.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West said in a perceptive and well-argued speech, problems can sometimes arise not out of deliberate racism by police officers—in my experience, most police officers are strongly anti-racist—but out of a lack of awareness, an insensitivity that may be unwitting or unintended. In those circumstances, it is right that police officers think carefully about what they do. Our police officers do a wonderful job for us, but, like the rest of us, they have to learn the ways in which to build a stronger multicultural Britain.

On institutional racism, I have already said that there has been some misunderstanding, partly as a result of journalistic licence and the way in which the measure has been presented. We must be clear: most police officers are certainly not racist. However, some institutions may have problems in terms of the way in which they recruit, promote and deal with people who are from ethnic minorities. They should address those issues. In the provision of their services, they may have disproportionately disadvantaged those with whom they are dealing. Those issues should be dealt with. I agree with the hon. Member for Worthing, West, who said that the police are going through a period of change. It is difficult, but in five years' time they will be through it and will be a much better police force as a result.

The right hon. Member for Charnwood raised one important point. He asked whether I agreed that there should be the same law for the public and private sectors. I do not. Laws should be appropriate to the role, the sector and the circumstances. The public sector, for example, should have a duty to promote equality that goes beyond that of the private sector. Broad principles are good, but they are guides, and should not be applied in all their detail, because they could provide rigidity that does not make for good law making.

Various questions have been raised in relation to immigration rules and the application of those laws, but I will perhaps be able to deal with those in more detail in Committee.

The bond scheme has strong support from many people in the Asian community, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West. The aim is to deal only with the difficult marginal cases. No one who gets a visa today should have to pay a bond under the scheme that we propose to introduce.

Britain is a multicultural society. We are not yet a success as a multicultural society; the Stephen Lawrence inquiry teaches us that. The Government are determined to make Britain a beacon to the world as a successful multicultural society. That is a tough challenge for all of us, but it is not an unrealistic challenge because we have come a long way in the past 25 years since the race relations legislation. We benefit from the diversity in our culture and the success of our ethnic minorities in the professions, academia, business and, indeed, politics.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West reminded us, many stories of ethnic minorities in this country are stories of great success. Many ethnic minority people have succeeded and contributed enormously to this country. Britain is stronger because it is a multicultural society, but there is no room for complacency.

There are problems to be resolved, but the Stephen Lawrence case shows that we are prepared to face up to our problems as a mature democracy and to tackle them. As the hon. Member for Aylesbury said, we deserve credit for having come a long way since the race relations legislation. Perhaps some need to come a little further. Perhaps we need to pick up the pace in the next few years on many issues, as the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) said. We will pick up the pace and move forward on an agenda to create a multicultural Britain. The Bill is part of that strategy and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

RACE RELATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL
[*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any increase in expenditure of a Minister of the Crown, government department or other public authority which is attributable to complying with any provision made by virtue of the Act; and

(b) any other increase attributable to the Act in the sums which are payable by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

EDUCATION

That the draft Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 17th February, be approved.

PENSIONS

That the draft Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Penalties) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 22nd February, be approved.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Question agreed to.

Far East Prisoners of War

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

7 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to raise this most important issue. All hon. Members have a variety of causes and campaigns clamouring for attention—an independent Member has perhaps more than most—but we know that if we take them all up, we will be ineffective on all of them. However, every now and again, a cause comes along that is so just, so right, so compelling and irresistible that it has to be adopted. Such is the case that I speak of today—the case for a one-off British Government gratuity to our heroes: those thousands of still surviving British service men who suffered for so long in Japanese prisoner of war camps.

Most of them now are in their 80s or 90s, although some of them are still in their 70s. It is therefore not a cause that will wait while intergovernmental consultation goes on in back rooms. The need will fade away, as old soldiers fade away. The Japanese Labour Camp Survivors Association has reported the death of 293 of its members in the past calendar year. It may well be that another died today, and that another will die tomorrow. They are dying out by the natural process of attrition.

I have been drawn to this campaign not only by its urgency and its justice, but by some personal associations for which I make no apology. I was one of the last soldiers to be enlisted in the Suffolk Regiment—the Twelfth of Foot—one of the great infantry line regiments of the British Army. Fifteen years before I joined it, the Suffolk Regiment had two battalions—the Fourth and the Fifth—in Singapore, when Singapore fell. Of the Fourth Battalion, 286 men died in Japanese prisoner of war camps. Of the Fifth Battalion, 271 men died. There was a similar terrible death toll among the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Battalions of the Royal Norfolk Regiment and the First and Second Battalions of the Cambridgeshire Regiment, which made up the Eighteenth East Anglian Division.

There is not a community in my native East Anglia that has not been touched in some way by that. We remember it, as do so many communities in the north-west, part of which I now represent. On 24 June, I shall be leaving my constituency early to attend a reunion of 300 of those grand old soldiers, who belong to the South Suffolk Association. I very much hope that I shall be able to join them and congratulate them on the successful conclusion of this campaign. It is a campaign of great importance.

More than 50,000 British service men were captured by the Japanese, mostly in Singapore, but others after naval engagements, in 1942. Of those 50,000, almost a quarter were killed or died in captivity. Many were executed in cold blood in the act of surrendering. I shall return later in my speech to deal with the conditions of captivity, as that it is an important part of the case for special treatment.

So far as is known, there are now 7,335 surviving British far east prisoners of war. With 3,300 widows, that comes to a little over 10,600 people whom we believe should qualify for compensation.

The case was taken up by the Royal British Legion last autumn, and this is the first time that we have been able to make the case in the House of Commons. The campaign has the open and declared support of 328 Members of Parliament—almost exactly half the membership of the House. Earlier this year, a delegation from the Legion met the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), as did a parliamentary delegation composed of the hon. Members for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) and for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) and me.

We found the Minister sympathetic, but the case calls for very much more than sympathy. It calls for active intervention. We now believe that our pleas for justice—for it is justice—and the case of the old soldiers themselves are being heard in No. 10 Downing street. I hope that, in his reply, the Minister will provide those necessary assurances.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The hon. Gentleman will know of my longstanding interest in the matter. I agree that the case that he is making is now absolutely compelling. In April 1998, the late Derek Fatchett, who was then Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, said that the Government would no longer be pressing the Japanese Government to meet their moral responsibilities. However, have not the Isle of Man and Canada said that, if the United Kingdom Government will not press the Japanese on the issue, they themselves will step into the breach?

Mr. Bell: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. Such action from the Government would draw the acclamation not just of the entire House, but of the entire country.

It has been argued that compensation should properly be a matter not for the British, but for the Japanese Government. So it should have been. Japan made a compensation payment in 1952, following the 1951 treaty of San Francisco with the United Kingdom and other countries. That compensation payment was £76 per veteran. Not only was that sum trivial, knowing what we know now of the treatment of those men, it was insulting. It was made from the sequestered Japanese assets in this country.

New evidence has since come to light that the British Government failed in their duty in 1955 when they decided not to take advantage of an article of the San Francisco treaty that would have provided for further claims if Japan had concluded more advantageous arrangements with other countries. Lord Reading's reasoning at that time is now in the public domain. In a footnote, he stated:

> We are at present unpopular enough with the Japanese without trying to exert further pressure, which would be likely to cause the maximum resentment for the minimum advantage.

Hon. Members might care to think about the diplomatic cast of mind that such a comment represents—a triumph of expediency over principle that has been the curse of our diplomacy down the ages.

So it was that the far east prisoners of war were abandoned by the Government of that time and left to do what they could through the Japanese courts by their own actions and at their own expense. It cost a lot of money, took a lot of time and was not successful. Time was not on our side. All that the Japanese had to do was nothing and the problem would conveniently fade away.

It therefore seems to me and to the old soldiers that the one Government to which they can reasonably turn for help is their own. The case for gratuity payments is strong and there are precedents. One comes from the United States. The American Government agreed in 1989 to pay a $20,000 gratuity to each of the citizens of Japanese origin who had been interned—in extremely benign circumstances—in the United States during the second world war. The other precedent comes from Canada. Fifteen months ago the Canadian Government announced that they would pay compensation to their former far east prisoners of war at the rate of 18 Canadian dollars a day for each day of captivity, up to a maximum of 24,000 dollars. The Ministers announcing those payments said that the issue had gone on too long and that the time had come to do the right thing. If that was the case for Canadian veterans then, how much more so is it the case for ours after the further passage of time?

This is not a poor country—it is one of the richest in the world. We live in peace and prosperity—a situation that has, to a large extent, been bought by the sacrifices of those who served and suffered. Nowhere were those sacrifices greater than in the Japanese prison camps. The death rate was higher there than in any other theatre of war, including the Normandy landings. I respectfully argue that it is payback time—indeed, it is beyond payback time.

If compensation is paid to former prisoners of war of the Japanese, an objection may be raised that the former prisoners of war of the Germans should also receive something. I believe that the British people, including those who were held in German prisoner of war camps, accept that the cases are different. The Japanese behaved with consistent brutality and disregard of the Geneva conventions, which the Germans, on the whole, did not. The declining band of forgotten heroes, the former far east prisoners of war, are a special case. The survival of each one of them is a miracle.

I have here some letters sent from German and Italian prisoner of war camps to my father, Adrian Bell, who wrote a book called "Corduroy", which many soldiers carried in their kit bags, because he wrote of a peace in England and a farming way of life to which they wanted to return. Those who wrote those letters knew that they would return. Their repatriation was all but sure. He never got a letter from a Japanese prisoner of war camp and neither did anyone else. The Geneva conventions were not observed. The Red Cross was kept out. People died, people were killed and there were war crimes every day.

From time to time I have spoken in the House about the peace and security that we enjoy in this country and how little we understand the nature of modern warfare. How much less do we understand the nature of what happened to them and how they suffered, yet the documentation is there.

I have here the testimony of one of them, Harold Lock of Sudbury in Suffolk, in a pamphlet called "The Forgotten Men". He was 15 when he joined the Royal Navy, and not much older when the destroyer on which he served, HMS Jupiter, was sunk in the battle of the Java sea and he was lucky to struggle to shore with a companion. The Japanese soldiers made them dig their

[Mr. Bell]

own graves and they were just about to be executed when they were saved by an English speaking officer. He writes in his book of what they went through:

> Four prisoners made a bid to escape, but were reported to the Japanese by some natives from whom they tried to get a boat. They were brought back to the camp and shot. We were all assembled to witness this barbaric act, but no one showed any emotion. Death had become commonplace, and we were getting like robots, all feelings disappearing except the desire to cling to life. It is strange how precious everything seems when you are on the verge of death as most of us were.

For three and a half years those who survived were treated like that, facing the imminent prospect of death at all times. It is difficult for people who have not been close to death to know how that affects people. Those who could not work died. Those who could worked on in vermin-ridden rags. All of them, I believe, were marked for life. To come through such an experience was like living a nightmare for the rest of their lives.

One of the service organisations that I support is Combat Stress, the ex-services mental welfare society, which recognises that long after the body has recovered from such an ordeal, the mind has not. No one suffered more than the thousands of British who were ill-treated by the Japanese.

It is remarkable how cheerful so many of them are, how normal they seem and how slow they have been to campaign for themselves. They are the very reverse of whingeing campaigners. To some extent, we owe it to them to campaign for them.

It is my view that in our lives, especially our parliamentary careers, however long or short they may be—and mine will be shorter—we have the choice between making a difference and filling a space. We can make a difference and the Government can make a magnificent difference, if they will. The opportunity is there and the case is strong. We are asking not for generosity, but for justice. I know that this cause will be supported by people across the country and on both sides of the House and I trust that we shall get a result very quickly.

Finally, it is hard for us, who live in such a peaceful time, to pay this debt of honour, but we owe it to some of the finest gentlemen who ever served under our flag. I urge the Government to help them in the evening of their lives and to pay this debt.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) on securing a debate on such an important issue—one with which all hon. Members feel sympathy. It is an indication of the interest in it that the attendance is rather larger than one would expect, even at 7 pm on a Thursday.

I should apologise to the House as I am wearing an old pair of glasses and find it difficult to see the brief, which is slightly too far away from me.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): My hon. Friend needs a good optician.

Dr. Moonie: Indeed I do. I also need not to sit on my glasses.

The question of compensation for those held as prisoners of war in the far east during the second world war is one in which a number of Departments are concerned and my reply today covers issues that also fall within the responsibility of my colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department of Social Security and the Department of Health.

Just over 50,000 British service men were captured by the Japanese, many after the fall of Hong Kong and the subsequent fall of Singapore in late 1941 and early 1942. Commonwealth service men fighting with them were also captured. For example, the Canadians had more than 1,600 men captured in Hong Kong and the Australians more than 18,000 in Malaya, Singapore, Java and Sumatra.

The treatment of prisoners of war was governed at the time by the 1929 Geneva convention. Japan had not ratified it, but said that it would, in general, recognise its provisions. However, as we know, it did not do so.

The prisoners of war were held in camps throughout the far east, and while conditions and the availability of the relief supplies that we sent varied considerably between those camps, even the best were harsh. The work that the prisoners had to undertake, together with poor nutrition, and the sometimes brutal ill-treatment, which was so graphically described by the hon. Gentleman, all combined to take their toll of the prisoners, some 25 per cent. of whom did not survive their captivity.

As a safeguard to the prisoners of war, the Japanese should have permitted inspection visits by the protecting power and the Red Cross. In many areas that was refused and even where, with considerable obstructions, visits were permitted, little could be achieved. That avenue, which in Europe produced improvements in the conditions and treatment of prisoners of war in a number of cases, achieved little for those held in the far east.

The British Government were, however, able to make the point strongly that the ill-treatment of the POWs was unacceptable. That was done by means of war crimes trials and, through the Tokyo trials, a number of those held responsible for the ill-treatment of POWs were brought to justice for their crimes.

Uniquely among British POWs, the far east POWs received some compensation after the war for their ill-treatment. They received it from their captors under the terms of the 1951 peace treaty with Japan. They also received the money that the British Government received under the treaty and that they decided to distribute to the POWs and to British civilian internees. The question has been raised many times of the possibility of reopening the peace treaty to seek a higher level of compensation. That is of course a matter for my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, but I will say that the Government, having examined the position most carefully, accept the legal advice that the peace treaty is closed and cannot now be reopened.

There have also been calls for an inquiry to be set up into the perceived failure of the then Conservative Government to invoke article 26 of the treaty and seek more compensation on the grounds that other countries had signed more favourable agreements. However, the records, which have been publicly available for many years, show that that decision was not taken solely because of the weak position of the Japanese economy at that time and the wish, which was in Britain's interest,

to see it recover. It was also very much influenced by the fact that it was extremely difficult to ascertain what, if any, additional benefits this country would in practice be entitled to and what their worth might be. It is by no means clear, had the treaty been re-opened, that the British Government would have received any additional funds with which to provide compensation. Furthermore, there is no basis on which to reopen the issue of compensation for the far east POWs, because Japan signed no subsequent agreements conferring greater benefits upon the POWs of other countries than those awarded under the treaty.

The Government are very much aware of the depth of feeling that the ill-treatment of the far east POWs continues to evoke and we continue to raise the issue with the Japanese Government and to seek ways to build reconciliation as a means of helping to overcome the past.

At the end of the war, the pressure and support for compensation for the far east POWs was strong. The then Government suggested that the funds likely to be realised under the treaty should be shared on the basis of giving most to those who had suffered most. However, the representatives of the far east POWs wanted a simple per capita distribution, accepting that that might mean only small individual payments.

Those speaking on behalf of the POWs made it clear in the House that in establishing the principle of compensation from the captor, they made no claim of any sort on the British taxpayer. Brigadier Smythe, a leading champion for the cause of the POWs in the House said that on no account would they accept money from the British taxpayer. He went on:

> The important thing about this claim is its moral principle. The Far Eastern prisoners of war do not mind so much about the money side as they do that the principle should be established that no nation shall treat the nationals of another when they have them in captivity as the Japanese treated our men.—[*Official Report*, 10 May 1951; Vol. 487, c. 2226.]

It is clear from the views now being expressed on behalf of the far east POWs and their widows that that belief has now changed. They are seeking what is termed an "ex-gratia gratuity" from the British Government, and thus the British taxpayer. In essence, such a gratuity would be compensation.

It is a policy of long standing that British Governments do not make compensation payments to those who have been prisoners of war on account of their imprisonment. There are many risks implicit for those engaged in conflict and the risk of being captured is sadly one of them. It is unrealistic to suppose that Governments could effectively insure individuals against that risk. Terrible through the conditions suffered by the far east POWs were, it is unrealistic to think that it would be possible to ring-fence just that one group of POWs.

Mr. Bell: I wonder if the Minister actually believes what he is reading.

Dr. Moonie: Yes—otherwise I would not be reading it.

Objective decisions about degrees of suffering many years ago are impossible, and many thousands of other former prisoners of war who also suffered harsh conditions will be watching the outcome of the Royal British Legion's campaign with much interest.

The arguments that have been put forward in support of the claim have of course been considered, and considered with sympathy and care. We are well aware of the payments, for example, that the Canadian Government have decided to make to that country's far eastern prisoners of war, which amount to some £10,000 for each individual. Many comparisons are made with the treatment of pr oners of war elsewhere, and with money received by other groups; we do not accept that that alters our position.

British forces served throughout the world in the 20th century in two world wars, and in many other conflicts. Of course, they are still serving. For all of them, that service has involved risk and, for many—whether captured or not—it has involved difficult, dangerous and harsh conditions. Some have given their lives; others have received wounds and suffered illness.

The sufferings and needs of all those who are disabled as a result of their service—including any period of captivity—are addressed primarily through the provision by the Department of Social Security of war pensions. The dependants of those who died during their service, or whose subsequent deaths can be linked to their service, are supported through war pensions.

The service men themselves, in some cases, have received war pensions since the time of their leaving the forces; in other cases, where their disabilities have become apparent or worsened later in life, they have received war pensions or increased benefits at that stage. It is our aim in this country to target the resources available to help those whose service-related disabilities are the greatest, awarding pensions in proportion to those disabilities.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): On behalf of the House, may I say that we recognise that the Minister replying to these debates does not necessarily give his personal view, but states what the Government have so far not agreed to do? Will he consider what the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) has said in terms of giving recognition, rather than compensation? How is the Government's view different from that of Canada? Did the Canadian Government say that there was something unique about the experience, or did they say that they would have to take this action everywhere? If other Governments do not have to do so everywhere, this Government might do what the previous Government failed to do, which is to provide that recognition.

Dr. Moonie: I can speak only for this Government and our views, and not for the views of the Canadian Government or the deliberations that went on prior to their decision. That is a matter for them.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Cannot the Minister recognise the difference between prisoners of war and prisoners who have been the victims of war crimes? We give compensation to victims of crime. Why not give compensation to victims of war crimes?

Dr. Moonie: I have been making the point that there was a wide variety of suffering in many circumstances in prisoner of war camps, not only in the far east. It would be invidious to single out one group for special treatment.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Moonie: I shall not give way. I must make progress or I will be unable to say what I intend to say. If it becomes apparent that I can give way, I will be happy to do so later.

[Dr. Moonie]

I should stress that anybody whose health has suffered as a result of being a prisoner of war, or the dependants of those who have died for that reason, is entitled now to lodge a claim for a war pension or a war widow's pension.

It is still possible to lodge a claim where health problems emerge many years after leaving the service, or to ask for a war pension to be reviewed where the health of the recipient has deteriorated. That is what we mean when we say that we are targeting resources on need.

The special health needs and problems of the far eastern prisoners of war are also recognised in the provision for them of special tropical disease investigations, so that problems that might not otherwise be recognised as relating to their military service can be picked up. The national health service provides free health care in this country, whereas a number of other countries do not make the same provision. However, there is an extra benefit for veterans here, in that they receive priority over others with the same clinical priority for NHS treatment of their problem, or of the condition for which they receive a war pension.

As I have said, it is not, and has not been, the policy of successive Governments to make across-the-board compensation payments. We prefer to target our resources on those suffering disablement as a result of their service. The Government do not feel, after careful thought, that to depart from this long-standing policy would be justified as being the right or the fair way forward.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The Minister must realise that his answer will deeply disappoint the enormous number of people who recognise that a unique barbarity was visited on the far eastern prisoners of war. Should not that have been recognised by the successive Governments who have failed those prisoners of war by not obtaining compensation from the Japanese? Is not that a job now for this Government?

Dr. Moonie: Yes, I do recognise that. However, I believe that our policy is right. Although it produces disappointment, I will stand by it.

Mr. Nicholls: If the Minister feels as badly about having to make his speech as we do about having to listen to it, he should realise that it would make a great resignation speech in a moment or two.

I have done a lot of work with the national association representing former prisoners of war, and have met a great many men who were prisoners of the Germans. Some were confined in harsh conditions, but I have never met any prisoners of war from the German theatre who say that they would want part of any compensation that might be given to prisoners of war from the far east theatre. They recognise what the Minister does not—that the circumstances of the far eastern prisoners of war are unique. Given the strength of feeling expressed even in this short debate, will he not agree to reconsider the matter? If this is really to be the last word on the matter, listening to it has been a distressing experience.

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman brings his peculiarly repellant personality to a very important issue.

We welcome the chance to continue discussions with the Royal British Legion about other ways to look after the special needs of the far eastern prisoners of war. I am therefore pleased to say that I and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister are to meet Legion representatives in April, and that we will discuss the matter fully with them.

However, I must repeat that the Government have concluded that it would not be right to change the policy on the matter of compensation.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 10 March 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

PETITION

9.33 am

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I wish to present a petition on behalf of the overwhelming majority of residents of the parish of Bodicote in the county of Oxfordshire. The petitioners declare that

Bodicote is a village of some eight hundred and fifty houses.

That it has taken since before the Domesday Book until present time for Bodicote to grow to a village of this size.

To the great concern of the residents of Bodicote, it is now proposed by Cherwell District Council within a short period of time to increase the size of Bodicote by the building of a further one thousand and one hundred new houses at Bankside in Banbury.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Deputy Prime Minister, the Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, to bring forward legislation to change planning law so that greater powers are given to Local Councils in England to decide themselves the increase in housing numbers in their districts, rather than having such numbers imposed upon them through "predict and provide" policies and Regional Planning controls.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Orders of the Day

Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.34 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

If the Bill becomes law, it will undoubtedly improve the quality and well-being of a great many people. I have no doubt that that statement will raise expectations.

People go into politics for all sorts of reasons. I have been in politics for a long time. I decided at the age of 11 that I wanted to be a Member of Parliament, and it was a childhood ambition come true when I arrived in the House in 1983.

As we all know, we are very modest people. None of us really wants to be here; friends, neighbours and relatives twist our arms to stand for Parliament, and hey presto! we arrive here full of modesty. We are all content to be Back Benchers: ambition never enters our minds.

It probably has not escaped the notice of my colleagues that I am neither Prime Minister nor Leader of the Opposition. My mother and my wife still believe that I am a late developer—we shall see what happens—but I believe that, once one realises one's limitations, it is rather churlish to remain here and become bitter and twisted because no one notices the talent that one's relatives alone believe one to have.

When I entered the ballot for private Members' Bills year after year and never got the opportunity to speak, I became rather frustrated. I entered the ballot 16 times and, at last, on the 16th occasion, I was successful. There is no significance in the number 16, but it was third time lucky in this Parliament.

If I had been told that I would have the marvellous opportunity to speak first and not wait to be tail-end Charlie—the opportunity to have a few people listening to what I say, whether the House enjoys it or not and whether or not hon. Members are persuaded to adopt my point of view—I would have said, "How wonderful." However, I never imagined that I would seek leave of the House to present the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill. There were two issues on my agenda that were very dear to my heart: the pro-life issue, and animal welfare.

On the second count, I have convinced myself that I have already done my duty. There is an Act in my name, with which I am sure hon. Members are familiar: the Protection Against Cruel Tethering Act 1988, which prevents horses, ponies and donkeys from being tied up and ensures that they are properly watered and fed. I rather feel that I have done my duty by animals.

I did, however, agonise about the pro-life issue. Would I make a glorious speech, enthral the House, convince it of my argument and win the day? Then, without wishing to stir things up, I pondered on the House as it now is, and concluded that, although I might make a decent speech, I would probably be wasting my time.

I therefore did not have an issue to bring to the House. I found that I had suddenly become popular: people were interested in me. It was a little like the 1992 general

[Mr. David Amess]

election all over again. For 30 seconds, it seemed that the nation's attention focused on my good self. All sorts of organisations and interest groups suddenly wanted to know me.

My decision to present this Bill was made at the eleventh hour. When a Mr. Martyn Williams first came to see me, I was perplexed by some of the language that he used to persuade me of its merits.

A huge number of Members have signed the early-day motion on this matter—I think about 451 have done so—so one would think the Bill has the overwhelming support of the House, but, after 17 years in this place, I am somewhat realistic and know that it is not always easy to convince all Members.

When Mr. Williams started to talk about fuel poverty, I thought, "Goodness gracious. I am a Conservative and he is talking about poverty." I was born in a little terraced house in the east end of London. We did not have a bathroom: we had only an outside toilet and a tin bath on the side of the wall. We did not have a telephone. We used to throw the window open and shout loudly at each other. We did not have a refrigerator—we had a larder—but I did not think that I was poor.

Then Mr. Williams talked about targets. I thought, "Goodness. Targets. That sounds like the new sort of politics that I am trying to cope with." Then he talked duties and regulations. Again, I thought, "I am a Conservative. I embrace private enterprise and such matters," but, in what will be a relatively short speech, I hope to be able to convince all Members that now, although perhaps not exactly like St. Francis of Assisi—I have no brown habit—I am at ease with some of the language; I am entirely enthusiastic about it.

I pay tribute to a number of people. I do not have to be convinced about the merits of the Bill; it speaks for itself. In my previous constituency, I spent a huge amount of time—it contained more than 16,000 publicly owned properties—dealing with heating problems, so I have no doubt there is a job to do in that constituency.

I have moved to what is described as a posh constituency. Labour Members probably believe that it is posh, but I have had more challenges to meet in my present constituency than in my previous one. Yes, there are bigger houses, but I have found that many elderly people, for whatever reason, are not able to heat their properties properly.

I do not wish hon. Members to get their handkerchiefs out, but a constituent died in my constituency. I am not prepared to talk publicly about it because there is an investigation going on and I do not want to be party to any sensationalism, but the constituent died in a cold house. I and the councillor who dealt with the matter feel that that is appalling.

There are two sponsors of my Bill who are not here. One is Michael Colvin. As we know, he died under tragic circumstances. He had been a regular supporter of the Bill. His record on energy efficiency initiatives was there for everyone to see. I pay tribute to his part in the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995.

My Welsh is not that good, but our former colleague, Cynog Dafis, the previous hon. Member for Ceredigion, was another of the Bill's sponsors and another unstoppable campaigner for energy efficiency, warm homes and indeed all environmental matters. I am advised that he will continue campaigning—my goodness, I am using the word "campaigning"—on the measure in the Welsh Assembly.

I pay tribute to a number of other people. Without the hon. Members for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), the Bill would never have got to this stage. I eat humble pie. I am being honest. I should take no credit for the measure at all. I was just fortunate enough to draw number five in the ballot. I am providing a mouthpiece for the measure to be taken forward. I particularly pay tribute to those two hon. Members for their work.

I draw attention to my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and for—I cannot remember his constituency at the moment. They drew up a wonderful document in conjunction with the Members whom I have mentioned, using much of their private time. It is called "The Select Committee Hearings Autumn 1999-Winter 2000. The Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill. Report and Proceedings of the Parliamentary Advisory Group for the Campaign for Warm Homes". In particular, it addressed how the matter would be funded. I thank them for their work. To unite the hon. Member for Nottingham, South with our former shadow spokesman on the environment, transport and the regions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) must say something about the power of the issue that, I hope, the Bill addresses.

As we know, elderly people are particularly hard hit by the cold. It is an absolute disgrace that we have in excess of 30,000 extra deaths each winter compared with the summer: it has risen to 49,000. I am not going to buy all the business about the flu epidemic because then we would get into party politics. That is a huge number of people. Why does this country have so many more deaths in winter than Sweden and other such countries? There must be something that we are not doing correctly. The reason is that we are not addressing the issue.

The Government whom I supported for 18 years had an excellent range of measures. Indeed, my wife and I went into our loft with whatever we had got for £15 or £20. My hands became allergic to the pink stuff that we used to insulate it. Times have moved on. The Conservative Government did try to do something. Hon. Members are right to challenge me, although they have been gentle, on what my Government did on value added tax. That is another thing that we can argue about, but, given that we are in 2000, all hon. Members must recognise that there is a huge problem.

The Bill places a duty on the Government to deal with the matter over a long period because I am an optimist. I hope that one day soon there will be a change of Government. Governments come and go. What is the good of being a Member of Parliament unless we can encourage Governments to take these matters forward? There is no point being here. What is the point of legislating? We can all find people who would not obey the laws, but we have been sent here to legislate. I hope that, with the wisdom of women and men, we can arrive at good legislation.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am slightly surprised and, frankly, disappointed that my hon.

Friend believes that his main objective and that of Members generally is to legislate. That assumes that all legislation is desirable. Surely, a large part of our duties here is to prevent bad legislation. It is not simply to legislate.

Mr. Amess: My right hon. Friend speaks a great deal of common sense—which is why he was given the award of Back Bencher of the year. He is a parliamentarian, and he understands better than most how this place works. However, if the arguments that we deploy are not intended to result in legislation, what is the point of having a Government? My right hon. Friend looks surprised. I am with him entirely on the point that we must have good and sensible legislation. That is why I am entreating him to serve, if the Bill receives a Second Reading, as a member of the Committee that considers it.

Mr. Forth: You do not need me.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): You do not want him.

Mr. Amess: We can argue about that later. I have noticed that, on previous Fridays, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), with one or two colleagues, has been terribly helpful in suggesting drafting improvements to Bills. We welcome any suggestions that he might make—but I am sure that he is not suggesting that we should have no laws or regulations whatsoever.

Mr. Forth: Hear, hear.

Mr. Amess: That is a more challenging view to cope with, but I am sure that, eventually, I shall think of a smart answer to it.

A few Fridays from now, my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) will be introducing a measure that I am sure even my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will wholeheartedly support. Although I am sure that the overwhelming majority of hon. Members believe that we should have a little bit of legislation, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for drawing that point to the House's attention.

On 26 February—this might please my right hon. Friend—the President of the Board of Trade, at a warm homes campaign meeting in his constituency, said:

> Simply shovelling money at people to heat the skies above our cities is hardly a sustainable use of resources. Nor will it help the fuel poor much.

We would all say amen to that. It would be crazy to do that.

I am using the emotive terminology "fuel poor" because we have to identify the issues in the debate. It is generally accepted that the fuel poor are those who must spend 10 per cent. of their disposable income on heating their homes. Other Government schemes help the fuel poor by improving homes and insulation levels. That is a sustainable way of helping to keep people warm, cutting pollution and reducing the emission of climate-changing gases, such as carbon dioxide.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Is there a distinction to be drawn between the poor and the fuel poor, or are the fuel poor a subset of the poor—or the other way round? I should be grateful if my hon. Friend could, with rather greater precision, deal with the definition of fuel poverty. The matter is dealt with in his Bill, but could he help me on it?

Mr. Amess: I should be delighted to help my hon. and learned Friend on that matter, and on anything else that he would like help with. I shall deal with the definition of fuel poor later in my speech. For now, however, I simply ask him to bear in mind that fuel poverty is generally accepted to affect those who spend 10 per cent. of their disposable income on home heating. If he carefully examines the Bill—he is a lawyer, so he will have done that—he will see that no one will be forced to do anything. I am a Conservative, and therefore do not believe in forcing people to do things that they do not wish to do. Nevertheless, clause 3 specifically deals with that matter. As I do not want to provoke Labour Members, I shall move on quickly.

In October, in his speech to the Labour party conference, the Prime Minister described one of the things that kept him awake at night. As we know, in two months, something else will undoubtedly be keeping him awake. However, in October, he asked:

> How many of our pensioners will go cold this winter?

He was right to ask that question.

The answer, according to Government figures, is a shocking 4 million people. Sceptics will say, "Hang on, David, 4 million? That is a huge number of people." I suppose that the situation is a bit similar to the one in which a person whom we know is really ill, but never complains about it, whereas a hypochondriac might always complain about being ill, but live to be 105. Out in the wide world, in winter, a huge number of people go cold for no good reason.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to be a sponsor of the hon. Gentleman's Bill, which I warmly welcome. Does he accept that there are geographical concentrations of people who are suffering from fuel poverty, especially those who live in rather sporadic developments, in exposed locations and with low household incomes—such as in the west of Wales, Northumberland and Cornwall? Does he accept that, often, those people are not visible to those who are concerned about these issues? I warmly welcome his Bill, and I hope that he will accept that not only his constituents, but very many others in sporadic developments elsewhere will benefit from the Bill.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Gentleman is probably right gently to point out that I am milking my constituency just a little bit too much. I pay tribute to him as a sponsor of the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) has pointed out that there are specific issues to be addressed in the part of the country that the hon. Gentleman represents.

Mr. Forth: Following that very interesting point, will my hon. Friend explore now the effect of different average ambient temperatures across the country on the phenomenon that is the subject of the Bill? It strikes me as very likely that, in Cornwall, the phenomenon may be very different from that, for example, in the constituency

[Mr. Forth]

of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). Does my hon. Friend allow that that is a possibility? Will a mechanism to deal with that factor be built into, and support, his Bill?

Mr. Amess: I am glad that my right hon. Friend has raised that point. However, I am a little nervous that, the more that I put in the Bill, the more fun will be had with it. That is why there is not such a mechanism in the Bill. I live in sunny Southend, but I fully recognise that there are many different climates in the United Kingdom. I am happy to say that the duty of analysing all those matters will be put, fairly and squarely, on the shoulders of the Government.

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. Amess: My right hon. Friend sighs and heaves before he allows me to develop the point. I have spent a great deal of time contacting local authorities of all political persuasions, and I am delighted to say that, across the country, they have demonstrated huge support for the Bill. Some people might say, "Wait until they see how much it will cost," but I am very optimistic that, given local authorities' responsibilities, they will be able to help us in implementing the measure. If my right hon. Friend has any ideas about how he thinks such a mechanism might constructively be built into the Bill, I should be only too delighted to consider them. I am grateful for his helpful suggestion.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): May I try to help out the hon. Gentleman a little by saying that a great deal of work has been done in the House on how the wind chill factor should be used as a relevant part of assessments of fuel and housing poverty? Much work has also been done on the SAP—standard assessment procedure—energy efficiency ratings which apply to all new buildings in the United Kingdom. In subsequent dialogue with local authorities, part of our aspiration in dealing with the matter must be to reach a sensible view on how to take account not only of the objective SAP ratings on new-built properties, but of the specific geographical locations in which those properties are built. All of that should be built into the backdrop of consultation and dialogue with local authorities on the Bill's implementation.

Mr. Amess: I could not see whether my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was convinced by, or pleased with, that intervention, but I certainly welcome it. Perhaps we shall be able later to examine that matter.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): The hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) said that much work has been done on the wind chill factor. However, am I not correct in assuming that wind chill factor is relevant only once one is outside one's home, and that the wind chill factor has no relevance in ensuring energy efficiency and heating inside one's home?

Mr. Amess: Oh dear, I thought that this would be a consensual measure.

Mr. Forth: No.

Mr. Amess: I shall certainly give careful consideration to what my right hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Nottingham, South have said.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): The hon. Gentleman referred to regional disparity. Although I have great sympathy with people who live in remote parts of the south-west, the figures for excess winter deaths by region tell a different story. In the past four years, excess winter deaths increased by only 5 per cent. in the south-west—I say only, but it is with some regret—while the north-west had a 35 per cent. increase from 5,000 in 1995 to 7,000 in 1998-99. One would assume that that was related to the fact that we live in the coldest and wettest part of the United Kingdom. However, the figures showed a dramatic fall in all regions in 1997-98. In 1996-97, there were 5,900 excess winter deaths in the north-west, but the figure for 1997-98 was 2,500. One can only assume that that was a consequence of the euphoria following Labour's election victory on 1 May 1997.

Mr. Amess: I certainly do not agree with that, but I shall resist the temptation to respond to the hon. Gentleman. I have no doubt that he made his point well and it certainly seems much colder up north.

The Bill requires the Government to set a target of their choice and allows that target to be modified in response to unexpected events. The Bill would set the Government's policy in law. When I first adopted the Bill, it had absolutely no guarantee of Government support and I had no discussions with the Government about it. It was certainly not a Government Bill. I am not prepared to take on Government Bills. Indeed, one or two journalists said, "David, you are mad to go ahead with this Bill." However, there have now been a number of meetings. I pay tribute to the Energy Efficiency Minister in another place, as, thanks to his assistance and that of his officials, there has been a meeting of minds in respect of the detail of the Bill.

Let me deal with the Bill clause by clause and attempt to answer some of the points raised by my hon. Friends. Clause 1 defines the terms used in the Bill. The definition of fuel poverty is a general one, but it may be changed from time to time in order better to target people who need help. Clause 2 places a duty on the Secretary of State and the National Assembly for Wales to draft a strategy to end fuel poverty. That strategy must include a final target date by which the problem will have been eliminated as far as is possible.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Will he clarify something that may well permeate the debate that follows? Is it his intention that the Bill will apply taxpayers' money—presumably large sums of it, although I hope that he will clarify that too—to privately owned dwellings as well as those in the public sector?

Mr. Amess: Of course. The answer is yes. There are all sorts of proposals whereby we shall be able to work in

partnership with others. For example, there was a wonderful announcement by Transco yesterday. I know that that was not the precise point that my right hon. Friend was making, but that point is dealt with in the Bill.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The hon. Gentleman referred to Wales. Is it his expectation that extra money will be provided for the Welsh block grant to implement the plans that he foresees being made by the Assembly?

Mr. Amess: I understand why the hon. Gentleman makes that point, but I do not anticipate it happening at the moment. I am sorry, but I had better not get involved in the merits or otherwise of the Welsh Assembly as I would not want to cause offence in various parts of the House.

Mr. James Paice (South–East Cambridgeshire): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I apologise for missing the first few minutes of his speech, although clearly I did not miss the meat of the Bill, which he is coming to only now. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) asked whether the Bill applied to privately owned homes, but the relative role of the tenant—of council property, local housing associations or private landlords—compared with that of the owner of the property is not clear from the Bill or from the briefing that was kindly prepared for me. Can the tenant carry out improvements against the wishes of the landlord or force the landlord to carry them out? Can my hon. Friend explain, as I am not clear how their positions balance out?

Mr. Amess: I am not surprised that my hon. Friend is not clear about that, as it is not mentioned in the Bill. However, I do not believe that those circumstances will arise. The Bill deals with the strategy. Detailed points such as that may be raised in Committee. However, I do not anticipate that a tenant would be carrying out such improvements against the wishes of the landlord, particularly as they would result in savings of at least £400.

Although I am happy to continue to take interventions—

Mr. Forth: Good.

Mr. Amess: I thought that my right hon. Friend would be pleased about that. However, there appears to be a large number of right hon. and hon. Members wishing to speak, and I would not want to be accused of making the longest speech on a Friday and heavily criticised later. I know that people are giving up a huge amount of their time at the moment.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Is not one of the extra benefits of the Bill, should it become law as I hope that it does, that it will stimulate employment? Is the hon. Gentleman aware of research carried out by the Association for the Conservation of Energy which suggests that a 15-year programme of energy efficiency measures could create some 30,000 new jobs?

Mr. Amess: I am certainly aware of that and I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting it on record.

I would dearly love to eliminate fuel poverty altogether but, although I hope that the Bill will address some of the problems, some households—perhaps many—will refuse to co-operate with the scheme. Some houses simply cannot be insulated to the necessary standards and some households will be genuinely remiss, but I am advised that the Bill's intention to eliminate fuel poverty as far as is practicable is a sensible test. Following the preparation of the strategy, it must then be implemented. Assessments of progress are required from time to time and the strategy and targets can be eliminated in the light of those assessments.

Clause 3 provides the power to make regulations if required in order to set up the schemes under the strategy.

Mr. Burns: Will my hon. Friend address my concern about clause 3(2), which is the engine that will drive the legislation? A Government of either political party could produce regulations that fell short of what was necessary, for reasons of their own. Making the Bill subject to negative procedure does not give the House sufficient power to push the Government and make them think again. Will my hon. Friend consider whether it would be realistic to change it to an affirmative resolution so that the House can have greater control and more of a say in what the Government of the day may or may not want to do in those regulations?

Mr. Amess: That intervention proves the worth of the debate. My hon. Friend has made a splendid suggestion. I know that he is busy, but I hope that he will serve on the Committee if we secure a Second Reading for the Bill, so that he can take that issue forward. I thank him for making it, because the purpose of parliamentary scrutiny is to ensure that the legislation will hold the Government of the day to account.

Clause 4 makes it clear that the Bill will not compel people to participate in schemes, which must rely on persuasion if they are to be popular and successful.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): In response to an intervention from the hon. Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), the hon. Gentleman talked about people who would not participate. I hope that that does not include private sector landlords, many of whom, in some of the poorer parts of the north-west, still expect their tenants to live in poorly insulated properties.

Mr. Amess: I very much understand the hon. Gentleman's point of view. There are some landlords like that in my constituency. I hope that we shall be able to address that point.

Clause 5 is the money clause and clause 6 gives the citation and extent. It is worth noting that, although—

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): The hon. Gentleman skated over that point quickly. Has he made an estimate of the cost implications of the Bill? I guess that the cost will be in the region of £100 million. If so, would it not be a good use for part of the money from the climate change levy?

Mr. Amess: Those who oppose the Bill can put forward any arguments to say that it will cost a huge

[Mr. Amess]

amount. I have the full briefing. However, those who wish the Bill well can add up the savings in health, insulation and general well-being. Taking those factors into account, not only will the Bill be cost-neutral, there will be money in the coffers for the Treasury. That is why I have been persuaded to support the Bill, as a Conservative. That is how strongly I feel about it.

I was going to go into further detail on clause 5, but I shall rush on now. Half an hour ago, I could not remember the constituency of one of my hon. Friends, but now I can. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham and for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and the hon. Members for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), for Nottingham, South and for Plymouth, Sutton, who worked on the Select Committee. They have come up with ideas on public-private partnerships, bond issues, utility regulation and other matters.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does my hon. Friend appreciate that there is another consequence of the Bill—that there will not be a need to produce as much energy? That will mean that the countryside in Scotland and Wales will not be scarred with dreadful wind turbines—a policy that masquerades as being environmentally friendly, but the results of which damage the environment. The Bill will ensure that the countryside is saved.

Mr. Amess: I greatly admire my hon. Friend's style. It seems to have met with some good reaction and some adverse reaction in the House. I am trying to be as consensual as I can. I shall reflect on his point.

To sum up, the aim of the Bill is to end fuel poverty and the disgrace of so many people shivering—yes, genuinely shivering—through the winter. It has massive support. I have received messages from a range of organisations: the Women's Royal Voluntary Service, Help the Aged, the Green party, Friends of the Earth, energy efficiency industries, the Royal British Legion, Age Concern, professional footballers, the Royal College of Nursing—[HON. MEMBERS: "Professional footballers?"] I asked why they were interested. Apparently it is a big issue for the new national football stadium at Wembley.

Mr. Forth *rose—*

Mr. Amess: I do not know whether my right hon. Friend wants to be added to the list, but I shall give way to him.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend has been unprepared to put any cost on the exercise over any period, even during the debate today. Does he accept that it is easy to garner support for what appears to be a cost-free benefit? Does he concede that it is just possible that, if he had been prepared to put even a ballpark cost on the proposals and express that in terms of the additional taxation required to fund them, some of the voices expressing support might have been a little more hesitant?

Mr. Amess: No, I do not accept that admonishment from my right hon. Friend. I would be stupid to give a figure that would be used in evidence against me. We can pluck any figure out of the air.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): We are talking about the costs of capital installation. The long-term costs may be lower but, in the short term, the investment will be expensive.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Gentleman makes the point far more cleverly than I have been able to. I was hoping that my broad brush statement that the Bill will save money would be accepted. No doubt, the argument will continue.

Liz Blackman (Erewash): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in addition to the costs that we are talking about, there is a cost in human misery from being fuel poor? The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will not mention that.

Mr. Amess: I agree with the hon. Lady. My main interest is health. There is a terrible cost to the health service at the moment. It is not right to analyse the matter starkly. If the Bill became law, it would be cost-effective and a huge number of lives would be saved. If it were as successful as I anticipate, it would bring money into the Treasury.

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North) *rose—*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Amess: I was giving way to the hon. Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton).

Mr. Laxton: That shows what the merest twitch in the Chamber can achieve. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. There are various estimates on the issue. For example, savings to the national health service could amount to £1 billion as a result of the Bill.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Gentleman is right. I am disappointed that the House did not think that I had a flourishing end to my speech, and I am now about to deliver it. I was not simply going to sit down.

I am delighted with the huge turnout of Members of Parliament today. Fridays have become rather unpopular and unfashionable for all sorts of reasons. It never used to be like that. Fridays give an atmosphere that enables us to engage in constructive debate, so I welcome this opportunity. I pay tribute to all those who have supported my endeavours. I am very mindful of those who have cancelled constituency engagements or opportunities to spend time with their families. I am only too well aware of all those matters.

I return to my original statement, which seems a long time ago. I never came to the House with great ambitions, thinking that I could change the world. I came to the

House believing that I could make a difference. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will join me in making a difference. I commend the Bill to the House.

10.19 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on raising such an important issue, which affects all of us in our constituency work. I welcome his move from the warmth of Basildon to the cold east coast of Southend. It seems to have sharpened up his politics no end. He sounded semi-socialist at one point, which worried me slightly.

One of my abiding memories of being brought up in Scotland was the cold, crisp mornings when it was a delight to put my clothes on under the blankets. That was absolutely essential. I see that some of my colleagues are remembering their childhoods, too. I remember also when the coalman did not come, and the only chance of getting heat in the house was to find a combustible Englishman. I am only joking, but this is a serious issue.

It is intolerable, degrading and uncivilised that we live in a society where individuals shiver in their homes and beds, and some stay in bed all day because they cannot heat their homes. They contract illness because of that, and that is what I want to speak about. The effect of cold temperatures on human bodies and organs is an under-researched field. We do not know the full effects on our functions and organs, and I am pleased that research councils are now putting resources into that kind of study to reflect the problems of the elderly in society and across the world.

I was stung into action by a recent headline, "Killed by the cold", and a story by Simon Parkin, the local health correspondent for the *Evening News* in Norwich. This reflects badly in terms of the interest in the elderly in Norwich, Norfolk and society generally. The scandal of the politics of cold is that cold damages people's health, makes them susceptible to infection and causes increased deaths. These effects are accentuated in rural areas such as East Anglia, where many homes predate the heady days of 1945 when Aneurin Bevan built homes in this country at a fantastic rate. Many homes in rural areas and cities predate those days.

I am grateful to a colleague of mine—a consultant for the care of the elderly and elderly medicine at the West Norwich hospital—who has released his research on the subject to me. Much of it has been published in *The Lancet*. The research concerns death and disease among older people in winter. It is estimated that 20,000 and 60,000 extra deaths occur every winter in England and Wales. The definition used is that of a man called Curwen, who has done the definitive work in this area.

The calculation is the number of deaths in the four winter months from December to March, less the average of the numbers in the preceding autumn, August to November, and the following summer, April to July. Greater numbers of deaths are associated with both colder winters and the increased prevalence of influenza. Some 55 per cent. of those extra deaths are vascular—heart and stroke problems. Some 33 per cent. involve chest diseases. Accidental hypothermia accounts for no more than 1 per cent. and is usually secondary to serious underlying illness, rather than the primary event.

The percentage of excess winter deaths increases from 12 per cent. at ages 45 to 64 to 18 per cent. at ages 65 to 74, to 27 per cent. at ages 75-plus. The elderly are more at risk from winter. There is a tendency also for increasing winter mortality as we move from social classes 1 to 5. Excess winter deaths by country have been mentioned. In England and Wales, the excess percentage is 21, and in Scotland it is 20. Interestingly, in Norway, Finland and Canada, the figures are 7 per cent., 8 per cent., and 9 per cent. respectively. The fact that the coldest countries do not have the worst winter mortality rates has been attributed to warmer housing and behavioural adaptations, including wearing more clothes and being more active when outdoors.

The death rates increase linearly as the mean daily outdoor temperatures fall from 18 deg C to 0 deg C. That reflects on events inside, as well.

Cold-related death rates have been decreasing somewhat in recent years, and this has been attributed to improved home heating and to reduced outdoor exposure. Some argue that it is a result of increased car ownership. The important issue is that the poorest in our society tend to have the most energy inefficient housing—that is, homes that cost more to heat. Another interesting fact is that winter respiratory infections trigger strokes and heart attacks.

Calculations in Norwich show that, over the last winter, there were 200 extra deaths of the elderly, using the Curwen formula. In terms of the data for the year from August 1998 to July 1999, the medical assessment unit at the local Norfolk and Norwich hospital admitted 14,000 emergency patients with acute medical illnesses. The majority were elderly. Using Curwen's formula, we calculated that there were 599 more admissions from December to March than the average in the two other four-month periods. There are 13 per cent. more admissions in the winter.

The recommendations given to older citizens will be known to most hon. Members, but they are only advice. That advice is to keep homes warm, to keep them well insulated, to wear appropriate warm clothing outdoors, to eat a balanced diet, to maintain good energy sources and to get vaccinated against the flu if one is over 75. The trouble with that information is that it centres on individuals taking action. We need collective political action on these issues to take the responsibility away from the individual.

Mr. Garnier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Gibson: I do not want the dialectic to get in the way of the facts at this stage. I may give way later.

It ill befits politicians and others—some of whom have two or even three well-heated homes—to deny people who do not have one well-heated home the rights and resources to have that privilege.

I wish to pay tribute to three organisations. The first is Age Concern, which has done fine work and given help and advice consistently to the elderly. I want also to compliment my two local councils, because they can stand every compliment they can get these days. Broadlands council, which covers part of my area, has started to attack the problem vehemently. It has accepted standards for affordable warmth, and the standard assessment procedure rating is 55. The council has calculated that 57 per cent. of its housing stock—some 30,000 houses—falls well below that standard. There is a huge mountain to climb in

[Dr. Gibson]

terms of getting those homes up to the right heat and energy levels. The council is making sterling efforts, with grants and by utilising energy conservation legislation.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): My hon. Friend has mentioned the public housing stock, but we hear that the Bill will apply to public and private housing. It concerns me that many elderly people—particularly single elderly people—who are just above the threshold for the minimum income guarantee but are in a home that they could have afforded when their partner was alive cannot now afford to insulate their homes to a proper standard, and end up fuel poor. Are there any figures on the private stock? Is not that an important part of any survey?

Dr. Gibson: I was just coming to what Labour-controlled Norwich city council has done in that respect.

Mr. Garnier: The hon. Gentleman may have misunderstood the intention of my earlier attempt to intervene. What are the Curwen criteria? The warm homes campaign has alleged that 90 people in my constituency died last year because of excess winter cold. I find that unbelievable. If it is the case, I am surprised that local GPs or the coroner have not been in touch with me or the local press on the matter. Is that figure based on the Curwen criteria? If so, what are they?

Dr. Gibson: I cannot speak in specific terms about the hon. and learned Gentleman's area, but I imagine that the Curwen criteria are used across the country. The scandal is that there are any excess deaths at all in the winter months. That is reflected across the country. The percentages may change a little here or there, but the real scandal is that it happens at all, as it need not. GPs may not necessarily know the figures. Elderly medicine is not a fashionable subject, and it is not something that GPs look into—they accept what happens as the British way of life. The Bill will do much to eliminate that if we ensure that it makes progress today.

Mr. Garnier: What are the Curwen criteria?

Dr. Gibson: The year is divided into three periods of four months. One compares the number of deaths in certain age groups in the winter months with the number in the preceding and the following four months, adding the figures in the latter two groups and taking them away from the winter figure. That gives the number of excess deaths. In every part of the country, there is a winter excess.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): It might also help the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) to understand the problem if I tell him that we have a much greater excess of winter deaths than countries such as Norway and Sweden, which are much colder.

Dr. Gibson: Absolutely. We cannot make that point often enough.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: Is my hon. Friend aware that the estimated figure for excess winter deaths last year for the London borough of Bromley is 88? Should not the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) ponder that, as his record on energy efficiency is, to be charitable, poor?

Dr. Gibson: Yes, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will have his conscience pricked and that he will support what the vast majority demand and stop playing silly, amateurish games.

Our city council has taken up the issue and put £1.6 million into cavity cladding and insulation. Such enthusiasm and determination are to be applauded. We also need the Government to recognise the problem, support the Bill and develop a strategy to ensure that, in the foreseeable future, headlines such as "Killed by the cold" will disappear.

The elimination of cold homes and fuel poverty would save lives, ease the winter crisis in the health service and, incidentally, improve the environment.

10.32 am

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) not only on his success in the ballot but on his perspicacity in introducing such an important and badly needed piece of legislation. I wish him every success in the coming months as the Bill—we hope—passes through both Houses of Parliament and is placed on the statute book.

I know that success has many fathers and failure is an orphan, but I want to say how proud I am to be one of the Bill's sponsors, especially as, when I had the privilege of serving on the Front Bench under my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), I was instrumental in securing the support of the Conservative party for the campaign for warm homes and greater energy efficiency.

As the long title of the Bill states, its purpose is:

> To require the Secretary of State to draw up and facilitate the carrying out of a programme of action to provide households with a comprehensive package of home insulation, heating and other energy efficiency improvements for the purpose of reducing fuel poverty; to require the setting of targets for the achievement of that programme; and for connected purposes.

All legislation carries that catch-all phrase at the end.

Fuel poverty disproportionately affects pensioners, but it is not confined solely to them, important as it is to improve their situation. Far too many other categories of people also suffer from fuel poverty, including those on low incomes, those on benefits and those who do not have the financial resources to improve their homes or cannot get their landlords to do it. I will return to that when I discuss clause 4(b).

The commonly accepted definition, according to the 1999 energy report, is that a household is in fuel poverty if it needs to spend 10 per cent. or more of its income to provide adequate heat and energy. The report suggests that, on that definition, about one in five households are in fuel poverty, while one in 20 could be described as in extreme or severe fuel poverty because they would need to spend more than 20 per cent. of income on energy to achieve a decent standard of warmth.

In 1991, the English house condition survey estimated that about 7 million households were in fuel poverty on the 10 per cent. of income definition, although subsequent

improvements in methodology, as well as in energy efficiency, have brought the figure down to about 6.6 million. That estimate did not include housing benefit as income, although it included housing costs as expenditure. Including the benefit would affect the total income available to households but not their disposable income.

In response to the consultations on the house energy efficiency scheme, many people said that total income, including housing benefit, and total fuel use, including use for household purposes, should be included. The change in the past few years in the number of households in fuel poverty is substantial. Excluding housing benefit, there were 5.3 million houses in fuel poverty in England in 1996; including it, the number would be about 4.4 million.

There is scope for debate about the figures but there can be little argument about the fact that, even accepting the lowest estimate of 4.4 million, the number is unacceptably high. It should be borne in mind that the figure is for England only and excludes Wales—which is covered by the Bill—Scotland and Northern Ireland. That is crucial because, bearing in mind what my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said earlier, Scotland and Northern Ireland are infinitely harsher in winter than parts of the south-west, for example.

What is the fuel poverty impact of cold homes? Evidence abounds that fuel poverty affects the health of the nation to the detriment of far too many people. We have evidence that a cold indoor environment increases the likelihood of respiratory illnesses such as influenza, pneumonia and bronchitis and exacerbates heart attacks and strokes. That is a fact. Fatal domestic accidents among the elderly are more common in winter. That is a fact. Cold and damp conditions can promote the growth of fungi and house dust mites, which have been linked to respiratory conditions such as asthma, which is a problem especially among young children. That, too, is a fact.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend have any feel for, or indeed facts about, the relative incidence of those phenomena in public as opposed to private housing? Does he make any distinction between the responsibilities of local authorities and housing associations and those of private landlords?

Mr. Burns: That is an important point. I may disappoint my right hon. Friend because I cannot produce hard facts to answer his question, although I can give him anecdotal evidence and some facts. For several reasons, under Governments of both parties, local authority housing and the public sector have had problems, although those have reduced as a result of energy efficiency measures taken in the late 1980s, in the 1990s and—to be fair—under this Government. When I come on to my local authority of Chelmsford, I shall be able to provide my right hon. Friend with some figures to show the extent of the problem facing what is a relatively small local authority.

Fuel poverty is not confined to local authority housing. For example, although one hears stories of good practice by private landlords in the private sector, one also hears some utter horror stories. Of course, owners of houses have an incentive to adopt measures to improve the energy efficiency and warmth of their homes because they will improve the value of their home and reduce their heating bills. I fear that my answer has been inadequate, but I hope that my right hon. Friend will wait until later in my speech for more details about the scale of the problem in the local authority sector.

Mr. Alan Simpson: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the experiment that is being conducted in Cornwall by some GPs who are specifically focusing on child asthma? They are part of an initiative actually to prescribe the installation of home insulation measures to address the ill-health experienced by children suffering from asthma. In the context of evidence-based medicine, it is important to examine the health gain arising from such initiatives.

Mr. Burns: That is an important contribution to the debate and I trust that if the hon. Gentleman catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he will tell us more about that important initiative.

It is accepted that a temperature for the home of between 18 and 21 deg C is a comfortable temperature for families and individuals to live in. A temperature of between 16 and 18 deg C will cause some discomfort, but no serious health risks; between 12 and 16 deg C will cause discomfort and risk of respiratory disease and bronchitis. At 9 to 12 deg C, there is risk of cardiovascular problems, strokes, heart attacks; and, at under 9 deg C, there are serious risks of hypothermia. Sad to say, in this day and age, some individuals and families have to live in homes with temperatures of under 9 deg C, thus exposing them to serious risk of hypothermia.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the key health factors is rehabilitation after patients are discharged from hospital? Much evidence now exists to show that one of the reasons for readmission to hospital is the inability of patients properly to heat their homes.

Mr. Burns: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, although some of those suffering from cold-related illnesses also need physiotherapy, respite care and after-care help. As other hon. Members have said, for many years now, there has been an unacceptable level of deaths associated with fuel poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West mentioned that the figures for the latest year available—1998-99—showed that in England alone just over 45,000 people died from such causes. That figure has risen over eight years from 33,000. Those are unacceptable figures that shame our society.

In my area of East Anglia, between 1991 and now, the death rates have increased from about 1,200 people a year to 2,250. In my constituency, the number of deaths associated with problems of fuel poverty has been estimated at about 50 a year. In this day and age, it is staggering that we cannot get our act together better to reduce those figures dramatically.

The extent of fuel poverty in my constituency is highlighted by figures that Chelmsford borough council has kindly supplied to me. The council's housing stock comprises 7,500 dwellings. It estimates that some 3,500 still require simple energy efficiency measures, including cavity wall insulation, additional loft insulation, and draught-proofing of doors and windows. The council expects to complete those works within the next two

[Mr. Burns]

years. Approximately 600 solid-walled and prefabricated dwellings in the borough are in need of insulation applied to the outside walls. That work is expected to take in excess of 10 years to complete at current funding levels.

Approximately 2,000 dwellings still lack a central heating system. That work is expected to take more than five years to complete at present funding levels. Some 4,000 dwellings lack double glazing and that work is expected to take more than 15 years to complete. Some 3,500 dwellings have older, less efficient heating systems, but at present resources in the borough are focused on what is called first-time heating, and the older systems will be renewed only when they are beyond repair. It will be necessary, as soon as all dwellings have been provided with some kind of heating system, to start to replace the old heating systems. We are fortunate in Chelmsford that this work is being done.

Chelmsford is not governed by my party and although it was governed by the Liberal Democrats for four years, my constituents saw the light last May and we now have a hung council. The Conservative councillors now have a direct input. I pay tribute to the council, under the Liberal Democrats and now as a hung council, because it is a proactive authority that has done all it can in the past decade to enhance its housing stock and to seek to make homes more energy efficient, for the benefit of the tenants and for the sake of quality of that stock.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will the hon. Gentleman also pay tribute to the Government for enabling local authorities to give more priority to schemes such as he has described through the release of £3.6 billion of capital receipts?

Mr. Burns: I certainly do not want to make a party political or partisan speech this morning. I would pay tribute to any Government who acted to enhance the country's energy efficiency programme, in housing or in other sectors, as that would in turn enhance the quality of life and environment for people in local authority housing.

However, we must not forget that not only local authority housing needs to be improved. As I said in response to the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, there is an urgent need for a rolling programme to bring up to standard the quality of local authority and housing association provision. That is why I so congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West on the Bill. It is another step forward, and it follows previous legislation and initiatives by all Governments.

Private owners in work have a real incentive to improve the quality of their homes. One crude and self-evident reason for that is that improvements enhance a house's value, but they also contribute to our overall environmental commitments by reducing energy wastage. In addition, those home owners benefit financially: on top of the real-terms fall in most fuel prices over the past decade, they will pay less per year on heating and cooking.

Sadly, some people are not able to take the appropriate action to improve their homes and render them more energy efficient, so they do not benefit from savings on their energy bills. For example, pensioners subsisting on the state retirement pension are unlikely to be able to afford the complete package of home improvements. I know that help is provided with loft insulation, for instance, but the complete package is beyond them. Unemployed home owners also lack the financial resources to undertake such work, and people on low incomes may take a long time to raise the finance for improvements to their homes.

I am also worried about privately rented accommodation. Many private landlords have the best interests of their tenants at heart and spend the money necessary to improve their housing stock and their tenants' quality of life. Regrettably, however, some private landlords do not engage in best practice. They want to maximise their rents and to make only a minimum investment in their properties. They have an almost total disregard for the quality of their tenants' lives.

Although clause 3 empowers the Secretary of State to make regulations implementing the Bill and the items specified in clause 2, clause 4(b) states that nothing in this Act shall be taken as conferring

any power to require any person to carry out works.

I assume that the Bill contains that provision so that Governments do not have draconian powers to interfere. However, is it not naive for legislation to rely for its successful implementation on the good nature and public-spiritedness of a private landlord?

I do not want letters of complaint from all over the country, so I repeat that the vast majority of private landlords are extremely good. However, a small proportion is not, and I fear that clause 4(b) could ruin the good intentions of this important Bill.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), the promoter of the Bill, said that he was an optimist and that he hoped that landlords could be tempted to undertake the work prescribed in the Bill by the carrot of public funding, as well as out of self-interest. Such carrots include the home energy efficiency scheme and renovation grants. Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that there should be sticks as well as carrots?

Mr. Burns: Logically, the answer is yes, but I cannot suggest to the House today how such sticks might best be devised. The grants that are available can be taken up by good landlords and bad, and ultimately that saves the taxpayer money.

Mr. Kidney: I know that the hon. Gentleman is anxious to finish, so I shall not detain him. However, I am anxious not to sink the Bill, as it is a good measure that I want to succeed. With regard to the sticks that might be employed against bad landlords, does the hon. Gentleman agree that legislation on public health and environmental protection could also be used? Other possibilities include the promised new register of houses in multiple occupation and, more controversially, the use of housing benefit—a potentially excellent tool to persuade private landlords to make improvements.

Mr. Burns: That is a valid point. I do not want the Bill to be sunk, either, any more than I want to slow down its progress by tampering with clause 4(b). However, I worry that unscrupulous people will drive a coach and horses through the Bill's good intentions by not enhancing

housing quality. On the other hand, some people genuinely will not be able to undertake those improvements because they lack the money.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) seems to be suggesting that loopholes in the Bill could be blocked by using provisions available in other legislation. That would be marvellous. I am sure that the Minister wants to improve energy efficiency, and that he would approve of any legal method that would achieve that.

My final concern centres around the regulation powers in clause 3. That clause is the engine of the Bill, and it implements the proposals in clause 2. However, I am worried that the annulment or negative resolution procedures of clause 3 would cause this House to abdicate its power to monitor the Executive and hold it to account. That worry would apply regardless of the political complexion of the Government involved.

We all know how the negative procedure works. Statutory instruments cannot be amended; they are dealt with Upstairs in Committee, if they are dealt with at all. I fear that any future Government, regardless of political composition, could use the regulations to dilute the Bill's intentions. Therefore, I urge the Minister to consider reversing the onus in the clause to the affirmative resolution so that the House of Commons could hold the Executive of the day to greater account. It would also ensure that the will of the majority of hon. Members who support the Bill was reflected in the regulations rather than diluted by them.

I am proud to support the Bill, which is long overdue. It comes before the House with a realistic chance of completing all its stages in Parliament and getting on to the statute book. I believe that we all owe it to our constituents and those 4.4 million people who suffer the indignity, problems, discomfort and illness caused by fuel poverty to take a giant leap forward. We must say, "Enough is enough. We are going to deal with this problem." The first step is to put this measure on to the statute book.

11.2 am

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who, in promoting the Bill, recognises the importance of Government action to tackle the human misery and waste caused by fuel poverty. That is in stark and marked contrast to the characteristically controversial and dismissive comments of Edwina Currie, who was previously one of the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends. Her advice to elderly people who were struggling to keep warm was to knit themselves some woolly hats and gloves. The hon. Gentleman shows that we have come some way since that advice was given.

The Bill complements the activity and determination of the Government, who have already taken action to tackle fuel poverty. Cold homes are a major health hazard. They are wasteful in terms of energy and money, as people throw money down the drain—money they can often ill afford—in a vain attempt to heat the unheatable. It is only by tackling the basic problem and ensuring that homes are properly insulated, with the right heating system installed properly and working efficiently, that the most vulnerable people will be lifted out of fuel poverty.

During warm homes week last year, I visited one of my constituents, Helen Townsend, who lives in a lovely terraced house in the west end. I saw and felt for myself how Helen's home had been made warmer and cheaper to heat since she had had a loft insulation grant from the Government's home energy efficiency scheme. When people think about their eligibility for insulation grants, most rule themselves out if they are not pensioners. However, fuel poverty affects all those, including elderly people, who are vulnerable. Helen Townsend is a young woman who suffers from a condition that has left her unable to work and having to claim benefit. In common with others in a similar position, she spends a lot of time at home and, for reasons of health and comfort, needs it to be consistently warm. She should not have the additional worry of paying for it. I was pleased to hear from Helen how easy it had been to get a Government grant. That is another essential factor in making a warm home an achievable reality, rather than something on a wish list. The Bill needs to take that into account.

Last year in the east midlands, there were an estimated 4,200 excess winter deaths, some 88 of which were estimated to be in my constituency of Lincoln. As a result of the measures in the Bill and the Government's current programme, not only will distress be reduced, but lives will be saved. I was staggered to discover that, while the United Kingdom death rate rises in the winter by some 30 per cent., in countries such as Norway and Sweden, where the average temperatures are obviously lower, the rise in the winter death rate is closer to 10 per cent. That information concentrates the mind.

Our fundamental problem is how to tackle the root cause. How do we effectively support those who struggle to pay their fuel bills and cannot raise the capital to make their homes easier and cheaper to heat? We know that heat rises, but it also evaporates. Many people who can least afford it are paying to heat the air outside. That is a complete waste and, for some, a dangerous and sometimes fatal waste.

It always strikes me as ironic that constituents in the most difficult financial circumstances pay the most to heat their homes inefficiently. Pensioners and families on low incomes, and those with disabilities or chronic illness, simply do not have the resources to take the financially sound measures that would result in an affordably warm home. They cannot, in the short term, afford the investment that would bring them the benefits of warmth in the short, medium and long term.

As well as being good for the people who live in them, affordable warm homes release money to spend on other things. Pressure is taken off the health service and the quality of housing stock is maintained—for example, the need for damp and rot-related repairs is reduced. Furthermore, an extended programme of insulating homes and installing new heating systems creates jobs.

I am pleased that the Government understand that the issue of fuel poverty and its effects crosses the desks of many Ministers, including those with responsibility for health, environmental, social security and Treasury matters. The Government have brought those Departments together, with others, to look at their overall strategy on fuel poverty.

I am also pleased that, from April, the Government will for the first time be able to provide grants for central heating systems for older people on low incomes. That is another sensible, practical measure, the like of which is supported in the Bill.

[Gillian Merron]

The role of local authorities in ensuring affordable warm homes is crucial. Lincoln city council has joined six other councils and the Energy Saving Trust Ltd. to launch the home energy Lincolnshire partnership. It provides households with a free home energy report, a certificate and access to discounts on energy-saving products. In local authorities up and down the country, officers such as Terry Bentley, the energy efficiency officer at Lincoln city council, work tirelessly to promote understanding of the importance and use of energy-saving measures. We need that kind of approach and those kinds of people to work with the Government to help with the fight against fuel poverty.

The Bill builds on the contribution made by the Government, who have put forward practical measures that will keep vulnerable adults and children in healthy, comfortable and financially sound warm homes. I hope that the House will support the Bill.

11.9 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on his courage in choosing a Bill whose scope could have an impact both nationally and internationally. I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on the Bill, and to restate Liberal Democrat support for it.

The debate might be an opportunity for right hon. and hon. Members to reminisce about their own experiences of fuel poverty, particularly as students. I think back to my time at Imperial college and how, when it was winter, I had to keep on my hat, scarf and coat in the room that I rented. It was anything but a favourable environment in which to study. A couple of years later, I moved to Hackney, where, if I left the water in the sink in the evening, the washing-up was frozen into the bowl in the morning. We may all have had a similar experience. Although I am portraying mine humorously, it is not a laughing matter.

Mr. Maclean: I listened carefully while the hon. Gentleman told us that when he was a student he was so cold he had to sit wearing his coat, woolly hat and gloves. In those circumstances, did he find Edwina Currie's advice to wear a woolly hat offensive or sensible?

Mr. Brake: As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, I followed her advice—or rather pre-empted it, as I was a student many years before she made that recommendation.

I shall be brief because I am aware that many Labour Members want to speak, as we witnessed earlier when an inadvertent movement by the hon. Member for Southend, West caused a Mexican wave on the Government Benches. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) sets such store by his commitment to environmental protection and social justice that he has stated that the Bill is crucial for our social justice and environmental agenda. He said that if the Government do not support it, they will stand condemned on both counts.

I tried to obtain advance confirmation from the Government as to whether they would support the Bill, but my telephone call went unanswered. However, I hope that the Government will support it; the Liberal Democrats want that—as do an overwhelming majority of Members in the Chamber today. It is certainly what millions of people living in fuel poverty want.

Environmental issues are often perceived to be the preserve of the chattering middle classes. The Bill gives the lie to that myth. It shows that saving the planet is about saving the people who inhabit it, that environmental and social concerns are inextricably linked and that sustainability is economic as well as environmental. Too often, it is claimed that environmental action loses jobs and slows economic growth. As several hon. Members have already pointed out, that would not be true of the Bill, because it could result in the creation of up to 30,000 jobs.

Fuel poverty is a scandal, as every hon. Member would agree. It represents the failure of successive Governments to ensure that our citizens live in warm, dry homes. Surely, that is one the most basic human rights—on a par with the right to clean water or food. In the 21st century, no one should be denied that right.

Government figures shows that four out of 10 pensioner households live in fuel poverty. Despite the Government's welcome winter fuel payments, millions of pensioners are still shivering in cold, damp homes. Members will be aware of that from their constituency visits. Unless the Government are prepared to guarantee the winter fuel payments in perpetuity—no Government could actually do that—pensioners who are gaining a little warmth at the moment, because of that extra payment, could be shivering in the future, if the money is withdrawn.

Our failure to tackle the root cause of the problem—poorly insulated and poorly heated homes—means that we are heating the air above people's houses. Other hon. Members have told us of the number of UK households that live in fuel poverty and the number of people affected by the problem. The effect on the poor, elderly and disabled is clear. The number of excess deaths in England and Wales was 48,000.

Hon. Members will probably also be aware, from their briefings, that England and Wales have higher excess winter mortality rates than any European countries other than Ireland and Portugal. Our rates are extremely high compared to those in Scandinavian and central European countries, even though their climates are much tougher.

The success of the Scandinavian countries, in particular, in reducing their excess winter deaths must be attributable, at least in part, to their much higher insulation standards. Although the death rate in the UK rises by about 30 per cent. during the winter, in Norway and Sweden, that rise is only 10 per cent.

Mr. Forth: Does the hon. Gentleman have any information about the source of the investment to produce those much better conditions in Scandinavian countries? Is it because private individuals decide to invest in their homes or because the Government channel taxpayers' money into such measures? I am sure that he will recognise the importance of that question; the debate has not yet scratched the surface of the source of the moneys that would be deployed as a result of the Bill. Who is paying whom?

Mr. Brake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am not able to give him chapter and verse

on the source of the funding for Scandinavian schemes. However, I am certain that a major factor is that those countries have more building regulations and higher standards.

The Bill would undoubtedly reduce the massive increase in illnesses that are exacerbated by cold and damp, such as influenza, bronchitis and asthma. It would certainly reduce the pressure on the NHS, allowing the service's stretched resources—the subject of much comment over the past few weeks—to be diverted away from easily preventable illnesses to those that are more serious.

I regret that there are no official estimates of the cost to the NHS of excess mortality or morbidity. I hope that the Minister will commission some research on that point, or will ask the appropriate Department to do so. Other hon. Members have referred to the figure of £1 billion estimated by the Association for the Conservation of Energy.

As has been pointed out, the Royal College of Nursing drew attention to a programme of home energy improvements in Cornwall. The RCN estimates that, as a result of that programme, the saving to the NHS is about £500 per household per year. That is a substantial sum by anyone's standards. It is always risky to extrapolate figures for the whole country from one study, but if one assumed that similar savings could be made for all households suffering from fuel poverty, the figure could be £3 billion or £4 billion—a large saving.

Many children who live in cold homes underachieve at school, because they have nowhere dry and warm to work. The Bill would go some way to solving that problem.

The Bill is about joined-up government—something that the Government often talk about. It is about social inclusion; it is good for people. It is also good for the environment. Instead of spending money on fossil fuels—the consumption of which contributes to climate change—we should spend money on conserving the energy that we already use.

Yesterday, the Government launched their climate change strategy, which rightly pointed out that reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, in all energy use sectors, would be necessary if the Government are to meet their international commitment to reduce such emissions. The Bill will help to deliver a reduction in emissions in the domestic sector that will enable the Government to achieve not only the legally binding Kyoto commitment of 12.5 per cent., but their 20 per cent. target. Hon. Members should focus on that, as the Government are, rather worryingly, speaking of "moving towards" their 20 per cent. target, whereas they have given a firm guarantee that they will deliver on their legally binding 12.5 per cent. commitment.

The Bill is good for the economy. We have heard that it would create 30,000 long-term jobs. Interestingly, the savings to the Exchequer that would result from those jobs would be about £300 million a year, or £4.5 billion over 15 years at today's prices. I am assured that that is a conservative figure, based on an estimate that the average cost of unemployment for someone who has previously been on average earnings is about £10,000 per claimant. That excludes the effects of a reduction in indirect tax collected, as a result of changed spending patterns once the person becomes unemployed, and other costs such as an increase in demand for the NHS and social services.

The Government have promised to eradicate fuel poverty. Senior Ministers are on record as describing fuel poverty as a scandal. The Deputy Prime Minister rightly said:

> One of the obscenities of the 1980s was the failure to tackle the problem of keeping our elderly people warm in winter.

The Environment Minister went further and stated:

> The preventable scourge of fuel poverty still remains an indictable menace in our society.

Hundreds of hon. Members have signed early-day motions, written letters, issued press releases and promised their constituents that they would support the Bill. I welcome that.

The Prime Minister said that he wants to end child poverty within 20 years. I welcome that, too, but the Government will not eradicate child poverty unless they also eradicate fuel poverty.

The Liberal Democrats fully support the Bill. We urge the Government to come off the fence and back the Bill, so that together we can embark on a historic, cross-party campaign to put an end to the outrage of fuel poverty.

11.22 am

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on the choice of subject for his private Member's Bill. If it does not thoroughly ruin his reputation, may I say that I also approve of the way in which he has taken the Bill that I promoted in previous Sessions and refined, developed and—if I dare use the word without totally ruining his reputation—modernised what we were doing? That modernisation has come about through the work of the all-party warm homes group and the warm homes Bill group, and the hearing to which the hon. Gentleman referred, in which his colleagues, the hon. Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton), and also the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), participated.

We have been examining the costs in detail. When I first became associated with the campaign and looked into the costs, I was convinced that the Government would not consider putting taxation up to the level necessary to meet those costs, so we had to find other solutions. The all-party group has been working hard on a report, and I particularly welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, who has deployed his considerable experience in the financial world.

Working with the warm homes group has been one of the most rewarding experiences that I have had in the almost three years that I have been in Parliament. The group brings us together to tackle a task described by the director of Ofgem recently as "awesome". Although much has been achieved, much remains to be done.

I pay tribute to the organisations that back the campaign, including the Association for the Conservation of Energy, Church Action on Poverty, the National Housing Federation, National Energy Action, Unison, Friends of the Earth, the National Right to Fuel Campaign and, most appropriately, the Child Poverty Action Group and Help the Aged.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) said that if we were serious about child poverty, we must tackle fuel poverty. The same is true of pensioner poverty.

[Mrs. Linda Gilroy]

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) asked whether there were subsets of the poor; there certainly are. They range from the pensioner who is fairly comfortably off in well-insulated sheltered housing, who may be paying 6 to 7 per cent. of his or her income on fuel—which is the average in the population—to the more common experience among pensioners, where fuel payments take up to 16 or 17 per cent. of their income. As we heard earlier, there are those in extreme poverty who spend 20 per cent. or more of their income on fuel.

I invite hon. Members, as I have done in previous contributions, to consider how they would feel if they had to pay out 20 per cent.—or even 30 per cent., a figure that I have seen—of their income to accommodate their fuel needs.

The Government have already taken significant steps, which makes it difficult to put a price and a time scale on the programme to eliminate fuel poverty. We heard mention of the private sector and the particular challenges there. The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) highlighted the difficulties that may be faced in the private rented sector. I hope that we can debate that aspect further in Committee.

The Government have refocused the home energy efficiency scheme on the fuel poor, and from June grants will be increased from £315 to £1,000, or £2,000 for elderly people on low incomes. To qualify for that scheme, a household must accommodate a child under 16 or someone over 60 who is in receipt of various benefits. The scheme will focus on owner-occupiers and the private sector.

The Government have also been concentrating on the repair of local authority housing through the release of capital receipts, to which I referred earlier. In addition, they have reduced VAT on fuel to the minimum level; introduced a tax-free fuel allowance, which has been quadrupled to its present rate of £100; and reduced the gas levy, which is helping to keep prices down.

On the income side, the oldest and poorest pensioners will have an increase of £700 a year for single householders and £1,000 for couples through the minimum income guarantee. The working families tax credit will lift 700,000 to 800,000 children out of poverty. All these policies and others, working together, are beginning to tackle fuel poverty. However, there is still much more to be done, at both national and local level.

Since 1997, my local energy efficiency office, through its home energy action team, has been working with 174 households, 83 per cent. of which are on benefit, and looking not just at what work can be done, but at the impact that that will have. The first results are now available, which show savings of £158.66—three times the figure originally expected. That has an average effect equivalent to an increase of 2.9 per cent. in household income. It also increases comfort levels in those homes and reduces carbon dioxide emissions by an estimated 1,214 kg per household.

I am pleased that the Government recognise how much more still needs to be done. They have set up an interministerial team, whose remit, membership and programme of work were outlined in written answers to parliamentary questions from me on 21 December and 27 January, which show how serious the Government are about tackling fuel poverty.

However, there is much more to do. The Bill would help to build on that approach through providing for a fuel poverty reduction strategy to be published and laid before Parliament. It will emphasise what energy efficiency can achieve in poverty reduction. I am especially keen on clause 2(2)(b), which would bring in the private sector and enable householders who suffered from fuel poverty to have access to appropriate fuel tariffs.

Some of the big companies, such as PowerGen, TXU Eastern Energy, and Scottish Power have been particularly active in working on these issues and—on energy efficiency though not on pricing—Transco has recently launched a £30 million project, which will help to build on the Bill.

The Bill is a win, win, win measure: it would tackle poverty and social exclusion; it would help us to fulfil our commitment to reducing carbon dioxide emissions; and it would help to create jobs and move us towards full employment. Furthermore, it would improve health by making savings in the health budget. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned education. Children, let alone more senior students, who live in poverty and cold homes find it more difficult to study and meet homework targets.

The Bill could even be linked with crime reduction. It links all the important issues of employment, health, education, crime and the environment. It would be a key to ending child and pensioner poverty. It is therefore a win, win, win, win, win, win measure, and I support it.

11.31 am

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I am grateful to be called early in the debate, and I am especially pleased to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), whose speech was the sixth in the debate. I pay tribute to all the speakers. We are witnessing a rare occasion when we are almost indulging in an all-party love-in. I hope that we shall be able to persuade the Government to join in this veritable orgy.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on drawing no. 5 in the private Member's ballot. That is in contradistinction to my experience; I have been successful only once, in the first Session of my first Parliament 30 years ago when I drew no. 10. I believed that that presaged a rather more successful political career than I subsequently had. I promoted an Urban and Rural Environment Bill, part of which was designed to discourage chopping down trees of amenity value. The excellent measure was lost because of lack of time, which led to the memorable headline in *The Guardian* "Trees Bill Axed".

Our waste of energy in this country is appalling. People have died or suffered severe illnesses unnecessarily. I was especially interested to read in the seventh report of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit that it believes that that state of affairs is a "continuing national scandal". I therefore especially welcome the Bill, which has a long line of predecessors, because it is flexible to the extent that it is a challenge that the Government can accept.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West, who is the promoter of the measure, has not included a time scale. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley

and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) pointed out, the Bill contains no guesstimate of its cost. I believe that it will cost a considerable amount of money. I am not an expert on financial matters, but if I had to make a judgment, I would estimate the cost at approximately £500,000 million a year.

I also estimate that a programme of eradicating fuel poverty and ensuring that all the housing stock is satisfactorily insulated would take 15 years. However, I am encouraged by the Labour manifesto for the first Scottish Parliament; it mentioned removing fuel poverty in two terms.

The challenge can be accepted, and if we have the wit and imagination, we can tackle an appalling problem. I have been considerably helped by the briefings that I have received not only from Mr. Charles Secrett of Friends of the Earth and regular correspondence with the director of the Association for the Conservation of Energy, but by correspondence with many other organisations, including Help the Aged and National Energy Action.

More than half of all Members of Parliament have signed the two relevant early-day motions: early-day motion 108 in the previous Session and early-day motion 317 in the current Session. I pay tribute to the work of many people, not least the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson).

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that signing an early-day motion is a pretty easy and, frankly, cheap way for Members of Parliament to express their views? Perhaps a more substantive measure of commitment would be attendance on a day such as today and, if appropriate, a vote in the Division Lobby.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I entirely agree. It is a problem that the number of early-day motions increases as Session succeeds Session. It becomes a challenge to discover the early-day motions that we do not need to sign. One of my consolations when I was a Government Whip—one cannot get much lower than that—was being disobliged from signing early-day motions. I apologise to the Whip on duty, the hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes).

I can be brief because other hon. Members have eloquently made the points that I intended to raise. However, I want to stress the increase in the death rate of 30 per cent. during the winter months in our country, compared with 10 per cent. or less in Norway, which generally has a much colder climate. I am convinced of two reasons why the number of excess deaths is much lower in Norway and the Scandinavian countries than in our country. First, higher building regulation standards pertain in Scandinavia. For example, in Sweden, people talk about the need for triple glazing rather than double glazing. Secondly—this is a personal judgment—I imagine that Norwegians, Swedes and Scandinavians generally have more access to plentiful supplies of timber that they can burn.

The fact that cold homes presage more deaths in the winter is given credence by the rather stark contrast between the number of excess deaths in mild winters, compared with that for extreme winters, in our country.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on his point about building regulations? Does he agree that, while this country would benefit enormously from tighter building regulations, that would affect only future homes? We must still tackle the problem of older houses that are poorly insulated.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The hon. Gentleman is right. He is knocking at an open door. When we introduce regulations, which are generally accepted, to make motor vehicles safer, we impose more restrictive regulations on new cars and leave a period of time for older cars to be adapted. We ought to draw the same policy conclusion in relation to the insulation of our homes. There are tighter regulations for new homes, as he says, and it is time to deal with the huge backlog of work in older properties.

Governments of both hues have taken initiatives over the years. For example, the first home energy efficiency scheme, which was a package of work, was introduced in 1991. Before that, there was only qualification for grants, which represented a scatter-gun approach that usually benefited those with more money living in larger houses. I readily acknowledge, as part of this love-in, that matters have been improved by the Government. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton mentioned the new HEES package, which starts in June. I understand that it will involve £300 million over two years, but—I say this relatively, not as a criticism—it will affect only about 500,000 homes at most.

I remember reading a good article by the director of the Association for the Conservation of Energy, Mr. Andrew Warren, who said that that programme, which he welcomed, would certainly alleviate fuel poverty, but not eradicate it. We have needed a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach for some years and I sincerely believe that the Bill is the measure on which such a policy can be hung. My view is that we need to insulate 5 million houses in England more effectively and, at the top end, although I hope that the figure may not be so great, as many as 8 million throughout the United Kingdom.

Of course, I welcome the winter fuel payment of £100 to all those of us who are 60 or over, but again—although I do not wish to belittle that good initiative in any way—I wonder whether a scatter-gun approach is being taken. I ask myself whether all over-60s need £100 and include myself in that observation, but, whatever happens, I do not wish to be churlish. I understand that the initiative will cost about £700 million a year—perhaps the Minister will confirm that—and this on-going policy will be implemented year after year. All the demographic indicators suggest that that figure will rise as the years go by.

There is also a tendency to incite people to burn more fuel, which must be one of the consequences of making available £100 for the elderly. Fuel prices have come down considerably—if I wanted to enter a party note, I would say directly as a result of the privatisation programmes—in spite of the previous Government putting 7.5 per cent. value added tax on fuel. I acknowledge that the present Government reduced that to 5 per cent.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend not think that there is a paradox in the argument between, on the one hand, the so-called fuel escalator on vehicle fuels—which I understand was introduced on so-called environmental grounds to deter the unnecessary use of fuel or to improve efficiency—and, on the other, the reduction in tax on

[Mr. Forth]

domestic fuel, which I understand causes greater emissions and more pollution? Has he been able to work out that paradox? I have tried to get the answer from successive Ministers, but have failed.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I confess that I have not been able to work out that paradox, nor am I too anxious to do so because I am none too keen to go on record as wanting to increase VAT on domestic fuel. However, I recognise not only that paradox, but the paradox in the Government's climate change levy proposals. As they stand, the Government will tax all businesses—from manufacturing down to the corner shop—on the energy that they use, although understandably they have had to make concessions to businesses that necessarily have to use a lot of energy to make their goods, but the opposite is happening in the domestic sector.

As we are less than a fortnight from the Budget, I cannot resist the temptation of putting my little point to the Chancellor, albeit via a third party. My advice is that he would do well to cease to bother about the climate change levy. After all, it is meant to be revenue neutral. He should let the planned gas-fired power station programme go ahead and also deal with the whole question of the effect of VAT on the construction industry, not least—and most relevantly in this debate—VAT on insulating or energy-saving materials. Creating an impost and giving it an exception creates anomalies; if those anomalies become too great, they become absurdities. This criticism would also apply to the previous Government: the application of VAT in the construction industry has become an absolute absurdity and I hope that the Chancellor will at least begin to tackle that problem in his Budget on 21 March.

The Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West is the latest in a series that have been introduced over the years. It is a good—I use the word carefully—and noble measure. I was about to say that it will prevent deaths. Although it certainly will, perhaps I ought to be more exact and recognise that we are not immortal. It will at least delay deaths and improve the health of our nation. It is a good measure in relation to the Government's Kyoto commitments on reducing emissions of carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and sulphur dioxide, which are a real problem in our country. It offers the prospect of employment in the construction industry and I have heard it suggested that 30,000 new jobs may be created over a period. Although it will be expensive, I also believe that it represents a sound economic investment.

I have referred to the number of Members who supported the early-day motions tabled in this and the previous Session. On reflection, I reckon that more than two thirds of all Back Benchers did so, given that the 100 or so Ministers are not allowed to sign early-day motions. I commend my hon. Friend's Bill to the House.

11.48 am

Mr. Jim Dobbin (Heywood and Middleton): I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on his wisdom in choosing to introduce such a worthwhile and much-needed Bill and on the flourish at the end of his speech.

For far too long, many people in this country have suffered the ill-effects of poorly heated homes, which have caused great concern to the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Up to 8 million households in the United Kingdom suffer from cold homes and that figure represents many, many more individuals. Many of those most at risk are afraid to use their heating because they cannot afford to pay for it and many old people in my constituency go to bed early and get up late to save energy costs. That is a form of social exclusion in itself and it can lead to loss of mobility and deep depression.

The very young are no less vulnerable. Many new-born babies come home from a warm hospital to a cold and damp environment. Small children lose body heat very quickly, and it is difficult to maintain it when parents are on low wages and cannot afford extra heating.

Much of our housing stock falls below the standard required to provide warm and dry accommodation. As housing chair in the metropolitan borough of Rochdale, I became familiar with the problems caused by lack of investment and lack of improvement in housing in both the public and the private sectors, both pre-war and post-war. Many occupants had developed respiratory tract illnesses as a result of living in damp and draughty houses during the winter months. In many instances whole families were huddled together in the living room, where the only heating in the house was a gas fire. They had to put up with fungus-covered walls, which were the norm on some estates. Any attempt to improve the environment even just by decorating was doomed to failure, as the damp caused wallpaper to peel away. Throughout the winter months, my telephone rang constantly.

The Kirkholt estate in Rochdale was one of the first to attract much-welcomed estates action funds, which financed what became known as the warm and dry Kirkholt project. Central heating systems were installed in approximately 2,000 properties; previously, there had been just two centrally heated properties on the estate. Cavity wall insulation was put in, and properties were reroofed where necessary. New guttering, the repointing of defective brickwork and double glazing, with new window frames, brought the houses up to an acceptable standard. The problem of damp disappeared, and the high level of respiratory tract infections was vastly reduced. The normal winter health problems were all but eliminated, and my telephone stopped ringing so frequently.

Another problem in the area was the number of old terraced properties—a remnant of the industrial revolution, centring on that part of the country. Similar problems to the ones that I have mentioned were common. Grant-supported envelope schemes, and a solution to the problem of cavity-tied wall failure, meant that occupants had an improved home environment that was both warm and dry. A similar improvement in health followed the exercise.

In my constituency, a former Manchester overspill estate, the Darnhill estate—now taken over and managed by the Guinness trust housing association—is the subject of a modernisation programme. More than 400 properties out of a total of 1,100 will have central heating for the first time, and will benefit from other improvements. Housing-associated health problems have been much reduced by remedial action—not just the provision of central heating, but a package of measures designed to tackle each different set of circumstances. It is not just a question of resources in the form of grants; it is a question of improving properties.

It is unacceptable for such circumstances to arise in the year 2000. It is unacceptable that so many people should live in conditions that fall so far short of providing a healthy, warm, dry home. The population is living longer: many elderly people can look forward to 10, 20 or 30 years after retirement. Those years should not be a time of worry about the cost of heating, or the fear of respiratory tract infections as a result of damp and draughts. Such people should not be condemned to stay in bed for many of their waking hours in order to keep warm.

The Government are aware of the difficulty, and have already provided a £100 winter fuel allowance and a reduction in value added tax on fuel, along with other measures. Those are excellent improvements, but if full value is to be gained from them, we need the comprehensive package described in the Bill. That will go some way towards alleviating the unacceptable problems experienced by so many of my constituents.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have given notice of it.

As you will know, last night, the Government suffered a humiliating defeat on the Local Government Bill in the House of Lords. What Lord Whitty described as a central part of the Bill was changed by their lordships. Have you been approached by the Deputy Prime Minister or any of his junior Ministers—one of whom is present—asking to make a statement today, and to tell us whether the Government intend to try to change the Bill again in the House of Commons, where it will shortly be discussed, or whether they intend to recognise the view of their lordships and many in local government that they should be allowed to make their own choices in regard to structures, rather than those structures being imposed by central Government?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I have received no indication that such a statement might be made.

11.55 am

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I am pleased to offer my support for this crucial Bill. The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) deserves great credit for taking up the issue, and for bringing it this far with so much support. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), our party Whip, is a sponsor, signifying the support of the Ulster Unionists. I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), who have persistently pushed for the Bill to be taken seriously. I am sure that they are delighted by the Bill's progress.

The need to ensure that some of the most vulnerable members of society can be warm in their homes is, I am sure, recognised by all hon. Members. The links between cold homes and ill health are obvious to us all. Those links, however, are not just a question of common sense; they are backed up by scientists and doctors. Numerous reports can be quoted to make those links clear—Sir Donald Acheson's recent report on health, work by the Building Research Establishment and reports by the House's own Select Committees, such as the recent Environment Audit Committee report on energy efficiency.

We should be ashamed of the increased number of deaths in winter. I am appalled by the fact that more than 1,200 excess deaths have been recorded, or estimated, in Northern Ireland. Hon. Members have acknowledged the harshness of our winters, which is comparable to those in Scotland. We should not tolerate the fact that our record is so much worse than that of other European countries—and deaths are only one aspect of the misery that is being caused.

Thousands of people are made ill because their homes are cold each winter. Doctors must despair when they treat people successfully in hospital, curing them of illness, only to have to send them straight back to the cold, damp homes that made them ill in the first place. We must aim, as the Bill does, to tackle the causes of the problems, rather than just treating the symptoms.

The Bill would also have environmental benefits. Insulation helps to prevent energy from being wasted, and that is an important part of our commitment to tackling climate change. While it is always difficult to link particular weather events to climate change, evidence suggests that the recent terrible floods in Mozambique are exactly the type of disaster that we shall see more and more often as the climate heats up. Preventing that from happening is one of the greatest challenges faced by Governments throughout the world.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West again and the many other hon. Members who have backed the measure over the past few years. I wish the Bill well and hope that it will become law. I regret that, too often, Northern Ireland has to wait for the step-by-step procedure to benefit from good legislation that applies in Great Britain. I ask him to consider the position in Northern Ireland and how the measure, when enacted, might, at the earliest possible date, be applied there.

11.59 am

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): I join Labour Members in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who used his good fortune in the private Member's Bill ballot, being drawn No. 5, to introduce what is a very important and popular Bill. We all owe him a debt of gratitude. Like other Labour Members, I hope that having the support of so many Members on the Government Benches will not ruin his street cred.

I endorse the tributes that the hon. Gentleman paid to my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and to the Conservative Members who have put so much work into the issue. On a sadder note, let me say that I support the Bill, and so did Michael Colvin. He and I served on the Council of Europe delegation, so I knew him quite well. I think that I speak for everyone on the delegation when I say how sad we were at the death of Michael and his wife Nichola. We will miss them very much.

Members have spoken eloquently about fuel poverty and its effect on people's lives. I shall not repeat the point. I completely agree with all hon. Members who think that it is a scandal that, just as we enter the 21st century, people simply cannot heat their homes adequately because they are poor and so suffer from all those illnesses, some dying unnecessarily.

I will be brief because I know that other hon. Members want to get in. I make just two points. The Bill's greatest strength is that it uses energy conservation and energy

[Ms Jenny Jones]

efficiency to tackle fuel poverty. Those of us who are of a certain age in the House—the age of wisdom and experience—will no doubt remember the save it campaign of the 1970s. Because of the oil crisis, there was a national awareness campaign. For the first time, many people had to think about where energy came from, how we used it and could save it. It was probably the first time that many people who could afford to do so started to insulate their homes. They began to realise how much energy we were wasting.

Times have moved on. Oddly, I agree with the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who said that, if we try to tackle the issue just by lowering fuel prices, we will be in great danger of increasing the pollution that comes about from the energy sources that we use. Grants for people who cannot adequately heat their homes and reducing fuel prices alone will not solve the basic issue. We have to think about where our energy comes from and how to conserve it.

I think that developing renewable energy sources should be a far greater priority, but that is a debate for another day. If I discussed that now, Mr. Deputy Speaker would no doubt quickly rein me in, as it is not the subject of the Bill. Nevertheless, it is an important issue. We have to think about where our energy comes from. The fact that the Bill emphasises energy conservation is its main strength.

The second point is about job creation. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) rightly linked job creation with environment-friendly initiatives and economic development. We have all had the figures quoted at us as to how many jobs the Bill could create if it became law. I am sure that that is true, but the issue is how those jobs are created and where, and whom they will benefit.

I represent an urban constituency in the midlands. For several years, in Wolverhampton and the black country, some extremely effective community business and community enterprise initiatives have got off the ground on some of our poorest and most deprived housing estates. The chances are that people who live on those estates will benefit from the Bill. Community enterprise has demonstrated that unemployed people who live in an area where they have no other chance of securing employment can create their own jobs by providing services that the area has lacked. Home insulation and energy conservation initiatives will not only benefit those people and improve their housing, but will create jobs.

I reiterate that, in the 21st century, people are still suffering from poverty and are unable to heat their homes adequately. I believe that Ministers support the Bill, and I hope that the Bill will not be talked out today. I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister say that the Government will, if necessary, support the Bill as if it were their own.

12.5 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): There are often arguments about the definition of poverty and about whom we should consider to be living in poverty. However, if we use the commonly accepted definition of fuel poverty, there can be absolutely no argument about who is suffering from it—it is those living in households that have to spend more than 10 per cent. of their income on fuel to provide adequate heat. That is a sizeable and substantial percentage of household income to spend simply on keeping warm.

Mr. Brake: Would the hon. Gentleman be surprised to learn that, according to a letter to one of his constituents, at least one hon. Member in the Chamber—the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—does not

accept the concept of "fuel poverty"?

Mr. Baldry: I have absolutely no doubt that my right hon. Friend will be able to make his own views known in his own way and in his own time.

One issue that has been highlighted in the Bill is the dreadful number of people living in fuel poverty in the United Kingdom. According to the Library's figures—which deal only with England—one household in five in England, amounting to approximately 5 million households, are suffering from fuel poverty. However, the problem is even worse than that. As the Library goes on to observe:

> About one in 20 households were classed as being in severe fuel poverty, needing to spend over 20 per cent. and 30 per cent.

of household income simply to keep warm.

As one in five households in England are suffering from fuel poverty, every English Member will have many constituents who are living in fuel poverty. We therefore all have an interest in ending it, and an incentive to put the matter right.

The extent of fuel poverty is all the more disappointing because it is occurring against the background of falling fuel prices. Since privatisation, consumers' gas and electricity costs have decreased by about 30 per cent. Moreover, consumers generally have realised other benefits from privatisation.

Recently, the new Director-General of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets appeared before the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, of which I am a member, and he observed that 5 million people who had

switched gas suppliers can save around £65 each and in electricity 4 million have switched saving £20 a year each.

The director-general also said that, according to their analysis, most of those who have switched supplier, particularly gas supplier, are

the old, the poor and the people in the lowest social groupings.

Nevertheless, 14 million gas customers and 22 million electricity customers have stayed with their current supplier. If they were to switch supplier, they, too, could make savings.

The words "energy efficiency" have often been used in today's debate, and the Bill enjoins the Secretary of State to establish a policy ensuring that people living in fuel poverty are able to keep warm at a reasonable cost. However, the Library's research paper for this debate makes a point that has not yet been made sufficiently forcibly today. A stark sentence in the paper's introduction states:

> The solution to the problem lies in the long-term improvement of housing stock.

Housing is not a particularly sexy subject, politically. It does not grab the headlines like health, class sizes or falling police numbers. However, I hope that, at some

stage, the Government will give us some indication of their strategy for long-term improvement of the housing stock. The Bill will not succeed without a long-term improvement of the housing stock, particularly in the public sector.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) gave the Government credit for releasing more capital receipts to local authorities. The Government deserve credit for that, but those capital receipts result largely from the sale of council houses and most of those wishing to buy their council houses or flats have now done so. Money was also released to local authorities for home improvements as a consequence of large-scale voluntary transfers. Those opportunities will not arise again.

It was announced earlier this year that council tax increases would be substantially above the rate of inflation. That begs the following question: where in future will local authorities find sufficient funds to maintain and improve their existing housing stock? Improvements to existing housing stock are not simply a matter of putting rolls of insulating material in people's lofts; they often involve quite expensive local government capital grant programmes of improving windows, doors and so on. We need some indication of the Government's long-term thinking.

My final point relates to the new home energy efficiency scheme, which is rather inelegantly known as HEES 2. The Government are to be congratulated on introducing the programme, and I am sure that Ministers at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have to work hard in the public expenditure survey round with their colleagues in the Treasury to secure the funds. I hope that all-party support for the programme will make their work easier in future PES rounds.

Perhaps when the Minister replies to the debate, he will be able to help me with a particular concern. The Government have embarked on an ambitious programme. We are told that some 4 million households will be eligible for HEES and that the grant maximum for installing insulation and improving household heating will rise from £315 to £700 for households using mains gas, solid fuel, oil or off-peak electricity for heating. In addition, there is a new HEES-plus scheme for people aged 60 and over, for which around 3.7 million households will be eligible.

I have two questions for the Minister. I understand that £260 million has been allocated to the first two years of the programme. However, £260 million divided by 8 million eligible households would provide approximately £32 per household. How will the new HEES programme prioritise? How will people know about it? I am sure that many constituents who read reports of this debate will be interested to know how they can get a grant of £700. Under the new HEES-plus scheme, the maximum grant is £2,000. How will that be achieved? Given that, on the Government's own figures, some 8 million households are eligible for HEES or HEES-plus and only £260 million has been allocated to the programme for the next two years, is the Minister confident that he will be able to extract sufficient money from his colleagues in the Treasury in subsequent years to ensure that the programme will not run until the £260 million is exhausted and then he will say, "Terribly sorry, but that's it"? If we are to achieve long-term improvements in the housing stock, we must recognise that such schemes will be expensive and that it will be a long haul until all eligible households are improved. If we do not, it will be a presentational cheat.

It will be interesting to hear from the Minister what the Government intend to do not just about energy efficiency, but about improving our housing stock, particularly the public housing stock. What commitments will they give to the HEES programme, which has been a central plank of the efforts so far? I very much hope that the Bill gets a Second Reading today, but it will be meaningful only if the Government are committed to the long-term improvement of housing stock.

12.15 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I shall try to be brief, because I know that many hon. Members want to take part in the debate. I also feel that I have probably had more than my fair share of the House's time since I first raised the matter in 1993. To all those with doubts and misgivings about the details of costs and how such a programme might be financed, I recommend the report of the all-party group on warm homes, which went into great detail about where the costs would occur, how they could be met and where savings were to be found.

I commend the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) and welcome his Bill. We often hear the phrase "joined-up government". The Bill illustrates what joined-up government should be about. It is part of a process that connects saving lives, raising the quality of life, addressing environmental damage and its impact and providing a safer environment.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): My hon. Friend will have heard general references in the Chamber to climate change savings that would result from the Bill. Is he aware that the potential savings from energy efficiency have been estimated at between 2.7 and 3.8 megatonnes of carbon? That is equivalent to, or greater than, the total savings outlined in the Government's transport White Paper. The worst-off people are likely to spend two or three times more on heating their homes to the same efficiency as more affluent people. Putting those two facts together, does he agree that a substantial joined-up government spin-off could arise from the passing of the Bill?

Mr. Simpson: Yes, I do. My hon. Friend allows me to move on to the sense in which the Bill defines the new virtuous circle. It is a way of addressing a critical problem in society through a series of measures from which we will all be net gainers. I pay tribute to the cross-party work that has been done over a long period on spelling out where those gains are to be found. Some of us have found such gains in some of the previous Government's urban programmes for housing renewal, such as the city challenge initiatives. In my area, we found unexpected gains. Members of the public found that their contribution to reducing energy consumption and climate damage made them feel better as well as warmer. They felt that they were part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

An even more unexpected gain was found by the police. In neighbourhoods with serious housing renewal strategies, local kids were able to find local jobs. They ceased to be a pain in the neighbourhood's backside and

[Mr. Simpson]

instead became the really nice kids who had just put in the double glazing, done the loft insulation or replaced the door. That transformed their position in the process of social renewal. That was the only explanation that the police could come up with for the collapse in levels of neighbourhood crime. We were told that kids who might otherwise be attracted to a life of crime were being drawn into programmes of social renewal, and that criminals do not like vibrant neighbourhoods where work is going on as it is harder to conduct burglaries and get away with it. The crime reduction was a factor that we never considered when we looked at the net gains of the matter.

We were told by health authorities and social services departments that there would be health gains, although not specifically in terms of pensioners and the reduction of the excess winter deaths, which are still a matter of shame and scandal for this country. However, the benefits include raising the quality of life for older people and children.

I pay tribute to the GPs and the primary care groups in Cornwall and Birmingham who piloted some of the initiatives in which people are able to get home insulation on prescription. That addresses some of the challenges mentioned to us by health authorities during winter crises, when they say that their ability to treat patients coming in is constrained by the number of pensioners that they are not allowed to release because local authorities are unable to say that there are conditions at home that are fit and safe for patients to return to. The Bill is concerned with a general raising of the standards and quality of life, as well as with addressing the unsexy issue of the quality of the housing stock in this country. I believe that that will be pivotal to the way in which we address sensible living and responsible environmental duties in the 21st century.

Some hon. Members are concerned that the Bill may be about coercion. In truth, it will be a measure in which the role of Government will be one of co-ordination rather than coercion. There is a huge amount of good will, to which the hon. Member for Southend, West referred, which cuts across the whole of society. People want to play a part in the process, and they want an overall plan. The Bill moves us towards that.

We will be required to come up with strategies to address the needs of people living in private rented accommodation. That was acknowledged at the warm homes hearings. It is not a criticism of the Bill, but it is a way of recognising that we are moving to an overall holistic programme to address the needs of those in private rented accommodation, as well as of those in public sector housing and privately owned accommodation.

The Bill will have the extra advantage of saving us money; I am absolutely certain of that. Every time we have stepped, with trepidation, into issues of how we finance this measure and what the overall cost would be, we have found at every stage that we would get back more than we would be required to shell out. We are not picking up on a definition of the fuel-poor families and whether they are the same as the poor in society, but we are addressing a long-term commitment to raise the quality of housing stock in which all families can have rights and aspirations to live sane and sensible lives.

For some time, Britain has been almost alone among EU countries in not having an overall housing strategy aimed at the elimination, as far as practicable, of housing poverty. The Bill sets out a framework within which we will be able to pull together a raft of other Government initiatives—all of which have been moving in that direction—to put together a complete jigsaw. The fact that we are setting ourselves a target of eliminating fuel poverty in Britain will be one of the best hallmarks of any legislation—whether Government or private—on which we could go into the 21st century. The Bill deserves the support of the House, and I hope that it will receive it.

12.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): After three hours of debate, the salient points have been well and truly covered, so I shall not go over them again.

Initially, I had grave reservations about the Bill, but I have revised my judgment significantly. There is a school of thought that says that this is a centralising measure, increasing Government activity and responsibility and allowing the state further to intrude into matters that are rightly the concern of the individual. That argument does not stand up to investigation.

I want to draw attention to a deficiency in the Bill which has been given some consideration. In the debate it has become clear that the cost of investment that the programme will require is a great unknown, as are the source of the money, how it will be deployed and what will be the demand on the taxpayer. It is important for those questions to be answered in Committee.

I have revised my opinion on the Bill and hope that it will proceed to its Committee stage, because the principle behind it is extremely important. It should be given a fair wind, for one overriding reason: the percentage increase in deaths in winter is nothing short of a national scandal. The statistics have been repeated time and again. The comparison between this country and others is frightening. Any measure that earnestly seeks to solve that problem deserves to proceed.

There are also indirect and incidental reasons for supporting the Bill. One is the effect on national health service spending. We have heard that the cost of treating cold-related illnesses is approximately £1 billion a year. If the number of such illnesses can be reduced, clearly funds can be released for other areas of health expenditure, which will be immensely beneficial. There will also be a great indirect benefit to the environment. With effective insulation and other measures, there will be a reduction in polluting acid rain and greenhouse gases.

The approach of supplementing income is essential for the time being, but I do not believe that it is the most sensible and effective method for the long term. It is immensely beneficial for some, but it does not represent the most efficient use of energy and money. The way forward lies in extending domestic energy efficiency. The Bill is designed to achieve that. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) claims that it will, and I believe that he deserves a fair hearing in Committee. I wish him luck.

12.28 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): The Bill is only short and the speeches have got shorter as the morning has worn on because many of the points have been covered.

Fuel poverty is a terrible problem, but it has many solutions and we can tackle it. I used to think that if a measure was sensible it could be effected quickly, but I have learned that the magic wand theory of politics—we want it to be done, therefore it shall be done—is perhaps a touch naive. I still find it strange that something that is so obviously good for everyone involved seems to be so difficult to implement.

I congratulate all my hon. Friends who have introduced similar Bills in the past, and I am happy to support the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) today, although we are not natural allies and this will probably be the only occasion on which I do so.

It is hard to accept that, with our climate, we have such badly insulated homes. To echo the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), insulation is not sexy. No one can say that loft insulation is glamorous, but it can make a huge difference to the warmth of a house. Why do we still allow energy to escape through roofs, windows and doors? It is a terrible waste, both for the individual household and for the environment.

The £100 winter fuel payment for all pensioner households is great, but let us consider how much further that money would go if homes were properly insulated and effectively heated. We have to stop being careless with our energy resources for the sake of those who suffer from the cold, and for our environment. Less wasted energy would lead to lower emissions of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases, and that has got to be good.

Cold is a horrible, miserable thing to suffer. Like the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), I can say that I have been there, done that and bought several T-shirts. Our first home did not have central heating and it was miserable and painful to live there in winter. We were lucky, because we were young—so the House can tell how long ago it was—and we were working so we could remedy the situation, which we did as soon as possible.

For the elderly, with less mobility and fewer resources, a cold home is not just miserable—it can be life threatening. We have heard this morning about the number of excess winter deaths, which stands as a testament to our failure to insulate our homes. It is unacceptable that one elderly person dies of cold, let alone the nearly 15,000 who died in the south-east in 1998-99. That is a tragedy for all their families and shameful for our society. As we have also heard, it costs £1 billion a year to treat cold-related illnesses. As the hon. Member for Banbury suggested, that money could be used in many other ways by the NHS.

As a society we should be able to organise ourselves to do something about that problem. We need a nationwide strategy and, as the Bill says, the best agency to draw up and ensure the implementation of that strategy is the Government. That will ensure that everybody is included and that provision is delivered equally throughout the country. With insulated homes and energy efficiency, we could—as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) said—have a win-win situation. We could save lives and fuel, create work, help the environment and ease the winter pressures on the NHS.

I have always believed that prevention is better than cure. Our climate is no secret. For goodness sake, the Romans put in central heating when they were here. The solution is achievable. We know how to solve the problem. The Bill has overwhelming support, so let us get on with it.

12.33 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) for reminding us about the Romans and their central heating, but I remind her that the Romans also had a fondness for square sewerage pipes that led to all sorts of difficulties. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on his luck in coming far enough up the ballot to be able to introduce the Bill and on the Bill itself.

My hon. Friend claimed in his speech that he was a man of no political ambition whatever. I suppose that I must believe him, but I applaud his enthusiasm and sense of humour. Hon. Members driving private Bills through the House need a good deal of both, from time to time, but they also need ambition. I am reasonably sure that my hon. Friend is not without any of those three qualities.

This Bill has the support of hon. Members from all parties, but it is also the occasion of sadness. Today's debate gives me my first relevant opportunity to pay a quiet tribute to my late friend Mr. Michael Colvin, who was also a sponsor of the Bill. I am sure that the House will join me in passing our condolences to his family.

Like all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, I want to promote public welfare and health in this country. If the Bill achieves that, it deserves applause. It is clearly motivated by a worthy aspiration, but I hope that that can be translated into real Government commitment. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West distributed a briefing at the outset of the debate, which states:

> The Government has promised to eradicate fuel poverty. Labour's manifesto for the Scottish Parliament promised to do this in two terms. Senior Ministers are on the record saying fuel poverty must be ended, that it is a "scandal" and a "preventable scourge". Recently, an "Inter-Ministerial Group" has been set up to look at the problem and set a target date to eradicate fuel poverty.
>
> Despite this, the Labour leadership has a poor record. Ministers have effectively "removed" over 1 million households from fuel poverty by attempting to change the definition.

I share the aspiration behind the Bill, and I hope that the Minister will be able to demonstrate that the Government are prepared to put that aspiration into direct effect.

The Bill has a broad sweep, and perhaps it could not be otherwise. It is not detailed, and that causes me some concern. Clause 3, for example, deals with the power to make regulations, and I must confess that I hate Bills that allow Ministers to make regulation. I believe that legislation should be passed in this House, not at the whim of a Minister in a Committee Room upstairs.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) made a good point about the negative resolution process, and I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West has been attracted by that point. The House appears to be prepared to give Ministers a lot of regulatory powers these days. If we are not to have primary legislation on this matter, I hope that the House can have a little more power over what goes on in its name.

I do not want to criticise the thrust of the Bill, but a couple of matters deserve comment. They reflect what my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter)

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

said a moment ago. When I first came across the Bill, I had grave misgivings. Some remain, although many have been mitigated during the debate. However, I am worried about the absence of information on the costs involved.

Hon. Members are the protectors of public money, if nothing else. Our constituents will be the ones who pay for the Bill, and the ones who will benefit. Although I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West does not have the resources of the civil service to help him provide the details, the House and the public must, as soon as possible, be given the necessary information about the costs likely to be borne by the public in implementing the proposals.

I also have misgivings about the use of figures relating to "excess winter deaths", as they are called. Earlier, I intervened on the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), for whose scientific and medical knowledge I have great respect. I was particularly struck when, about two or three weeks ago, a journalist from my local newspaper, the *Leicester Mercury*, telephoned me to tell me that the warm homes campaign was suggesting that up to 90 people had died in my constituency last winter as a direct result of cold. My constituency is unusual in one sense, in that it returns a Conservative Member of Parliament. It is not unusual in that it is reasonably prosperous. There are obviously pockets of poverty and deprivation, but it is not the sort of place where one would expect two bus loads of people to die every year as a direct consequence of cold.

The campaign for warm homes does itself a disservice if it misuses, or allows other people to misinterpret, what may otherwise be accurate statistics. I have no doubt that 90 elderly people died in my constituency last winter—probably rather more. Indeed, every time I look at the electoral roll to see how quickly it changes, I am not at all surprised to find that large numbers of people in my constituency die during the winter.

It is suggested that in 1998-99, the deaths of 4,200 people in the east midlands came within the definition of excess winter deaths. I do not know what the figures are for the city of Leicester. I do not even know what they are for North-West Leicestershire, whose Member of Parliament I see in his place. However, I do know that if 90 people in my constituency had died of hypothermia or cold-related diseases, or as a direct consequence of lack of heating, the general practitioners in my constituency, with whom I am in close and regular touch, would have told me. I am also reasonably sure that, if those people had not been in regular touch with their doctor before they died, the coroner would have been informed and the *Leicester Mercury*, the other local newspapers or the local radio station would have been on to me for my opinion. They have not been. We must be very careful about misusing highly emotive figures such as these.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I have great respect for the hon. and learned Gentleman, and I am sure that he is not being deliberately disingenuous. Is not the campaign based on the fact that, statistically, up to 100 elderly people in each constituency die each winter who would not die if the pattern of deaths were more evenly spread, as it is in countries where housing and energy provision is more satisfactory? Even in the relatively affluent part of Leicestershire that he has the privilege to represent, there are pockets of poverty, to which he referred. Individual deaths that are related to cold homes will not necessarily hit the headlines. It will not always be obvious—that is the whole point.

Mr. Garnier: I am not quite sure what lesson I am supposed to draw from that intervention, save that the hon. Gentleman kindly says that he respects me. May I return the compliment?

This is a simple point, and I do not need to labour it. It is merely that bald figures are useless unless we understand what is behind them. Before right hon. and hon. Members rush headlong into enthusiastic support for the Bill, they must be more careful about the statistics that they use to bolster that enthusiasm. I share the enthusiasm for the promotion of public health and welfare, but I want it done on a rational basis, not on the uncertain basis of figures that have been conjured up out of the air.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. and learned Friend further agree that unless we know a lot more about the individual patterns of expenditure and disposal of income of each of these people, we should not rush to judge what was the main contributor to their unfortunate and regrettable demise? It seems rather odd to draw a general conclusion without knowing the very relevant circumstances of those people—how they spent their money and what their priorities were. Unless we know a lot more about that, the conclusions will be even more suspect that my hon. and learned Friend suggests.

Mr. Garnier: That is right. Although I have made my point about statistics and I do not want to be sidetracked, I offer a ludicrous example in order to—

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow) *rose—*

Mrs. Gordon *rose—*

Mr. Garnier: May I finish my reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)? I shall then give way to the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell).

If an elderly lady in my constituency who slipped on an icy pavement and broke her thigh, went to hospital and died from pneumonia contracted as a consequence, would that be an excess winter death? I do not intend that example to be flippant. It would undoubtedly be a tragedy, but it would have nothing to do with the real message that the campaign is trying to draw out. I pose that rather ridiculous question to illustrate my concern about the use of statistics.

Mr. Rammell: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Will he reflect on the fact that no serious academic source has challenged the methodology by which excess winter deaths are calculated? A similar calculation prevails in Scandinavian countries. If the same methodology is used in both cases, and deaths in those countries are less than in the UK, that is a cause for concern—whatever the end figure. Surely, that should be the focus of the debate.

Mr. Garnier: I am neither an academic nor an academic institution, but I am sure that I am not the first

person to express concern about such use of statistics. The hon. Gentleman and I are probably on the same side of the argument as regards the passing of the Bill into law, so I do not want to pick an unnecessary fight with him. I simply express a concern that we are allowing ourselves to be bamboozled by statistics—by hard numbers—without really understanding what lies behind—

Mr. Maclean: Will my hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Garnier: May I finish my sentence before I give way to my Scottish—but northern English—right hon. Friend?

I apologise for repeating myself, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We need to be a little more careful in such matters. The subject is highly emotional. The death of any large group of people must be a matter of public concern. Like all hon. Members, I want to get the measure right, but I do not want us to be pushed along a road that is right-headed but wrongly premised.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for giving way. I am following his speech carefully. It may help him if I quote the definition of excess winter deaths given by the director of the Office for National Statistics. He states that they are

> the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July)—[*Official Report*, 20 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 436W.].

The danger is that we have made the assumption that all excess winter deaths are due to hyperthermia or to cold, rather than to other illnesses or diseases, which we may contract during the winter months because of our climate but which are not necessarily cold-related or related to cold homes.

Mr. Forth: What about global warming?

Mr. Garnier: My right hon. Friend and I would probably agree that excess winter deaths are not the result of sun stroke.

I have some concerns about clauses 1 and 2. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West pointed out that clause 2 contained the guts, if not the engine, of the Bill. How can my hon. Friend's aspirations in the Bill be measured?

Several hon. Members read out the accepted definition of fuel poverty. I asked the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) whether there were subdivisions of poverty; whether those who are fuel poor were also to be described as poor; and whether all poor people could be described as fuel poor. Those of us who were taught maths in the 1960s learned about Venn diagrams. Does the universe contain separately identifiable groups, or is fuel poverty merely one of those new jargon expressions that we shall have to get used to?

Mr. Forth: My hon. and learned Friend will be familiar, as I am, with the Office for National Statistics family spending survey, which has just been published. It shows that for the group with incomes in the lowest 10 per cent., expenditure on fuel and power is 7 per cent. of their expenditure, on drink and tobacco it is 7 per cent. and on food it is 23 per cent. Does not that suggest to my hon. and learned Friend first, that there is a much more important potential problem of food poverty than of fuel poverty, as food is just as vital to life, and secondly, that many people are making a discretionary choice to spend as much on alcohol and tobacco as on fuel?

Mr. Garnier: My right hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point—

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): It is not a valid point.

Mr. Garnier: My right hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point, but whether it is relevant to the discussion about cold homes, I do not know. Clearly, a number of people who die during the winter are elderly and die of heart and lung diseases, partly as a result of smoking and possibly partly as a result of the cold. It is possible that the aggravation to their constitution caused by smoking was exacerbated by the cold, and vice versa—the effect of the cold may have been aggravated by smoking, a habit that I heartily condemn.

Mr. Hopkins: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. To counter the point made by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), may I suggest that it is possible that the people who are dying of cold are not the same people as those who are consuming alcohol and cigarettes? Is it not also likely that as the people in question are very poor, small percentages of income represent very small sums of money indeed? The people who are suffering and dying are not the same people as those who are living a lavish life style, no doubt with good claret.

Mr. Garnier: I have no idea what the answer to those questions is, and I do not suppose that the hon. Gentleman has, either.

I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West to bear in mind that we need closer definitions of some aspects of the Bill. We heard a definition of fuel poverty, and I made known my criticisms of it.

I am concerned about the impact of VAT on some of the proposals. My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) is an expert in this field, and I am sorry that I was absent during his remarks. He may have been able to advise the House about the impact of VAT on, for example, the home insulation and other energy efficiency measures to which clause 1 refers.

Whether the Government are the paymaster for these improvements or local authorities are to pay for them, I hope that the Government will not pay out on the one hand and take in on the other, by requiring VAT to be charged on those necessary and sensible improvements.

Clause 2(2)(b) was mentioned by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy). It requires that the strategy referred to in the preamble to the clause shall include

> measures which the appropriate authority believes are required to ensure that households in fuel poverty have access to appropriate fuel tariffs which encourage the efficient use of energy.

I should be grateful if my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West—or, in his temporary absence, the Minister—would explain whether that means that there

[Mr. Garnier]

will be subsidies for energy companies such as gas, coal or electricity suppliers, to enable them to reduce the tariff to a particular section of society, whether the individual consumers of those energy products will get the subsidy directly, or whether there will be no subsidy at all. It is unclear what is meant by

appropriate fuel tariffs which encourage the efficient use of energy.

It may well mean that the cost should increase rather than decrease to discourage inefficient use of fuel. Again, I would be grateful for an explanation.

I do not want to delay our proceedings with further rambling, but I wish the Bill well. I do not speak from complete ignorance. As I said earlier, my constituency, though prosperous, has pockets of deprivation. It may amuse some hon. Members to know that I am perhaps one of the few Conservative Members to have been a coalman. In my university vacations, when I had to get a job to pay off my overdraft and restore my bank balance to credit, I worked for Charringtons, a coal merchant's in Harling road, which is between Thetford and Attleborough in Norfolk. Consequently, I visited many homes in south-west Norfolk—another prosperous part of the country—and saw the conditions in which many elderly people lived in that rural part of England.

When delivering coal to those elderly people, I would sometimes put it in the bath, on the kitchen floor or in a proper coal bunker in the garden. However, in every case of a poor elderly person, the house was not properly insulated and heat conservation was inefficient. The householders lived a less healthy and less enjoyable life because of their inability to pursue a sensible approach to energy consumption.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West on his success so far. I wish him every success in the future.

12.57 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I support the Bill because it requires a plan to change the quality of life of the most vulnerable and to tackle key aspects of fuel poverty, especially energy conservation, which is critical. It also raises the equally important issue of fuel tariffs. It could improve quality of life by granting the basic right to warmth to millions of people who are deprived of it. It could improve health, prevent deaths, create up to 30,000 additional jobs and benefit the environment.

The Bill would benefit Liverpool, where the combination of long-term poverty and poor housing affects many people's lives. A fuel poverty survey was carried out in March 1998 in Liverpool. It identified households where 17 per cent. of income was spent on fuel, but, because of the inadequacy of the buildings, people were often still not warm.

The survey also identified people who suffered most from fuel poverty. They included lone parents; people with large families; people who, for whatever reason, were poor; disabled people; and long-term unemployed people. It also focused on the critical issue of housing conditions. It showed that poor housing conditions, whatever the type of tenure, had a direct bearing on fuel poverty.

According to the survey, people were at risk in council houses that had been neglected, houses at the end of terraces, houses owned by private landlords and houses in the private sector. The private sector constituted a particular problem. Houses in the private sector in Liverpool are twice as unfit as those in the country generally.

The survey also raised the important issue of self-disconnection. It was found that approximately 82 per cent. of people who suffered from fuel poverty disconnected their energy supplies frequently and were therefore cold. It drew attention to the extra cost that is incurred by pre-payment meters, to which so many poor people are vulnerable. The key concern was the evidence that three quarters of the households eligible for assistance under Government schemes were not aware of the existence of those schemes.

I support the Government's programme for improving energy conservation and tackling fuel poverty through that. I welcome the additional money that is to be made available—the budget of £75 million will increase to £125 million this year and to £175 million next—and the broadening of the criteria, which will make more people eligible. I also welcome the establishment of the interministerial committee, which will, among other things, point to the energy regulators shouldering their responsibility.

In Liverpool, Riverside—my constituency—£1.2 million has already been spent through the Government's energy conservation scheme and almost 9,500 households have been helped. There have been savings on bills and 10,783 tonnes of carbon have been saved from release into the atmosphere. I support the Bill because it will make progress not by pious words, but by insisting on action and a strategy and by saying who should put that strategy and its targets together. It will also give the Government responsibility and point to responsibilities for local authorities as well.

The regional dimension is also important. We must ask the utilities and their regulators to report to regional chambers and assemblies so that their responsibilities can be monitored.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way because, as she knows, that point arose earlier. Does she agree that, as the Bill is developed in Committee and on Report, it might be proper for the regional element to be strengthened simply because, self-evidently, even a small country such as ours has considerable variations in climatic conditions, ambient temperatures and the like? That may mean that, instead of taking a blanket national approach, which could be wasteful, the Bill should be more sensitive to regional variations.

Mrs. Ellman: The problem is national and should be tackled nationally, but measures should often be implemented locally. We have to monitor the results of actions taken and the regional level is important in that. The utilities and their regulators should have to report to regional forums so that they have to face up to their responsibilities.

I support the Bill because it is about action and drawing national attention to a national scandal and because it suggests a plan to eliminate it. I hope that all Members will support it and look forward to the time when the scandal of fuel poverty has gone.

1.3 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on his success in the ballot. I hope that I shall not have to wait 16 years to achieve such success. He told us that he had succeeded previously, despite not winning a ballot, with a Bill on tethered donkeys. I can well understand why he chose to focus on the need for warm homes and energy conservation rather than the needs of Labour Members, who are tethered by their pagers to their masters in Millbank, although we all think that they are sorely in need of better treatment.

I declare an interest. For a long time, I have been the unpaid director of a company that provides low-cost housing to rent. It has an excellent record of meeting all the reasonable requirements of its tenants for home improvements, energy conservation and warmer homes. I speak as a former Paddington councillor. Many of those I represented were tenants of houses in multiple occupation that had inadequate heating. Paraffin burners were their source, but they were not only unsatisfactory and expensive, but somewhat dangerous. One of the previous Government's achievements was ensuring that more and more fire regulations came into force to take away that danger. However, we must be conscious that removing that form of housing created other housing difficulties in London. The problems of homelessness are sometimes accentuated if the improved standards that we all want are not achieved at the same time as the provision of increased resources to ensure that sufficient housing is available.

The hon. Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) told us that she had started life in a home without proper heating, as I did with my wife when we were first married and lived in a multiple-occupation house in Paddington. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) spoke of those who use coal. Many of those whom we are discussing today are elderly people who still rely on a bucket of coal to keep them warm in the evenings. Unsatisfactory though that may be, we should bear in mind that such people tend to be creatures of habit, and may take a great deal of persuading to give up the customs of a lifetime. If the Bill is enacted, that aspect must be handled sensitively.

It is, nevertheless, a simple matter of thermodynamics that a central heating system normally provides adequate background heat more cheaply than trying to heat a home for a few hours each day with gas or coal fires. It is to the previous Government's credit that, during their 18 years in power, the percentage of homes benefiting from central heating rose from 60 to 90. It is also to the credit of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West that he has presented a Bill that is part of a long Conservative tradition. It began with the Housing Act 1961, which required landlords to provide adequate heating for their tenants. My hon. Friend's Bill is another milestone on the way to improving the lot of those experiencing fuel poverty.

Mr. Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman says that it may be the habit of a lifetime to choose to heat a home by gas or coal. Is not the real problem the capital cost of installing central heating? Is that not what deters people? Indeed, the capital cost of a variety of energy advances is a problem, underlying which is the problem of insufficient capital investment.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Capital cost is indeed the unspoken burden of the legislation. My hon. Friend has been careful not to put a cost on the Bill, but there will indeed be capital costs. When we were in government, however, we discovered that, if the right incentives were provided, housing associations and private landlords, as well as councils, could find the means to deal with the capital costs of improving homes if housing benefits were increased in line with those costs.

It would be naive to suppose that a sensible, serious programme under the Bill could be enacted without a knock-on cost to the housing benefit bill, but that may be a sound course to adopt. As well as capital costs, there are long-term savings to be made in the running of a home. However, those savings are shared between occupier and owner—in the case of tenanted properties—or used by an owner-occupier. In a free society with free access to capital, the sensible option is to make the investment, because in the long run it will pay for itself.

Briefings on the Bill suggest that the payback period for the typical cost of the programme envisaged in it might be 15 years. In a period of low inflation—that was another achievement of the last Government—long-term capital investment might indeed involve a 15-year payback, but we should not forget the gain in terms of human capital. The most telling arguments for the Bill refer to the number of lives that it would save.

It is hard to quantify the capital cost in monetary terms because the technology is changing so fast. There is a report in today's newspapers about a boiler that is also an electricity generator. It is envisaged that such boilers will typically be installed in people's homes and, in a more energy-efficient manner, meet both heating and electricity requirements. We would not have thought that possible a few years ago. If that is the way of the future, that shows how difficult it is to assess the true capital cost. With new technology, it may prove to be a lot less than some people now believe.

Clause 2(4) states:

> In preparing a report . . . the appropriate authority shall consult—
>
> (a) such organisations as appear to it to represent—
>
> (i) local authorities,
>
> (ii)relevant utilities
>
> (iii) persons in fuel poverty;
>
> and
>
> (b) such other persons as it sees fit.

That must clearly refer to private landlords. As a result of the previous Government's reforms, there is a growth in provision by private landlords of homes to rent. We should encourage that. There is still far too little of that form of housing provision. It enables the economy to be more flexible. People can make changes in their lives far more easily if they can go in and out of rented property. If such rented property is to be improved for those in fuel poverty, the Minister will need to say how he proposes to ensure that housing benefit will be adjusted to reflect improvements in the fuel efficiency and warmth of homes of people who rely on housing benefit to pay their rent.

In a number of instances, landlords have, on behalf of tenants, negotiated to make improvements and have sought the agreement of the rent officer on how that will

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

be paid for. Of course, payment will come in housing benefit, not out of the pocket of the tenant whose life has been improved. When the improvements have been incurred at a cost of several thousand pounds, the housing benefit department has said that it is not prepared to meet the revenue cost of servicing that capital improvement.

It will obviously deter private sector landlords from making such improvements—however much they want to do so—if they cannot afford them. That leaves them in an awkward position, so a firm statement by the Minister on his Department's attitude to housing benefit, where such improvements have been made by private sector landlords, would do a considerable amount to benefit those in fuel poverty, whom we are all concerned about.

I represent Guildford, a seat in Surrey, but for many years I lived in Cornwall. I was interested in the points about the incidence of fuel poverty-related deaths. There is no doubt from the statistics that those who live in the west country are far less exposed to the risk of that tragedy than those who live in the part of the world that I represent. Many delicate flowers flourish in Cornwall that are killed off by the frost in the south-east. Similarly, people in delicate health, of whom there are many, are much more at risk in the south-east than in other areas.

Of course, the one contribution that the Government have made to cutting fuel costs has been their 3 per cent. cut in VAT on fuel, but that cut was financed by abolishing health insurance premium tax relief for the over-65s. The knock-on result is that the elderly in my constituency have seen only a fractional decrease in the cost of heating their homes, but a massive increase in the waiting lists at our local hospital—waiting lists that have themselves, sadly, cost far too many lives; deaths that have to be laid at the door of the Government and their ill-conceived collection of policies.

We should recognise that the 30 per cent. cut in energy costs that has been accomplished by the previous Government's liberation of energy companies is a much more significant factor in creating savings for those who are living in fuel poverty. I hope that that cut will not be reversed by the cack-handed way in which the Government are pushing through their Utilities Bill—which may over-regulate the sector and, in the long run, lead to much higher fuel costs not only for those who are in fuel poverty, but for everyone.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a certain irony in the fact that we are debating the issue against the background of secular falling fuel prices; the reduction in taxes on domestic fuel—which, as I said in an earlier intervention, has a dubious logic to it; and global warming—if one believes in that concept—and climate change. Against the background of those changes, is it not ironic that we are being asked to accept that the problem of alleged fuel poverty is as great as, or greater than, it was?

Mr. St. Aubyn: My right hon. Friend is perhaps confusing two issues: a reduction in fuel costs, and energy conservation measures. Part of the Bill's thrust is energy conservation, which is a vital part of fulfilling our commitment, at Kyoto and before, to reduce energy consumption. However, the Government have undermined that commitment by their switch from gas-fired to coal-powered electricity stations. That was a retrograde step, and I hope that the Government will rethink it. If we are serious about energy conservation, we should be serious about how we produce energy. To that extent, I agree with my right hon. Friend.

My right hon. Friend should be aware of another trend—our growing awareness as a society of the needs of those in fuel poverty, and our desire as a society to take action on it. It would be a gain for society if not only that investment and those long-term savings in energy use could be made, but if lives could be saved. We require a concerted approach in achieving those goals and cannot rely on ad hoc measures.

The measures introduced incrementally by the previous Government did much to tackle those problems. In establishing the overarching policy by region that the Bill seeks to establish, we should not ignore the vital importance of micro-policies that could make specific improvements for specific groups in fuel poverty.

I have taken up enough of the House's time in emphasising my deep commitment to the Bill's principles. I hope that I have also highlighted to the House some of the issues that will have to be addressed in Committee if the Bill is to achieve the objectives that so many of us support.

1.18 pm

Liz Blackman (Erewash): Like many other hon. Members, I feel that I cannot begin my speech without congratulating the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on addressing an important issue in his Bill. I should also not like to miss the opportunity of congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) on all their work on this very important issue.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) mentioned the Library's excellent briefing on the Bill. Much of that briefing has been used in the debate by hon. Members speaking in support of the Bill, and I shall not rehearse those arguments.

Another Opposition Member said that the Bill is good and noble, and it is. The Bill has wide support, and it is very convincing in its attempts to target energy conservation and insulation programmes.

I really hope that the Government find the Bill acceptable as it has many attractive qualities, not least its flexibility. It provides that the Government can set and revise targets, so long as any revisions are reported to Parliament. It is important to ensure that the programme is a success because of the substantial capital costs involved, so it is good that the Government can organise the funding rather than having to stump up all the money themselves.

The Bill provides tremendous scope for the private sector. Everyone—particularly Labour Members—would agree that the Government have worked successfully with the private sector and have raised capital for a variety of public sector projects. The Bill also provides scope for consultation, as has been mentioned. Its flexible framework is an advantage that will make it attractive to the Government.

The Bill has multiple targets; it is indeed a Bill for all seasons. It reduces fuel costs for poor households, which then have the option to invest the money that has been

saved in other housing maintenance projects. That has the effect of driving up the value of their homes as well as enabling them to live more comfortably. As a result, poorer housing, often in urban areas, is improved and that helps to stop migration and increase vitality in urban areas.

There is also a knock-on effect on housing planning pressures. Poor houses are often in cheaper areas. When they are done up and made more comfortable they become accessible to first-time buyers who have a limited budget. That is in addition to the other many and varied benefits that we have heard about today, including helping to meet the Kyoto targets, reducing costs to the national health service, reducing crime and providing significant potential for job creation.

It has been asked whether the Government have the will and the credentials to make the Bill a reality. I would say that they most definitely do. They certainly have a good track record thus far. We have already discussed the excellent home energy efficiency scheme, which has now been refocused and provided with additional resources. Our policies on SAP, winter fuel repayments and the minimum income guarantee for pensioners and the £3.6 billion in capital receipts will substantially improve housing stock. The Government certainly have the right credentials, but as one Opposition Member rightly said, there is still a massive deficit. So much rests on the Government.

I am encouraged by the establishment of the interministerial group to examine fuel poverty, not least because it is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, who certainly has a track record for seeing projects through, not least in getting to grips with pensions mis-selling.

As the hon. Member for Southend, West said, this is a good and noble Bill. It has been estimated by the Association for the Conservation of Energy that in the long run it will be cost neutral, but I think that it is a policy with profits. It certainly will not be neutral to the beneficiaries who will be able to live in more comfortable and secure homes. Being cold and living in poor housing is the pits. It makes people ill, miserable and unable to function. The Bill is the vehicle to address their basic needs.

1.24 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I add my voice to the many that we have heard from both sides congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess). He has presented a good case very well. Several Labour Members have praised him and expressed the worry that, by doing so, they may damage his reputation among Conservatives. I am happy to assure them and my hon. Friend that, despite all the congratulations that he has received, we shall all still love and revere him as much as we always have done—indeed, possibly more so, because the Bill is in such a good cause. I feel strongly that the principles behind the Bill are very good and I hope that the Government act on them. I am also speaking on behalf of the Conservative party, which is in favour of the principles of the Bill and believes that it should receive a Second Reading this afternoon. If it proves necessary, I shall accompany my hon. Friend into the Lobby to vote for it.

The Bill gives rise to issues across a range of policy areas. Oddly, the environmental issues have not been widely discussed this morning, but the social issues have excited the interest of hon. Members on both sides. There are also funding issues, which need to be addressed, as well as the question of the Government's record and, more important, their intentions towards the Bill and the principles that lie behind it.

Given the tone of the debate, it may be surprising that the Front-Bench speeches come from the environment teams, because environmental issues have not dominated the debate. It has sounded more like a social security debate. Apart from the important social issues relating to fuel poverty, there are clearly significant environmental issues. I agree with Friends of the Earth, which has said:

> the elimination of fuel poverty is essential to meet Britain's international climate change obligations. . . . A policy of paying people to heat the skies above their homes is simply unsustainable.

We could stretch the use of the word "unsustainable", because the policy is unsustainable not only environmentally, but economically. We are in the slightly absurd situation of people receiving benefits from the public purse to spend on fuel that does not heat their home but is simply burned, with the warmth going out of a badly insulated house and damaging the atmosphere that we all breathe. It is hard to define a worse use of taxpayers' money.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) gave some vent to the issue of using taxation for environmental purposes and how the Bill will affect that. Hon. Members on both sides will agree that, just as emissions from business and motor vehicles are a serious cause of environmental pollution, so are domestic emissions.

Audrey Wise (Preston): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that the contribution of poor people to global warming is proportionately far less than that of most of us? Poor people spend less on vehicles and other pollutants. A pensioner with a one-bar electric fire does not contribute as much to global warming as any of us. Will he bear that in mind?

Mr. Green: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. It would be a more sensible use of public policy to prevent as many people as possible—the poor pensioner surviving on not enough fuel or anyone else—from contributing to global warming. There are ways—the principles behind the Bill support them—in which we can improve our environmental performance without disadvantaging anyone.

Those of us in the Opposition who have opposed the climate change levy, which puts a burden on businesses, and the Government's wild increases in petrol duty—which fall on many poorer people, particularly in rural areas—are consistent on this matter. We do not think that just using higher taxes is the way ahead. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West has proposed a far-sighted solution with the Bill which avoids higher taxation. That is one of the reasons why I welcome the principles behind the Bill.

The issue of tackling fuel poverty should not divide the House. Governments of both parties have introduced measures to try to tackle the issue. The previous Government introduced the home energy efficiency scheme in 1991, which produced a range of useful measures including loft insulation, cavity wall insulation and draught-proofing. I welcome the fact that the scheme

[Mr. Green]

has been updated by the Government and I know that they are thinking of ways to improve it further. As technology advances, we can all think of new ways of improving the energy efficiency of homes. That need not divide us.

The Minister and the Government will recognise that the measures the Government have introduced so far do not measure up to the scale of the problem of fuel poverty in this country or to their own rhetoric. My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) mentioned the problem of the definition of fuel poverty. The Minister will be aware that the Government have changed the definition in a way that reduces the numbers who are said to be in fuel poverty. One is perhaps entitled to ask, slightly cynically, why the Government chose to go down that route. I hope that that does not indicate any Government hostility to the Bill.

Our national commitments are not an issue of disagreement in the House. The previous Conservative Government signed the Rio convention and did much of the groundwork that led to the commitments that the present Government signed up to at Kyoto, which we welcome.

One of the points at issue about environmental policy is that a better use of energy can and should involve a public expenditure saving in the long run, and even in the not-so-long run. Treating illnesses caused by fuel poverty costs the NHS about £1 billion a year. Reducing—and, if possible, eliminating—that NHS expenditure would be doubly beneficial.

There are other areas where public spending savings can be made by better energy policy. Studies have shown that fitting energy efficiency measures cuts the management and maintenance costs of a dwelling by £300 to £400 a year because of reduced repair bills caused by the absence of rot and mould. Tenants who feel warm, and therefore more comfortable in their homes, move less regularly, causing fewer voids and less paperwork. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions estimates that at least 1.4 million public sector homes in England are in fuel poverty. The calculation can be made that improving only those homes could save £490 million per annum, with consequential savings in other parts of the UK. I am sure that the Minister is aware of those important financial arguments.

The environmental impact of the Bill is positive, but clearly the social effects of fuel poverty have caused most passion in the House and outside. Several hon. Members have referred to cases of individual distress in their constituencies. We are all keen to eliminate such distress in our constituencies.

I am sure that many hon. Members have received the postcard suggesting that the average of avoidable deaths per constituency is 90 every winter. We have had some discussion of regional variations, but that is a second-order issue. Even if the figure is imperfect, it is clearly not acceptable to have such a level of avoidable deaths in an advanced country. I am sure that the Minister will accept that the Government have an urgent duty to tackle the problem.

I hope that the Minister will explain how the Bill intersects with the Utilities Bill. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) spoke of clause 2 being somewhat opaque; it becomes even more so when considered in conjunction with clause 78 of the Utilities Bill, which talks about what the Secretary of State may do if he considers that members of a disadvantaged group

> of customers of persons who supply gas are treated less favourably than other customers of theirs . . .

That clause is designed as an attack on fuel poverty, and it is not immediately clear what would happen if it intersected with clause 2(2)(b) of this Bill. One would not want any incoherence in the attack on fuel poverty.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is not being frivolous when he says that if the House supports the Bill—as I hope it will—we need to think through the taxation and spending consequences. The House would be guilty of a dereliction of duty if we did not do that. I have asked similar questions to his about the possibilities for funding large-scale projects.

The warm homes committee set up by both Government and Opposition Members has been examining the funding options to avoid the Treasury having to indulge in more public spending and increase taxation because of the Bill. Various members of the committee, including my hon. Friends the Members for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) have been inventive in finding ways in which public finance initiative-style mechanisms can be used—issuing bonds, perhaps—as is done in the health and transport sectors. The financial mechanisms could be discussed in Committee.

The Government have announced their intention to abolish fuel poverty—the precise objective of the Bill—so I assume that the Minister will confirm that they have already made a commitment to obtain the necessary finances. A serious commitment of taxpayers' money to tackle the problem of fuel poverty is already in the Red Book. Those who support the Bill contend that if we must spend taxpayers' money we should do it effectively. We are spending large sums clearing up the problems, but it would be much more effectively spent in preventing them.

We will need to investigate the various private funding methods. I am sure that if my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst takes up the brave offer from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West to sit on the Committee that will consider the Bill, my right hon. Friend will be assiduous in ensuring discussion of cost and methods of funding.

It is significant that among those who have expressed public support for the Bill is the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In fact, he complained to the campaign in support of the Bill that he had not been listed as a supporter in the literature that many of us have been sent. He said:

> I have always tried hard to be as supportive as possible—this is why I am surprised to see that I am not listed as being supportive in other ways.

Now that he is Chief Secretary to the Treasury, he has every chance of being as supportive as he could want to. Responsibility has been accepted by the Cabinet Minister responsible for controlling public expenditure, so he must know how the aims of the Bill can be achieved without increasing public expenditure. Otherwise, the figures that the Chief Secretary has published would be misleading, and that cannot be the case. I hope that the Minister will enlighten the House about the funding mechanism and how it fits in with the Government's current spending targets.

Responsibility now lies firmly in the Government's hands. If they want this Bill or a version of it to reach the statute book, they can make it happen. They have promised to eradicate fuel poverty and senior Ministers are on the record as saying that fuel poverty must be ended, that it is a scandal and a preventable scourge. Indeed, they have set up an interministerial group—the acme of action for this Government—to consider the problem and to set a target date for the elimination of fuel poverty. I hope that the Minister will also enlighten us about that target date and the work of the interministerial group.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West deserves the congratulations and the gratitude of the House for choosing this measure. Helping the old and poor to live in greater comfort and warmth is a noble cause. After all the rhetoric we have heard from Ministers on that issue, they will be judged on whether they help to deliver the Bill. I support my hon. Friend's Bill.

1.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) has raised an important issue with his characteristic flair. Not only will energy efficiency help to reduce heating bills, it will—as the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) was right to emphasise—also bring environmental benefits.

As was evident during the debate, the Bill has support on both sides. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) said, the debate was in danger of becoming a bit of a love-in, with the exception of the legendary scepticism of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), without whom no debate of this nature would be complete.

I also wish to acknowledge the role played by my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) on this issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford)—who has the second and third Bills this afternoon, which are both relevant to this issue—has also long taken an interest in energy efficiency.

The Bill places a duty on the Secretary of State to prepare and publish a strategy and targets, with the intended aim of reducing the incidence of fuel poverty in England and Wales, and to implement the strategy thereafter. That is a worthwhile and necessary aim. As hon. Members have acknowledged, tackling fuel poverty has been a Government priority. I was a little disappointed to hear the hon. Member for Ashford say that the Government's measures do not measure up to the scale of the problem. Perhaps they do not, but they do measure up to the record of the previous Government.

According to recent estimates, at least 4.3 million households have difficulty with fuel bills. As hon. Members have said, many poor people have to make choices between being warm or sacrificing spending on other pressing priorities. Their problems arise from the combination of low incomes, poorly insulated housing and expensive-to-run or inadequate heating systems. Under-occupation can also be an issue.

Research indicates that cold homes are the major domestic health hazard, and that tackling fuel poverty requires improvement in the energy efficiency of the homes of vulnerable households. That is why the Government are committed to tackling fuel poverty and are taking a range of measures actively to alleviate it.

Perhaps I can set out the progress that we have already made. We have cut value added tax on fuel and on energy efficiency materials supplied through Government schemes, so that people can now better afford to heat and insulate their homes.

We have established the new home energy efficiency scheme which, from June, will provide comprehensive packages of heating and insulation improvements to households most at risk from cold-related ill health—the elderly and families on low income, the disabled or chronically sick. The scheme will include efficient central heating systems for people over 60 on low incomes. It will offer grants of up to £2,000 per household, in contrast to the £315 available under the current scheme, which still leaves many people in difficulty. The scheme will focus particularly on the private rented and owner-occupied sectors. They account for about 70 per cent. of fuel-poor households and are missed by the current programme. In England, the new scheme will have a budget of about £260 million for the first two years, and is expected to assist about 460,000 households. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have their own schemes.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): I wish to alert my hon. Friend to a possible problem that may evolve in the scheme being introduced in England. Government policy places emphasis on getting new deal people on to training schemes. However, the energy action grants agency will employ its own surveyors, and the people doing the installations—the companies involved in training—will not know whether they will be allocated contracts until those surveyors have reported back to the agency. Until then, people on the new deal will have nothing to do but sit around. In Scotland, the installers can carry out the surveys as well. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider that option.

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We shall certainly do our best to learn any lessons from the Scottish experience.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) asked how we would prioritise matters. It is our intention to establish referral networks, in which local authority health and social services departments will try to identify the 460,000 most-in-need households that we hope to deal with in the scheme's first two years.

The Government have also provided substantial extra resources for housing investment by local authorities through the housing investment programme. That amounts to £3.6 billion over the three years to 2001-02, and will be used to tackle the backlog of renovation work

[Mr. Mullin]

needed in social housing. These resources should have a significant impact in tackling fuel poverty, through improved energy efficiency, which is one of the priorities of strategic stock maintenance programmes. We are asking local authorities to report on their policies and achievements specifically in combating fuel poverty, in conjunction with the reports that they already prepare under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 on the implementation of their home energy conservation strategies.

We have introduced, and subsequently increased by 400 per cent., winter fuel payments for pensioners. The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet asked what the cost was. In 1999-2000, it was £675 million. Next year, when payments are extended to the over-60s, the total cost will be £850 million. The hon. Gentleman also made a point about VAT on home improvements, to which I am sure many right hon. and hon. Members will be sympathetic. I hear what he says, and I will pass the message on to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

We have introduced the minimum wage and the minimum income guarantee for pensioners. Those measures should also have some impact on the ability of poor people to pay for heating.

The inter-ministerial group, chaired jointly by the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in the other place, will consider the impact of these programmes. The group met for the first time in January this year. It will seek to develop a more accurate picture of the extent of the problem, how quickly it can be addressed, and at what cost. It will also develop and publish a strategy setting out the Government's fuel poverty objectives, and how they will be achieved.

Alongside these Government actions, the electricity and gas regulator has announced that he is continuing the energy efficiency standards of performance scheme for the electricity industry to 2002, and extending it for the first time to gas consumers as well. After 2002, there are provisions in the Utilities Bill for the Government to take over responsibility for setting standards, as part of the climate change programme, with continuing emphasis on help to pensioners and low-income consumers. All those measures represent part of a significant package that should have a marked effect on tackling fuel poverty and improving energy efficiency.

As I mentioned a few moments ago, the aim of the Bill is both worth while and necessary. It mirrors the measures that we already have in hand. It would play a part in our fuel poverty programme, ensuring that the most vulnerable households need no longer risk ill health due to a cold home.

The hon. Member for Southend, West would, I think, be surprised if I said that the Government were entirely content with the Bill. We will need to look at the detail of the drafting to ensure that it accurately reflects Government policy. We have to consider provisions for bringing the measure into force and, bearing in mind the Government's current spending commitments and reviews, we want to consider carefully the references to time scales and targets.

Mr. Baldry: To those Conservative Members who have been Ministers, that sounded very much like code for "the Government intend to kill off the Bill on Report." We have been through that before. Will the Minister give an undertaking that the Government do not intend to give the Bill a fair wind now, with the intention of killing it off on Report and Third Reading?

Mr. Mullin: We certainly have no intention of killing off the Bill.

Mr. Garnier: Will the Government therefore unwittingly kill of the Bill?

Mr. Mullin: I do not think that I will dignify that with a response.

A number of hon. Members have asked about cost. Nothing in the Bill would increase spending per se. In any case, the Government have greatly increased spending in this area, as I have outlined. The Bill would enshrine existing commitments.

We accept that the Bill has merit, and I am glad to be able to advise the hon. Gentleman that the Government will support it, subject to amendments on matters of detail.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put, *but* Mr. Deputy Speaker *withheld his assent, and declined then to put that Question.*

1.55 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South–East): It seems strange to follow a Minister in debate, as we can do on Fridays. I welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I feel privileged to speak in the debate. I am a former member of the housing committee in Bolton, an officer of the warm homes group and a member of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit.

The Bill has a fair wind behind it and, as we have just heard, the Government will put their force behind it too. In November, I received a document about the warm homes campaign, which included a nice photograph of the Bill's promoter, the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess). The campaign reminded us that 434 people were behind the Bill.

The Environmental Audit Committee recently produced one of its best-received reports—on energy efficiency. The report pointed out that it is a national scandal that about 8 million households in Britain cannot afford to pay for the warmth they need. People on incomes of less than £5,000 a year certainly cannot afford to heat their homes. The plight of the elderly has rightly been stressed in the debate. They suffer ill health and death because of the problem.

In addition, I draw the House's attention to the cause of lone parents and families with children who are caught in the poverty trap. More than a third of lone parents lack even the most basic forms of insulation in their homes.

In Bolton, 51,200 people—19 per cent. of the town's population—are aged over-60. One third of the town's households include a pensioner. Across the country, 62 per cent. of pensioner homes fail to meet the standard assessment procedure minimum levels of heat retention or of efficiency in their heating systems.

More than 13 per cent. of people in the north-west pay for their fuel in pre-payment meters. More and more people are going on to such meters. In February, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in York published the findings of a research study undertaken by the university of Newcastle into access to energy—among other matters.

That study made a good point, which has not been referred to in the debate. It noted that those of us who are fairly well off are made even better off by the utilities, because they make it cheaper for us to pay for energy through banker's drafts or standing orders. However, those who cannot afford to buy fuel have to go on to those wretched pre-payment meters. They have to pay more for their fuel than those of us who are more affluent. Furthermore, they often disconnect themselves, either accidentally or because they have no money—usually the latter.

Several of my constituents have complained to me about access for renewing their cards—even supposing that they have the money to do so. They often have to travel to an adjacent town. I have even given people lifts so that they could renew their energy cards. It can often cost £1 each way for one of my constituents to go to one of the energy providers in town just to put about £5 on the card—that is all they can afford. It costs them £2 to load the card with £5 of energy. That cannot be right. I hope that this Government, or a future Government, will tackle that.

The link between bad housing and bad health is indisputable and has frequently been referred to in the debate. Every drop of 1 deg C below the winter average results in 8,000 avoidable deaths. That is a scandal. In the north-west alone, there were an estimated 2,830 excess deaths in the winter months of 1998-99.

In 1986, I was elected chairman of Bolton housing committee. At that stage, we were spending £15,000, which was then a considerable sum, totally refurbishing public sector houses in selected areas of the town. I stopped that because people all over Bolton were complaining about damp homes. I decided to launch two programmes, which have been highly successful.

One programme was to give every council house tenant a modular heating system—modular, because we found that many of them could not afford to run full gas central heating systems at a cost of £300 to £500 a year. With our modular systems, they could turn on as many of the units as they could afford. That programme was completed early, and now the older heating systems are being renewed.

The second programme that I introduced was to refurbish the exteriors of all the houses that needed repair, with new roofs, cavity wall insulation and double-glazed windows, at a saving of between £5 and £7 a week for all the council tenants who benefited. I am pleased to say that that programme is also almost complete.

Mr. Alan Simpson *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put, *but* MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *withheld his assent, and declined then to put that Question.*

Dr. Iddon: Bolton has set itself a target of 20 per cent. energy savings in a 10-year energy strategy that has been drawn up recently with the help of an energy consultant. We heard references to cost during the debate. I can give some costs for our town. The implementation of that strategy will cost £187 million at today's prices. To achieve the Government's target of 30 per cent. energy savings, an additional £81 million would be necessary to provide condensing boilers throughout the borough.

A quarter of households in Bolton do not have adequate loft insulation. It would cost only £200 per household to provide it, and would result in annual savings of £65.

Bolton is a member of a consortium of 12 other local authorities, one utility company, one manufacturer and three private contractors, who have successfully bid for Government funds for a project appropriately named Millenergy. The group will raise awareness of energy saving and promote a bulk discount purchasing scheme for energy, along with a home energy efficiency grant top-up scheme.

Bolton is also a member of the north-west energy forum, which will act as a regional pressure group for the purpose of attracting funds to the region, and it is a leading authority in promoting the local Agenda 21 strategies.

Fuel poverty can be tackled by various measures, including the renovation and insulation of homes and the promotion of all forms of energy efficiency. That is good for the economy, creating, as we have heard, 30,000 new jobs and many new small and medium-sized enterprises. I am pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Minister say that he supports the Bill, and I wish it well.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put, *but* MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *withheld his assent, and declined then to put that Question.*

2.4 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): In that case, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall make a contribution to the debate. I shall be brief, as the subject has been well aired and the Bill looks as though it is about to receive a fair wind.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on his Bill, and thank my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) for the tremendous work that they have done.

Many more of my hon. Friends from north of the border would have been present today, but they are attending the Labour party conference in Scotland. My hon. Friends the Members for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross), for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) and I have made the effort to be in the House today.

[Mr. Russell Brown]

One of the underlying problems causing modern social ills is poor housing. That has been said time and again. Most hon. Members will have had contact with constituents who have complained bitterly about their home, whether on a housing estate in a town or city, or in the countryside, perhaps a property privately rented from the local estate.

Living in poor properties can lead to despair. Inadequate, or—even worse—inefficient heating, damp and poor maintenance leads to poor health and all the social problems that flow from such conditions.

I welcome many aspects of the Bill, especially those that mirror parts of Government policy. It is appropriate to tackle fuel poverty while protecting our environment. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is anxious about the Bill, especially its financial aspects. However, a warm and dry home should be a basic right in our country in the 21st century.

I shall confine my remarks to the subject of alleviating fuel poverty. Although the number of households that have to spend more than 10 per cent. on fuel fell by approximately a fifth between 1991 and 1996, we are in no position to be complacent, especially when many more than 4 million households can be classed as fuel poor. I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst would argue against the concept of fuel poverty.

Far too many elderly people are at risk, and the dangers of hypothermia, asthma and respiratory infections as well as coronary heart disease are far too common. We have an average of 30,000 more deaths each winter than would normally be expected. Approximately 90 per cent. of those deaths are of people who are over 60. It is a blight on our communities. As we heard earlier, the figures for many Scandinavian countries are lower than those for the United Kingdom. That is simply because they appreciate the social benefit of better heated and insulated homes.

The Government have taken action to assist the most vulnerable through the reduction of VAT on domestic fuel to 5 per cent.; a 5 per cent. VAT rate on specific energy-efficient materials; winter fuel payments for our 7 million pensioners and cold weather payments for many vulnerable groups. Those are only a few examples.

I appreciate that the Bill is relevant to England and Wales, but it is appropriate briefly to mention that the Scottish Parliament, in tackling fuel poverty, has committed a further £300 million to housing in Scotland. That will enable us to build and improve some 18,000 homes in the next three years and will target improvement and repair grants at those who are least able to pay. The Scottish Parliament's new housing Bill offers a tremendous opportunity to give young people a great start in life by living in a home that is free from damp and cold conditions.

Energy efficiency can provide a permanent solution to the problem of fuel poverty, benefit the environment through reduced carbon dioxide emissions, create jobs in the insulation industry, reduce expenditure on housing maintenance and repairs, and cut the cost of treating cold-related illnesses. It can also reduce fears of debt and disconnection for low-income families through making the cost of heating their homes more affordable.

The Bill has genuine potential, and I hope that the House will support it.

Mr. Amess *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question put, That the Question be now put:—

The House divided: Ayes 143, Noes 0.

Division No. 101] **[2.9 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Austin, John
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benton, Joe
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Evans, Nigel
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Gale, Roger
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Green, Damian
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hill, Keith
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hunter, Andrew
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McIsaac, Shona
McNulty, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sedgemore, Brian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Skinner, Dennis
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter

Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walker, Cecil
Waterson, Nigel
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wray, James

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Simon Burns and
Mr. Alan Simpson.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Maclean and
Mr. Eric Forth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *put accordingly and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Energy Efficiency Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

2.19 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on successfully steering his Bill through Second Reading. In the short time that I have left, I sincerely hope that I can join him.

I understand that the Bill is opposed by the right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). I hope that, in what will be a short debate, we will have an opportunity to find out exactly what their opposition is. I shall try to give them some time to make a speech.

The Bill reached Third Reading, steered by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), in the first Session of the Parliament. I pay tribute to him. I was drawn number 18 in the Back-Bench Members' ballot at the time. I picked up the Bill in November 1997. Later, he indicated that he was also interested in the Bill, which was slightly controversial. I felt that it had a better opportunity of success with him as he came sixth in the ballot and would be more likely to secure the time needed for it to pass through all its stages. I wished him well at the time.

I have a letter from the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst in which he says that it should not be easy to get private Member's Bills through Parliament. I accept that, but, given that I have been associated with the Bill since November 1997, I do not exactly consider it easy to get such Bills through the House.

Some comment has been made about the fact that I put the Bills forward as presentation Bills. That is purely a tactical move. The Bill and the next Bill on the Order Paper—the Energy Conservation (Housing) Bill—went through all their stages in a previous Session. Their Second Reading was unopposed. They went through the Committee stage. They were redrafted by parliamentary counsel. They reached Third Reading and then a voice from the back shouted, "Object." After all that work and dedication, the two Bills were shot down. That is unprecedented in the history of the House.

The Bill was the subject of a Supply day motion that was tabled by the Liberal Democrats. We voted on the wording of the Bill as it was amended in Committee, so effectively it had a Third Reading. The whole House voted on it and supported it, yet, on a Friday morning at private Member's business, a lone voice from the Back Benches shouted "Object" and the whole thing fell apart. No other Bill has been shot down in those circumstances ever before.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I wonder whether I can reassure the hon. Gentleman. A number of us on the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons are determined to improve that process.

[Mr. Efford]

Mr. Efford: I am grateful for the intervention. I understand that, under the procedures of the House, if the Bill were introduced by a Minister, six Members would be required to object to stop it progressing any further. It would progress in those circumstances, because only two Members oppose it.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I endorse what the hon. Gentleman has said. The Bill in the earlier Session, which I was fortunate enough to be able to promote, had almost unanimous support in the House. I had enormous encouragement.

Mr. Efford: I concur. During the previous Session, I tabled an early-day motion that attracted 323 signatures. Ten different early-day motions on energy efficiency have attracted widespread support from Members. It is clearly something that Members of all parties and from all parts of the UK fully support.

The Bill is about creating a level playing field in relation to domestic energy efficiency. It provides that, if a house is more than three years old or has not been subject in the previous 12 months to an energy efficiency survey, an energy efficiency survey should be done as part of the valuation survey conducted before someone purchases that house. An energy efficiency survey conducted at that time will add about £25 to the cost of the valuation survey. If such a survey were done independently of a valuation survey, it would probably cost £100 to £200.

Those who oppose the Bill are seeking to deny home owners across England—the National Assembly for Wales would have to adopt the Bill's provisions for application in Wales—cheap access to crucial information that, in the long term, could not only save them money, but benefit the environment.

The Bill is supported by the Council of Mortgage Lenders. It is supported also by the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors—which represents the people who will have to do the work. Those bodies accept the Bill as practical legislation. The issue of the Bill's practicality was addressed in the 1997-98 Session.

The Bill's provisions will have to be not only easy to implement, but easily understood by consumers. The Government were determined that the provisions should not place an overly heavy burden on either mortgage lenders or consumers. The amendments made to the previous Bill achieved those goals.

Information on energy efficiency is available in many spheres. Parliament has required vehicle emissions testing to be included in the MOT test, which motorists pay for. My Bill is very similar to the one promoted by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon. It is a sensible Bill, and I commend it to the House.

2.27 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate—although it will last for only three more minutes. The hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) has not left me much time to explain a few concerns that I have about the Bill. First, however, I must correct him on some fundamental matters.

The hon. Gentleman said that two Opposition Members opposed the previous Bill, and he mentioned my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and me. Although I had some objections about the way in which, in the previous Session, the hon. Gentleman tried to bounce the previous Bill through the House without debate, if he had bothered to do his homework, he would have seen that, on 6 February 1998, in my Second Reading speech on that Bill—which was promoted by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett)—I began by saying:

> I welcome the Bill . . . My only concerns are with the regulations . . . It has been my experience that the devil is always in the detail.—[*Official Report*, 6 February 1998; Vol. 305, c. 1353.]

I went on to say that I was not opposed to the Bill in principle.

We cannot have in the House a new concept of Second Reading and of democracy providing that, simply because a Bill had been considered extensively in one Session, it should be passed on the nod in a subsequent Session. I do not think that any of us could accept that as a constitutional principle.

Mr. Efford: In the previous Session, I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman and to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) to suggest that, because of the special circumstances pertaining to the legislation, we should commit my Bill to a Second Reading Committee. They declined the offer.

Mr. Maclean: I do not think that there are any special circumstances relating to this private Member's Bill that would warrant a Second Reading Committee. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that the Bill is so important, he must prevail on the business managers and get it included in the Queen's Speech. If the Bill is vital to him and to other Labour Members, I am sure that he will be able to persuade Ministers to include it in the Gracious Speech. If that happens, I may have any concerns that I wish about the Bill, but I shall not get very far with them, as the Government will be able to bounce it through with their large majority.

It is unacceptable for private Member's Bills to be bounced through on the nod without debate. The hon. Gentleman asks me to let the Bill through today, when, in the 11 minutes that we shall have to debate it, he has allowed me fewer than three minutes to outline some of my genuine concerns about it. As I was saying—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 24 March.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

ENERGY CONSERVATION (HOUSING) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 24 March.

RETAIL PACKAGING RECYCLING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 7 April.

ROAD TRAFFIC BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 24 March.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER (AMENDMENT) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 7 April.

ORGANIC FOOD AND FARMING TARGETS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 5 May.

SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2000-01

Motion made and Question proposed,

That, at the sitting on 14th March, Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.) shall apply as if the words '(aa) supplementary votes on account for the coming financial year;' were inserted after line 21.

Hon. Members: Object.

Birth Certificates

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

2.31 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I am pleased to have the opportunity to raise this vital matter in the House today. The title of the debate on the Order Paper may be slightly misleading as there is no such thing as a fraudulent application for a birth certificate. The debate relates to the potential for fraudulent activities thereafter. I am sure that there is some concern in another Government Department about whether the responsibility for replying to the debate rested with that Department or with my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who appears to have drawn the short straw.

My concern today centres around an issue that was highlighted—although not for the first time—by a television programme just over four weeks ago. It was a Granada production called "Tonight with Trevor McDonald". It was a short story entitled "Identity Crisis".

The programme showed how easy it was to obtain a copy of a birth certificate of a child who had died in infancy, generally within weeks or even hours of being born, and how that birth certificate was used fraudulently to obtain a passport and thereby a new identity.

It is worth pointing out that in England and Wales the Government Department responsible for administering the laws relating to marriage and the national health service central register is the Office for National Statistics, whereas in Scotland the Registrar-General is responsible for the recording of births, deaths and marriages.

The programme showed how a team of undercover reporters, posing as a gang smuggling illegal immigrants into the United Kingdom, answered an advertisement in the *International Herald Tribune* which was offering genuine British passports for sale at $17,500. Such documentation would be more than helpful if an illegal immigrant was trying to avoid the risk of deportation.

At a meeting with the fraudster, it was explained to the undercover reporters how easy it would be to provide them with a genuine passport, and within a very short time the same fraudster was able to provide a new passport and thereby a new identification to an arranged address.

Within days of the programme having been broadcast, my constituent, Alec Little, visited my office. He explained to me that the programme had been an extremely upsetting experience for him as the team of fraudsters had acquired a passport and a new identity for one of the undercover reporters which turned out to be that of his late nephew, James Alexander Patterson, who had died at the age of 11 weeks. Young James Alexander Patterson had been born on the day of my constituent's wedding and had died in the early hours of Christmas day.

Mr. Little went on to say, quite naturally, that something has to be done. How ironic that Frederick Forsyth, in his book "The Day of the Jackal", portrayed the scam almost 30 years ago, yet here we are in 2000 and the problem still exists and has the potential to continue for many years.

The indexes of births, deaths and marriages maintained by the Registrar-General may be searched by the public without charge. They contain alphabetical lists of the

[Mr. Russell Brown]

names of the parties, the registration district and the location of the entry in the register. However, as the registers are not public records, there is no facility for members of the public to search them. Copies of individual entries in the register may be bought by any member of the public who pays the appropriate fee and is able to identify the record that they require. There is no requirement for anyone purchasing a certificate to prove a connection with the person or the family to whom the certificate relates.

The issuing of birth certificates that are then used fraudulently was commented on in the previous Government's Green and White Papers on the registration services. They considered the problem to be sufficiently serious to suggest that access to recent registration documents should be limited to those who had legitimate reason for wanting them, for example by requiring all applicants to furnish prescribed particulars about the entry, including date and place of birth, father's name and surname and mother's name, surname and maiden name. It was realised that it would be impossible to eradicate totally the misuse of records by determined criminals.

The 1990 White Paper included a chapter on the responses to the 1988 Green Paper and set out proposals for access to registration records, as the Green Paper had met with little approval from consultees. Many of the White Paper's recommendations have been implemented by administrative action or changes to existing secondary or primary legislation. I appreciate that primary legislation would be required to change the conditions of access to registration records. Nothing has been done to restrict access to date.

The Government made a manifesto commitment to crack down on the fraudulent use of birth certificates. Last autumn, the Office for National Statistics issued a consultation document on the whole registration service. I am delighted that the issue of access to registration records was discussed, but I am disappointed that no definite proposals to counteract fraud were made.

The debate throws up a complex question about identity and how we tackle the problem in the new world of information technology and e-commerce. How will citizens prove their identity in the future? Will there be a central database that someone logs us on to when we come into the world? As we progress through life, perhaps into marriage and contact with Government Departments and bodies such as the Inland Revenue, the Benefits Agency or the UK Passport Agency, adjustments could be made to our personal data, the final entry being the only guarantee in life—death itself.

It may seem fanciful, but many see an easy answer to the problem of the fraudulent use of birth certificates, particularly in the tragic circumstances that we are considering, in a computer entry registering the death being cross-linked to the registration of birth. That would flag up a warning if someone attempted to use that identity in the future. I apologise if that oversimplifies a possible solution.

Even bolder than "The Day of the Jackal" fraudsters—if that is possible—are those involved in what is called piggy-back fraud, which means using the identity of someone who is still alive. "Tonight with Trevor McDonald" was critical of the UK Passport Agency and said that, despite a £120 million investment in a new computer system, there had been little improvement in combating fraud. I am pleased to hear that the new system in operation at the UK Passport Agency manages to avoid piggy-back fraud.

I mentioned that little seems to have happened since Frederick Forsyth's novel was written. My research and contact with Government Departments indicates that measures have been taken to deal with the problem, but the problem still exists, and who knows how many birth certificates some of the fraudsters may well be sitting on?

Yesterday's report by Lord Grabiner on the informal economy—or the black or hidden economy, as it can be called—revealed a London organisation of bogus companies, specialising in large-scale benefit, mortgage and property fraud, smuggling illegal immigrants and cocaine dealing. Investigators found evidence of 500 fraudulent benefit applications worth £4 million, 50 cases of fraudulent false identities and more than 40 claims for child benefit, supported by counterfeit and false identity documents.

The issue of identity is far reaching and can be tackled only with an integrated cross-Government approach. I believe that moves to achieve that are under way. Lord Grabiner says:

> I recommend that whether the solution is stricter control over the issue of birth certificates or tighter checks on their use, this is a problem that needs to be tackled.

It is strange that I have an Adjournment debate on the subject one day after that report has been issued.

Indications are that UK Passport Agency staff are being even more scrupulous, and that those responsible for registration are scrutinising applications for certificates. Above all, there is a strong working relationship with the authorities responsible for enforcement.

For the last 10 years, the register in Scotland has been moving to computerised registration and recording. In England and Wales, the records have been on computer since 1993, but that still leaves 300 million records on paper. I fully accept that what lies ahead will not be easy and that there is no way that we are likely to see those 300 million records being put on computer.

I hope that the Minister is aware of the concern that the matter has generated. The television programme contained comments such as:

> The oldest trick in the book,

and one parent classed the activity as "sick". The story has brought back sad memories to a number of families, and none of us really knows how many people are wandering our streets with the false identity of a loved one who was taken so early in life. For my constituent Alec Little, it was an upsetting experience, but I know that he will be relieved that his late nephew's identity was not passed on to be used in some fraudulent activity.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to build upon the foundations that have been laid in recent years, and I hope that, this afternoon, she can outline how our country can be provided with a system that rids us of these jackals.

2.43 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) on obtaining a debate on this serious issue. I can fully understand the great

distress caused to his constituent and his family by the hijacking of the identity of a dead child—and, indeed, the distress caused to other families to whom this has happened.

This case involved the fraudulent use of a Scottish birth certificate. I cannot comment on the detail of this specific case, or on the procedures regarding the registration service in Scotland. As my hon. Friend has said, arrangements for the registration service in Scotland are the responsibility of the Registrar-General for Scotland and the Scottish Parliament.

My responsibility is for the civil registration system in England and Wales, and I am well aware that families there have also suffered following the similar misuse of birth certificates. I am working with ministerial colleagues in tackling the fraudulent use of birth certificates, AS my hon. Friend said, it is not the birth certificate that is the problem, but the use to which it is being put.

Civil registration started in 1837 in England and Wales, and its basic legal framework has not changed since then. Births, deaths and marriages are recorded in a register in the area where the event took place. The Registrar-General has a statutory duty to issue a certified copy of the entry, commonly known as a certificate, to anyone who provides sufficient information to identify an event, as long as the fee is paid.

The records have always been open, to help to protect human life and to allow people to know their civil status and lineage. Perhaps it is an early example of freedom of information.

A certificate can be bought at the register office where the event occurred, from the family records centre or by post or phone from the Office for National Statistics at Southport. Most people buy a certificate when registering a birth, death or marriage but many buy another at another date. Family historians typically use certificates of older events for research. Whenever they are bought, certificates have the same legal standing: they are a certified copy of the entry in the register. Thus it is not the application but the subsequent use to which the certificate is put that can be fraudulent.

An entry in the birth register is proof that the birth took place and forms a record of the information given by the informant, normally a parent, at the registration. The register entry is not updated with any changes or on the death of the individual. A death would be registered on the regist ' of deaths where it occurred, which could be in a diff.:ent area or even in a different country, and there is no link back to the birth register.

In that respect, the register is like a newspaper archive: anyone can look up the birth and death announcements published in a newspaper 30 years ago and take a copy of what was printed. Thus the birth certificate is not evidence of current identity. Indeed, since 1993, certificate forms bear a specific warning that that is not the case. The certificate does not contain a link to the individual, such as a photograph, fingerprint or current address.

Legally, the registers of births, marriages and deaths have to be held in paper form. Fully computerised information is available for births and deaths that took place in 1993 and subsequently, and births since 1993 are, as my hon. Friend said, matched to subsequent deaths. Information for earlier years, including the birth records of the majority of people living in England and Wales, is available only on paper or microfilm, depending on the date.

The Government recognise that that is unacceptable in the 21st century. In December 1998, my predecessor—my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt)—commissioned the Registrar-General to undertake a fundamental review of civil registration with the aim of developing proposals for a service that can adapt to the changing needs and attitudes of a modern society, using modern methods and technology to meet those needs.

The Registrar-General published the consultation document "Registration: Modernising a vital service" last September. It identified a need to improve arrangements for access to and use of registration information. I am pleased to say that that was supported by respondents to the consultation. It proposed that the legal registration records be held in a computerised database and available at all register offices.

Computerisation of almost 300 million records of events before 1993 is, as my hon. Friend rightly said, a substantial undertaking, but it would remove the need to issue certificates for official purposes. Current users of certificates would be able to make use of checks against the central database, thus tackling at source many abuses. That is fully in line with the Government's commitment to integrated electronic services.

Computerisation would also enable birth records to be updated. That, and a further proposal to link death, marriage and divorce records, drew widespread support. That would prevent Day of the Jackal fraud.

Those would be significant improvements but the problem of linking the birth record to the specific individual would remain. It would be possible to include additional information—perhaps an address—in an individual's through-life registration record, which would make it much more difficult for a person to assume another's identity. It would go a long way to enabling citizens to access services simply and electronically, but there are substantial difficulties and updating civil registration in that way would take time.

The issue goes much wider than civil registration. Fundamentally, it is about how individuals are to establish their identity. Currently in the United Kingdom there is no single document whose sole purpose is to prove identity. The increasing need to verify identity often presents organisations with a dilemma. Government Departments and other organisations ask for a range of documents and information to verify the identity of an individual and have in place a range of measures to tackle identity fraud and the fraudulent use of birth certificates.

For example, the UK Passport Agency uses a birth certificate to establish nationality, but not identity. It requires a countersignatory to establish identity and it is enhancing the behind-the-scenes checks on identity. Similar procedures are in place for obtaining a photocard driving licence. The Department of Social Security uses a wide range of documents and, invariably, an interview. A group of officials representing those Departments with an interest in identity has a continuing role in improving the behind-the-scenes checks and the sharing of information. There have been successful prosecutions that show that the changes are working, and that approach is consistent with the Government's working group on electronic access, which has also recommended that an individual's identity is authenticated by seeking information that only they would know.

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

As the person with responsibility for birth and death records, the Registrar-General for England and Wales has a role in tackling identity fraud. Of especial concern to the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries is the hijacking of the identity of a dead child. That can be solved only by matching the birth and death records for those births after which death occurred in infancy or childhood. Mortality rates in the 1960s and 1970s were higher than today and there were, for example, 420,000 infant and childhood deaths among the group of people born between 40 and 18 years ago. Matching each record to the right birth record is a challenge in the absence of a fully computerised version of those records. However, the Government recognise the importance of closing that well publicised loophole. Officials at the Office for National Statistics are working with officials at the UK Passport Agency and in other Departments on producing such information and using it effectively in checking identity.

Application procedures for certificates are kept under regular review, especially those relating to births occurring during the past 50 years. Those have been tightened in recent years. The procedures have to achieve the right balance between deterring fraudsters and ensuring that the vast majority of honest citizens get a responsive service that meets their needs. It is important that the Government consider services from their customers' point of view, irrespective of departmental and agency boundaries. For example, obtaining a passport should not mean having to go through two distinct processes. Checks must be made once, and at the appropriate stage of the overall process.

I appreciate my hon. Friend's concern and frustration. Our plan for the fundamental reform of the civil registration system in England and Wales demonstrates that we have recognised the need to bring that important service into the 21st century, and that we are serious about tackling identity fraud and fraudulent abuse of birth certificates at source. Those matters are complex, and we are determined to put in place effective solutions.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes to Three o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 29 February 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

Point of Order

10 am

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on the form of our debates, which appear to be causing problems with regard to time keeping. Two weeks ago, at an Adjournment debate involving a Foreign Office subject, at which, I think, the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) was present, a Minister was late, although I emphasise that it was not the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who is never late for debates. As we know, he is always ahead of history and usually ahead of time. At the debate to which I am referring, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), was entertaining people who were accompanying the Queen of Denmark. There was, alas, a contest between his obligation to be here and his obligations to be polite to reigning European monarchs.

Such events always cause tension for parliamentarians, but they emphasise the need for flexibility in the form of our debates. I know that you will take such matters into consideration, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I hope that you can give me a ruling on whether some flexibility can be allowed today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I understand what the hon. Member is saying, but the rules are specific. If, at the appointed time, the hon. Member who is to open the debate is not present, the sitting is suspended until the time at which the next topic is to be discussed. Given that the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) is not in the Chamber, I am bound to suspend the sitting until 11.30 am.

10.2 am

Sitting suspended.

M25

11.30 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): An A-Z plan of Surrey would show that my constituency has at its centre, like a giant bull's eye, the intersection of the M25 and M3 motorways. To some extent, the area is dominated by its transport infrastructure. As a district, Runnymede suffers from the problems of economic success, which are, of course, different problems from those of economic failure suffered by other parts of the country, but real none the less. There are tremendous development and land use pressures as well as dominant transport problems. The transport infrastructure, principally the M25 motorway and Heathrow airport, together with the proximity of Runnymede to London, are important drivers of prosperity in the area, but they are also a threat to the quality of life. Our challenge is to achieve the right balance between economic prosperity and the quality of life.

The M25 has been under pressure since it was completed in 1986. The section between junctions 12 and 15 has already been widened to dual four-lane for most of its length and dual five-lane for the other part. The previous Government considered introducing parallel link roads alongside the motorway—three-lane roads, which would ease the pressure on the main motorway and deal with the problem of weaving by removing non-through traffic from what traffic engineers call the main line. Those proposals gave rise to considerable local opposition including that from local Members of Parliament, led by my immediate predecessor. The proposals would have involved a significant additional land take in a green belt area and would have imposed considerable environmental impacts.

In 1995, the previous Government, listening to the concerns expressed by local people, scrapped the proposals for the link roads and put forward an alternative scheme, which would have involved dualling to five lanes the stretch of motorway between junctions 12 and 14, and to six lanes the section between junctions 14 and 15 but, importantly, with no additional land takes. The whole expansion was to take place within the existing curtilage of the motorway. No doubt, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will have in her brief today the comments of the then Opposition. In June 1995, the right hon. Member for Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), now the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, described the proposal as lunacy. When the previous Government went out to consultation in 1996, the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), the then Opposition spokesman on transport, described it as "£100 million motorway madness".

In 1995, as a prospective parliamentary candidate new to the area, I recognised the pressures on that section of the M25 and the need for an immediate solution to the bottleneck that it had become. In 1997, I fought the general election on a platform of support for the scheme under which there would be a final widening with no additional land take, of commitment to the

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

environmental benefits as a spin-off for the local community, and, crucially, of the need for longer-term solutions to ensure that there would be no further widening. The Labour party, reckless as ever, clearly implied that it was against the scheme and would scrap it. Indeed, Ian Peacock, the Labour party candidate who stood against me in Runnymede and Weybridge at the general election, said in a public meeting that a Labour Government would scrap the M25 widening scheme on day one. Labour says one thing and does another. That is now familiar to those of us who watch the Government's style, but the public were more gullible then and believed what was said. Perhaps even the candidate believed it; perhaps he is one of the great disillusioned.

As on many other subjects, Labour lied to the electorate in a reckless and unprincipled way in order to be elected. Many disillusioned electors in Egham who voted Labour for the first time in 1997, largely because of this issue, now feel betrayed. Labour came into office in 1997 with what my constituents thought was a clearly stated position on the M25 widening programme, but it did not announce the scheme's scrapping on day one. Instead, it put it into a review, which is new Labour-speak for a cold store for difficult decisions. After review, it was put into a further review, and on 31 July 1998—the last day of the parliamentary Session—a newly appointed Minister for Transport announced a 180 deg U-turn and confirmed that the scheme would go ahead.

It is curious that, on the same day, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions published a document entitled "M25 London orbital motorway: the future strategy". Among other things, the document stated:

> Building our way out of congestion on the M25 is not an option. That kind of thinking leads to 14-lane monster highways which simply fill up with traffic within a few years. The Government totally reject that approach.

So much for integrated transport policy. There is no sign of coherent thinking, even between two announcements on the same day by the same Department.

Why did the Government decide to make the U-turn? The official answer was that the congestion problems on that section of the M25 were "immediate and acute" and had "a broader economic impact". As for immediacy and acuteness, the building work will not start until 2002–03 and will take two years, so something that was "immediate and acute" in 1998 will take at least seven and possibly eight years.

Local cynics suspect that "the broader economic impact" is a reference to terminal 5, but the Government have always denied that. Terminal 5 will access the motorway via a spur road from the planned dual six-lane section. It has not gone unnoticed among my constituents that some of the greatest advocates of terminal 5 have been ardent enthusiasts for the Government's other great building project at Greenwich. There is a strong belief locally that the Government have already decided the outcome of the terminal 5 inquiry, and that the decision to widen is to facilitate terminal 5 and create a scenario in which the inspector at the inquiry cannot use traffic as grounds to recommend refusing the terminal.

An interesting exchange took place during the inquiry, when a witness from the Highways Agency said that its position was that there would be no terminal 5 if there were no M25 widening. The inspector said:

> You are effectively saying that T5 depends not merely upon the spur but upon a widened M25.

The official replied:

> Yes, I think that that is the department's position, sir.

When the inspector asked:

> How do I report the department's position? Have I got to tell the Secretary of State that T5 should be permitted only if and when there is a guarantee for M25 widening?

the official responded:

> Yes, I think that that is the position, with respect, sir, that you find yourself in as of today.

In July 1998, the Government resolved that problem for the inspector by confirming the scheme. In November 1998, the then Minister of Transport, now the Secretary of State for Scotland, told me on the Floor of the House that terminal 5 was in no way taken into account in any of the deliberations in arriving at the widening decision. That is an astonishing suggestion for a major infrastructure decision, and it has little credibility among my constituents.

We were told in the summer of 1998 that the widening had to go ahead because of an immediate, acute need, but it will not be in place until seven or eight years after that date. Coincidentally, that is around the same time that the construction of terminal 5 will be under way—if, as I am confident will happen, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions approves its construction, following the inquiry's completion.

As far as my constituents and I are concerned, the contract has not been let or even informally discussed. We do not know whether it will be a contract to design, build, finance and operate, or some other form. Suspicion exists that the Government are delaying widening that section of the M25 in order to link it explicitly to consent for terminal 5, and to squeeze BAA for a substantial financial contribution to the costs of widening. Such suspicions abound in my constituency and it is time for the Government to approach the problem with some openness so that we know exactly what is going on.

I am opposed in principle neither to widening the M25 within the existing motorway boundary nor to constructing terminal 5. However, in both cases I expect local communities to be given substantial environmental benefits as a quid pro quo for playing host to major pieces of national infrastructure. In the case of terminal 5, those benefits will most importantly include ending early-morning flight arrivals, for which there will be no justification once the terminal is built. I shall later detail the benefits that my constituents expect in relation to M25 widening, as some compensation for having it imposed on them.

I am not opposed to those two projects, but I am opposed to a Government who say one thing and do another by recklessly pandering before an election to lobby groups—whether they are campaigning against the building of roads, or for animal rights or human rights abroad—only to abandon them cynically afterwards. All those groups, and many others, were

exploited by the Labour party in its lunge for office in 1997, then abandoned once they had served its purpose. I can speak for campaigners in my constituency who opposed widening of the M25, and I assure the Minister—should she be in any doubt about it—that they have long and bitter memories of the treatment that they received at the hands of new Labour.

Nearly three years into the Government's term of office, there has been a complete U-turn on the widening of the M25—the building will not start for another two or three years and the jams continue. There is a denial, which no one believes locally, of any link to the terminal 5 project. There is no sign from the Government of any serious, longer-term solution to pressure on the M25 that would avoid the demand for further widening in future. However, while Labour's deceit still rings in my constituents' ears, we need to move on to fight the next battle. The Government's only real action in the so-called management of the transport problem has been a vicious, swingeing increase in taxation of the motorist, with no effective alternative transport proposal, at least in the suburban areas of the M25.

I wish to focus on that huge pot of billions of pounds of additional tax money that the Government have confiscated from motorists. I want some of the money to be used to reduce the environmental impact on communities that include major transport facilities and I seek a commitment from the Minister that the Government will spend some of it on appropriate solutions to transport problems, even if they are more costly. Motorists are paying for their necessary but sometimes anti-social activity. Let us at least ensure that their money helps minimise the impact that they make on others.

The technology of road surfaces has developed dramatically in recent years. Quieter surfaces have been in use on the continent for some time and have finally been accepted and used by the Highways Agency. However, the Government's announcement last year of a £5 million noise mitigation fund is ludicrously inadequate. The new surfaces are obviously more expensive, but they are quieter, quicker to lay—which means less disruption to motorists when repairs are required—and have better skid resistance and, in some cases, better spray characteristics. Those surfaces should always be used on trunk roads. Motorists should pay, and it is certain under this Government that they will.

I should like the Minister to specify a definite time scale for the start of the work to widen the M25. When will the work start, and when will the tender be published? I should like an assurance not only that porous asphalt or a similar surface will be used, which I believe we have already received, but that the contract will include a noise specification that represents the best technology available at the time, that there will be full transparency in arriving at that specification and that there will be proper consultation to reassure the local community and the local authorities involved.

I should also like an assurance that where the motorway passes through residential areas, especially in Egham and Thorpe, the most effective sound barriers will be used, and that before the contract is let the specification will be published in draft form for consultation, either as a performance specification or as a build specification. I am not specifically asking that sound-absorbent barriers be used, because I realise that the choice involved may be more complex than simply absorbent versus reflective. However, I should like an assurance from the Minister that effectiveness, not cost, will be the determining factor, because the cost of sound barriers is a trivial component of the total cost of the scheme. I should also like an assurance from the Minister that details of the contract and the performance specification will be made publicly available so that my constituents and the local authorities in my area can discuss them openly and transparently.

I recognise that such measures will be expensive, but, as the Government have ensured, the motorist will pay. If my constituents are to be asked to host an expanded piece of motorway infrastructure, and if the motorists using it are to be asked to pay through the nose for the privilege, the least that they can jointly ask of the Government is that the financial pain felt by the latter is applied at least in part to reduce the environmental pain suffered by the former.

I should like an assurance from the Minister on those matters not only for my constituents in Runnymede, but in the interests of communities everywhere and of responsible motorists who acccept the impact that transport infrastructure makes and would like some of their taxes used to mitigate that impact on the communities through which they pass on their journeys.

11.46 am

The Paliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): As is usual, I congratulate the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) on securing the debate. I thought that he would take the opportunity to use the maximum time possible to discuss the possible effects of a major scheme on his constituents and use the time productively to discuss how to minimise those effects. However, he wasted his Adjournment debate time by making yet another empty political gesture that bears little relation to the needs of the area, with only a quick run-through right at the end of his speech of the major issues involved, about which people who live locally are worried. I shall discuss those issues in my response.

As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the M25 London orbital road is a key part of our motorway network, as well as a London outer ring road. It is effective in keeping lorries and other long-distance traffic out of London, and is one of the busiest motorways in Europe. As he said, pressure on the M25 is all too evident, especially at peak periods. All parties are united that something must be done, especially during peak periods.

In our 1998 White Paper entitled "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England", we announced a programme of 37 schemes for the following seven years and a series of multi-modal and roads-based studies. We also announced our refocused investment priorities for the trunk road network—to give priority to maintenance, make better use of existing roads and tackle some of the most serious problems through a carefully targeted programme of improvements. We have viewed the problems of the M25 in that context since we came to office.

The Highways Agency has been charged with

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

developing sustainable solutions to be used wherever possible as an alternative to building new roads. Building our way out of congestion on the M25 is not an option. Such thinking would lead to a 14-lane highway, which would fill up with traffic in the next few years. The objective is therefore to develop a long-term management strategy for the motorway that embraces all modes of transport, changes in land use and interaction with local transport networks to secure safe and efficient operation in an environmentally acceptable way. That is what distinguishes our proposals from those of the previous Government.

Mr. Hammond: The cornerstone of the Government's transport policy for road users seems to be to increase tax. What estimate has the Minister's Department made of the impact of the tax increases on motorists announced so far on peak-hour usage of the M25 between junctions 12 and 15?

Ms Hughes: I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman that in this debate, but I shall write to him. I am dealing now with proposals for M25 widening and the hon. Gentleman's allegations, particularly on an alleged Government U-turn.

The problems between junctions 12 and 15 are acute. Maximum capacity has been squeezed from this section by traffic management techniques. Controlled motorway operation has helped to smooth flows and reduce accidents, but there are still stop-start driving conditions for many hours on most days. More capacity is needed to provide the necessary headroom to evaluate other measures at this location and to allow a breathing space while wider, integrated transport policies take effect.

A scheme to improve this section of the motorway entered the roads programme in 1989, as the hon. Gentleman said. The scheme that we are discussing today would widen the M25 to five lanes in each direction between junctions 12 and 14 and to six lanes in each direction between junctions 14 and 15, within the existing highway boundary.

The hon. Gentleman has made much of statements made on the previous scheme by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, when he was in opposition, and of subsequent U-turns. An environmental impact assessment was published in 1996, and public exhibitions were held. Representations were then made by individuals, local authorities and statutory and representative bodies, all of which the Government considered when we came to power in 1997. We announced that we would review the roads programme that we had inherited against the criteria of accessibility, safety, economy, environment and integration. We listened to all the views that were expressed during that period. We concluded that additional capacity was needed where the amount of traffic was causing severe congestion at times and threatening jobs and prosperity over a wide area. We felt that widening should be a key part of a long-term strategy for managing traffic on the M25.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the previous Government's attitude and action—or inaction—in putting forward what would have been a disastrous scheme, but withdrawing it following representations, particularly from local people. Yet he calls it a U-turn when the Government try to implement the environmental impact assessment by producing a much improved widening scheme, having listened to the views that have been expressed—including his own—that the scheme should go ahead. He accuses us of lying and of U-turns, when what we have done is not dissimilar to what the previous Government did: we have listened to people. The difference between us and the previous Government is that we are proceeding with a necessary scheme that will mitigate the effects that local people are concerned about and provide a sustainable future for the M25 and the surrounding area.

Mr. Hammond: With respect, the difference is that the Labour party's official candidate told public meetings during the 1997 general election campaign that a Labour Government would scrap the scheme on day one. That did not happen, and my constituents feel that they have been misled. In the light of her defence of the Government's views on this matter, will the Under-Secretary accept and invitation to address a public meeting in Egham, at which she can express those views and judge for herself local people's attitudes towards them?

Ms Hughes: The contorted positions that the hon. Gentleman is obliged to adopt on this matter defy belief. A Labour party prospective parliamentary candidate is not a member of the Government, so it is absolute nonsense to accuse the Government of making a U-turn in respect of something said by such a candidate, and the hon. Gentleman knows it. As I made clear, we undertook a review on taking office. We responded to the views of local people and people such as the hon. Gentleman, who support the scheme, so I find his contortions incredible. I shall mention his point about a public meeting to my colleagues, who will doubtless respond.

On terminal 5, the hon. Gentleman should be in no doubt that the Government's proposed widening scheme would go ahead in any case. That is made clear by road congestion assessments that have been in the public domain for a long time. We have sensibly decided to put on hold the start date, which is now planned for 2002–03, when the decision on terminal 5 and the potential need for a spur road will be known. Unlike the previous Government, we are planning sensibly. It would be nonsense to begin major road works now, only to discover that we must revise the building and construction schedule and add the spur road to a section that has already been widened. The hon. Gentleman prefers to deal in the currency of political chicanery, and accuses the Government of duplicity. However, as any straightforward person can see, we are approaching two major building projects in a sensible way and making sure that their time scales are co-ordinated and additional problems not created.

One of the main subjects for debate should have been the potential impact of construction work and widening on people who live in the area. However, and doubtless to the regret of many of his constituents, the hon. Gentleman chose not to focus on those important

questions because he was more interested in making cheap political capital from his time in this Chamber. We have made a thorough assessment of the impact of traffic noise, air quality, motorway lighting and so on. Traffic noise is a major concern, and the hon. Gentleman knows that we plan to use porous asphalt throughout the scheme. It provides a quieter road surface, and will ensure that, notwithstanding the increase in traffic, householders will experience no more motorway noise in 2010 than they do at the moment. Porous asphalt will reduce noise levels experienced by about 850 of the 1,100 householders who live near the motorway. The scheme will provide a significant overall benefit in terms of noise, air and water quality, lighting and landscaping.

The hon. Gentleman has missed an opportunity. He has failed to raise issues that are of most concern to his constituents.

Barnsley District Health Authority

12 noon

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I am grateful to have an opportunity to discuss the funding of Barnsley district health authority, which is of great concern to many of my constituents and to parliamentary colleagues in this Chamber this morning. I want to concentrate on what appears to be the low level of funding allocated to Barnsley district health authority, in contrast to the area's needs. That is not a new issue; it has not arisen overnight, this year, or recently. It has been of concern for many years, so it is not an issue for which this Government alone must take responsibility. Barnsley has been for many years one of the lowest funded health authorities in the whole country. I am probably right to say that, for a considerable period, we were the lowest funded health authority in the country, despite greater health problems and inequalities than many other areas, especially those in close proximity with similar problems. Barnsley's history at the centre of the Yorkshire coalfield has left a legacy of disability. A large proportion of households in Barnsley borough—about one in three—have one member of the family with a disability. Other acute needs are also made worse by the funding shortfall.

I want to consider funding in some detail. It is a complicated issue, which I do not profess fully to understand. I shall keep the figure as simple as possible. As hon. Members will probably be aware, health authority funding is expressed as an actual figure, in terms of money available, and as what is known as a percentage from target. For example, the target figure is usually expressed as 100, so the percentage figure is above or below 100 depending on whether there is underfunding or overfunding for the particular health authority. Barnsley is consistently underfunded. In 1997–98, Barnsley's percentage figure below target was 97.37 per cent., while in 1998–99 it fell to 94.76 per cent. In 1999–2000, the figure rose to 97.02 per cent. However funding for the forthcoming financial year—2000–01—is a decrease to 96.89 per cent.

It appears that Barnsley is falling further and further away from the target funding of 100 per cent. The figure of 96.89 per cent. makes Barnsley the worst-funded health authority in the Trent regional authority, which comprises 11 others. However, according to the indicators used by Trent regional authority—morbidity, coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke and other indicators—Barnsley has the worst problems in Trent. We have what I perceive as the greatest need, but we appear to be falling behind in relation to funding.

I said earlier that the problem has persisted for several years and that the present Government should not bear sole responsibility for the funding that is available. For the forthcoming financial year 2000–01, Barnsley's funding allocation is £168.14 million. That involves a cash uplift of 7.62 per cent., which compares favourably with a national average of 6.78 per cent. and which is the highest cash uplift in the Trent region. However, in relation to authority funding in the Trent region, Barnsley is still at the bottom of the pile, and we are moving further away from the target funding. We are one of the lowest-funded health authorities in the country. We are in a sorry position—we cannot find

[Mr. Eric Illsley]

solutions to the problems that we have identified, let alone attempt to pursue health prevention initiatives that involve, for example, changes in life style and diet.

The situation was highlighted on national television recently, and that coverage was discussed in our local press. We witnessed the unfortunate headline "Barnsley on the sick list". The article stated:

> Barnsley was today named as the worst health authority in South Yorkshire.
>
> The first league table marking performance was based on death rates from cancer and heart disease . . . and deaths from "avoidable" diseases such as TB and asthma.
>
> Barnsley was ranked 102 out of 120 . . . Experts said the league table showed that some of the country's most deprived areas had the worst healthcare provision.

That is our problem—we are one of the most deprived areas but our health care provision is one of the poorest in the country. We do not seem to be able to access the funding that we need to correct the situation.

The report of the health authority finance officer, which was submitted to the health authority on 22 February, highlights some of Barnsley's problems. The report stated that following the financial settlement:

> The forecast year end outturn ... showed a projected underspending of £195,900 compared with the previously predicted significant overspend.

That forecast outturn has been improved because an "additional allocation of £736,000" had been made available

> to the Authority in respect of generic prescribing and the identification of further sum of £421,000 of further slippage within the reserves. . . The forecast year end outturn took no account of the £800,000 borrowings which the Authority had been required to negotiate and which would form a first charge on its allocation for 2000–01.

That means that the authority has a year-end deficit of about £1.2 million.

We have gone from facing a considerable overspend to facing an underspend of £200,000, although there is a first charge of £800,000 on the authority's funding, and £400,000 has been taken from the reserves. The health authority's funding involves a deficit of £1.2 million for this year end. Why does Barnsley health authority have an underspend of £200,000 at the end of the current financial year when in reality it faces a considerable deficit?

I raised the issue of deprivation and health need in Barnsley when I met the chief executive of Trent regional health authority last year. The indicators and statistics that the authority uses were beginning to show Barnsley in a very poor light in terms of various categories of health provision—consistently the worst of the 11 authorities in the Trent regional health authority area. I have already referred to the television survey that ranked us 102nd nationwide.

Of the 11 authorities, Barnsley has the worst level of morbidity, in respect of every cause of death, for people under the age of 65. It has the worst record for lung cancer, cervical cancer, hypertensive and cerebrovascular disease and coronary heart disease, and for the early detection of cervical cancer and inappropriate surgery in respect of children's glue ear. Looking at that list, it is easy to see where Barnsley's problems lie, and the difficulties that it faces. I have referred only to the categories in which Barnsley has the worst record. Categories in which it is second worst include colon cancer and suicide, and the list goes on.

To make matters worse, there is only a narrow gap, in terms of health provision, between the best and worst areas of Barnsley. That suggests that problems extend throughout the borough; no area is better or worse than any other, and the situation is poor across the whole health authority area. I should point out that that is not the fault of the local hospital. A recent headline in the local newspaper, headlined "Praise for hospital", states:

> Hospital bosses in Barnsley have been praised for bucking a national trend by rarely cancelling operations.

The health authority staff at the hospital have recently been singled out for substantial praise.

It is clear from the establishment of the South Yorkshire coalfields health action zone that some of Barnsley's problems have been recognised. Given the priorities that will be addressed by the action zone, I hope that the position can gradually be alleviated by encouraging people to improve their life style by changing their diet and so on. The question of low incomes and deprivation is a different kettle of fish, which can be addressed only by better economic performance in the longer term.

When I raised the matter with the director of Trent regional health authority last year, I pointed out that Barnsley is an area of extreme need in terms of health provision; it has a poor record and the least amount of money. He replied that the people of Barnsley have low aspirations and are reluctant to complain. I suggested to him that if I start to tub-thump and shout about it, his budget situation will deteriorate, because I will make people aware of the situation that they face and the fact that they should be demanding more from their health authority, but the money is not available. He was inclined to agree, which surprised me. More should be done to equalise funding across Trent regional health authority to try to alleviate Barnsley's problems.

I shall refer to a couple of other problems that Barnsley faces. We have recently lost accreditation for an ear, nose and throat surgeon because we could not provide sufficient training opportunities for junior doctors and we contravened the rules on junior doctors' hours. We are also facing accreditation problems with orthodontic surgery, orthopaedic surgery, dermatology and general surgery.

There are major problems throughout the area with the prescribing of wrong drugs and too many drugs. Problems will also arise with the reconfiguration of health authorities in Barnsley, but they do not concern funding and I do not expect the Minister to respond to them today. I hope that any attempt to reconfigure the health trusts in Barnsley will not disguise the fact that our funding is low, but I have considerable reservations about that reconfiguration.

I refer the Minister to a letter that I received recently from the Barnsley local medical committee of general practitioners. There is an air of desperation in the letter which refers to funding being badged for various purposes but schemes and areas in Barnsley being desperately in need of development with no funding to allow diabetic and cardiology services, both of which are

Government priorities, to be pursued. Dr. Kenneth McDonald, secretary of the committee, concludes his letter by stating:

> It feels very much as if we are being penalised for achieving financial probity in an area where there is a large amount of socio-economic deficit leading to considerable medical problems that as GPs we are very keen to address, but are hamstrung due to funding deficit.

I look forward to the Minister's response and hope that she can give me some hope for the future.

12.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) and congratulate him on raising the debate on the funding settlement for Barnsley. My ministerial colleagues and I are aware of local concerns about past and current funding for the district. His constituents will be aware of his hard work and that of his colleagues in Barnsley to ensure that the area receives better health care facilities in future.

We have backed our commitment to the national health service with significant additional resources for the NHS in England of £1.9 billion during our first two years in government and, from the comprehensive spending review, almost £18 billion during the next three years. That represents the largest ever cash injection into the NHS.

In December, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced total funding of £34 billion for England's health authorities for 2000–01. That represents an average cash increase of 6.8 per cent., which is a rise of 4.2 per cent. in real terms. Those resources are additional money for modernisation and to help to create the fast, fair and convenient health services that people expect. They will also tackle health inequalities, which my hon. Friend described so clearly in relation to Barnsley.

I want to make a couple of points about the way in which we allocate resources nationally before turning to my hon. Friend's specific points about Barnsley. Funding is allocated to health authorities on the basis of the relative needs of their population. A weighted capitation formula is used to determine each authority's target fair share of resources so that similar levels of health services can be commissioned for populations with similar needs. The previous Government took account of the indices of need to the extent of only 80 per cent. when using the weighted capitation formula. The present Government, on the advice of the resource allocation group, increased the weighting in the formula to 100 per cent., increasing the account taken of deprivation because we want to tackle health inequality. That has already made a significant difference in Barnsley. The result was an additional £1.3 million added to Barnsley's target in 1998–99. We also need to make progress towards that target, which is exactly what we have been doing during the past few years.

The weighted capitation formula is used to set the targets, which then inform the allocations. It depends on factors such as additional need indices, which contain health and socio-economic variables. It is based mainly on work by York university to investigate the link between social and economic circumstances and the use of national health service in-patient services. The formula itself does not determine allocations. Actual allocations reflect decisions on the speed at which health authorities are brought nearer to targets, through the distribution of extra funds. The pace of change is decided annually—by Ministers for health authorities, and by health authorities for primary care groups. The key decision in pace-of-change policy is how extra resources should be deployed between across-the-board increases to maintain continuity and stability and differential distribution to bring under-target health authorities such as Barnsley closer to their target allocation.

To satisfy those objectives, all health authorities have in recent years been given real terms growth. The additional funding has been distributed to target those health authorities that are furthest from their fair distribution of resources. All health authorities were given a minimum cash increase of 6.2 per cent. for 2000–01. To supply the extra resources needed by under-target health authorities, the average cash uplift was 6.8 per cent., although the highest cash increase allocated to under-target authorities was 8.5 per cent.

My hon. Friend was right to say that, as a result of decisions made by the previous Government, Barnsley district health authority started well below its fair share of resources. To bring Barnsley up towards its fair share, it is receiving above average increases each year. Its allocation per head is £719 per person, compared with an average per head, across the country, of £675 per person. Barnsley therefore receives more per person than the average.

As my hon. Friend and I agree, that is not the right way to make the comparison. Once health needs are taken account of, Barnsley has not been given its fair share. Under the previous Government, the formula did not fully reflect deprivation. We have made progress towards the target with an increase of 7.8 per cent. this year, compared with a 6.6 per cent. average increase. In 2000–01, there will be a 7.6 per cent. increase, compared with a national average increase of 6.8 per cent. As my hon. Friend mentioned, that is the highest increase in the Trent region. He is right to say that we need to go further, and sustain above average increases in future for the population of Barnsley.

My hon. Friend mentioned the growth in the percentage gap between the actual position and the target in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. In fact, that reflects an accounting change, rather than a change in resources for services. As he is aware, Barnsley has had above average increases, but there has been a technical change to the baseline because of a revaluation of the NHS estate. The baseline for Barnsley, as a result of that revaluation of capital and estate, is lower. That is not because of lower resources for services, or additional resources for services for other areas. It is simply about a revaluation of the baseline. That makes clear Barnsley's continued need for above average increases in future. Those increases must be sustained to tackle the health inequalities that he mentioned.

Concerns have been expressed about how well the current formula matches NHS cash to health need. A new formula is required that reflects the way in which the new NHS is managed and uses resources. The Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation is currently overseeing a wide-ranging review of the

[Yvette Cooper]

formula. The review is in its early stages. We expect a progress report, which is a major undertaking, in about a year. We have therefore frozen the current formula to maximise stability and certainty for health authorities, while the review takes place.

My hon. Friend referred to Barnsley health authority's financial position. I am aware that at the end of January 2000 it forecast a small deficit of £315,000 and that it expects to carry an underlying deficit into the next financial year, as a result of GP prescribing and mental health out-of-area placements. The additional cash uplift for 2000–01 will contribute significantly to reducing that deficit, but I understand my hon. Friend's concern. The health community is in continual discussion about its financial position and is endeavouring to bridge the gap without falling short of service targets. The outcome of its work will be discussed with the Trent regional office of the NHS executive in early March.

My hon. Friend correctly identified prescribing as one element in Barnsley's financial situation. That will be a key issue for the health authority next year as well. As for all other health authorities, the price increases in generic medicines last year caused a major problem, although it has been mitigated in the current financial year by an additional allocation to Barnsley of £736,000.

My hon. Friend is aware that Barnsley's prescribing performance has not been of the highest standard. I share his concern that, in three of the Audit Commission's four indicators for prescribing performance, Barnsley ranks the lowest in England. The reasons for the poor performance are complex and reflect Barnsley's long-standing problems with the provision of primary care.

A range of actions has been put in place to tackle poor prescribing performance. The health authority has allocated resources to employ prescribing support to pharmacists in both its primary care groups. The pharmacists will work with the PCGs and individual practices to promote more cost-effective prescribing.

Among the health authority's targets for improved prescribing performance is a 25 per cent. reduction in benzodiazepine prescribing and a 7 per cent. increase in generic prescribing in 2000–01. A reduction in benzodiazepine prescribing is strongly desirable on clinical grounds, as there is broad consensus that its use should be kept to a minimum. The Trent regional office of the NHS executive is monitoring the health authority closely to ensure progress on these issues.

However, my hon. Friend will be aware that Barnsley's difficulties require more than simply a fair funding formula. We must modernise services and tackle the root causes of ill health. In July 1997 my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) invited Sir Donald Acheson, a former chief medical officer, to undertake a review of health inequalities in Britain. That report was a landmark that placed health inequalities firmly on the national agenda. It covered their deep-rooted causes, not only the upstream causes such as poverty, unemployment, low skills and poor housing but the downstream causes such as smoking, diet and exercise. My right hon. Friend was right to point to the higher mortality rates in Barnsley. Although death rates from coronary heart disease are declining, there is an upward trend in suicides.

The Government are committed to reducing those inequalities by taking action on a broad front: the minimum wage will help those on low incomes, and the working families tax credit and increases in child benefit will help to counter poverty. We shall also deal with poor housing and the broader coalfield issues that my constituency shares with my hon. Friend's. We also want to tackle directly some of the downstream causes of health inequalities, particularly in coalfield areas and in Barnsley.

My hon. Friend is aware that Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster comprise the South Yorkshire coalfields health action zone. Indeed, it was one of the first wave of HAZs launched in 1998 to tackle health inequalities in an area ravaged by pit closures and industrial decline. The HAZs are testimony to our determination not simply to look at the funding formula for the services provided to people once they have become ill but to tackle the root causes of ill health in areas like Barnsley. In its first year, the coalfields health action zone received additional funding of £520,000 from the main programme; in the current year, it has received £3.3 million as well as £100,000 in development money. Barnsley's share has been £918,000, which will enable it to put in place a range of initiatives to tackle the root causes of ill health.

I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about resources in Barnsley. The Government are working to tackle such health inequalities by increasing the fair-funding formula that is distributing more resources to Barnsley, by giving additional resources for health promotion and the prevention of ill health through health action zones, and by modernising health services.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order.

Drug misuse

12.30 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce a debate that will last for half an hour, which was the time taken by the BBC Radio 4 programme "Face the Facts" yesterday evening to set out the case of Ruth Wyner and John Brock. I shall not refer to the broadcast in detail, as I hope that the BBC will put a transcript of the programme on its website, but I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) who was quoted in the programme.

I shall not go into detail about the conviction and sentence of Ruth Wyner or John Brock, the manager and the director of the Wintercomfort project in Cambridge. They have been granted leave to appeal against their sentences. To discuss their conviction would be to tread on the borderline of what it is appropriate to refer to in this Chamber. I wish to declare two interests: first, my brother-in-law, Dr. George Reid, senior bursar at St. John's college, Cambridge is a trustee of Wintercomfort. Secondly, before becoming a junior Minister in 1984, I was the chairman of the Church of England Children's Society, which ran 100 projects that were mostly to do with vulnerable young people. The society continues that work and when I asked its director, Ian Sparks, to describe the policy before the start of this debate, he replied, "Risk minimisation."

Obviously, there are people in jail who are drug misusers. Ministerial replies have informed me that drugs were misused in prisons about 18,000 times last year. The Prime Minister said to me in an oral answer two weeks ago that the proportion of prisoners involved in the misuse of drugs had fallen from more than 20 per cent. to below 20 per cent. I pay tribute to those in the Prison Service who, since 1995, have been making progress. The problem has not been swept under the carpet; it is being recognised. I pay tribute, too, to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which covered the misuse of drugs in prisons in a report published in November. I hope that the report has drawn a reasonable response from the Government. I suspect, however, that the Government have already responded to the Committee and that the Committee will publish its response to the Government shortly.

The Home Affairs Committee dealt with the importance of tackling drugs misuse in prisons. I shall illustrate the scale of the problem. Last year, people were detected as misusing drugs in Highpoint prison more than 100 times, while the actual supply of drugs was detected on only seven occasions. For every 20 times that people are known to be misusing drugs, those who supply them will be caught only once. Catching suppliers of drugs is not easy, even in a prison that is under total control. The point of people being in prison is that they do not break the law, yet at Highpoint, as an illustration of other prisons, there is an obvious problem. The Home Affairs Committee recommended the use of sniffer dogs, both for visitors and for those making random visits around the prisons.

I commend the fifth report of the Home Affairs Committee. Paragraph 175 on page lvi refers to the need to ensure that Prison Service treatment projects and programmes sufficiently involve outside agencies and expertise. I recommend that the Government ensure that Ruth Wyner and John Brock are released from prison and that they use them as advisers. Those two people have 30 years of experience of dealing with people who are vulnerable and on the streets. In the overall spectrum, Home Office Ministers are supposed to have total control over prisoners. Those who run hostels have some control over their residents. Those who operate day centres such as the Bus project run by Wintercomfort in Cambridge have virtually no control, except for the opportunity to ban. Similar projects can be found in Worthing, in West Sussex, and around the country.

I will not mention what the judge said about sentencing, because that can come before a higher court. However, an organisation with decent guidelines which its employees follow, and which are known to the police, is an example of the expertise that underlies the recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee. It said that the anti-drugs strategy could be derailed if steps were not taken to ensure that there was an adequate pool of drugs workers and agencies in the community, to assist in the development of prison programmes and to provide the vital aftercare for released prisoners.

By misuse of drugs, I refer not to the use of alcohol or cigarettes, which I covered to some extent during the Adjournment debate that I initiated on 13 May 1998, and which can be found at column 291 of *Hansard*, but to the conventional meaning. When people are on the streets and are drug misusers, they are vulnerable. I will deal not with the crimes that they commit, but with their vulnerability. Where is their contact with medical services? Where is their contact with those who can involve them in risk minimisation? For example, where do they start to learn about moving from heavy drugs to light drugs? Where do they learn to go from the multiple use of needles to using a needle just by themselves? How do they reduce from misusing drugs seven times a week to twice a week, on the way to being clean, as some young people did when I was involved in such work? Few people go in one jump from being a drug misuser to not misusing drugs at all.

It is probably recognised that more people leave prison addicted to drugs than go in addicted. I hope that that is changing. The previous Government took that seriously, as do the present Government. The Minister, whom I am glad to see here today, and his colleagues in the Home Office and in other Departments have spoken well on this issue. I hope that the Minister does not mind responding to the debate today.

I will now refer to the debates on what became section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 when it was going through the House and another place. The Act followed the legislation of the 1920s, the Dangerous Drugs Act 1965 and the Bill introduced by the Labour Government in early 1970, and continued with the Conservative Government after the general election in 1970. In Committee—I forget whether it was in the other place or in the House—people said that prison governors were vulnerable to prosecution, because section 8 applies to those who manage, not to the ordinary worker. There were explicit references to the risks to prison governors and, I think, to Ministers. If there were no references to

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

Ministers, I make them now, because both they and prison governors are as vulnerable as Ruth Wyner and John Brock.

I cannot believe that Parliament intended Ministers to find themselves in front of a judge in King's Lynn, charged with the same apparent offence as Ruth Wyner and John Brock. I recommend to Ministers that they set out a policy similar to Wintercomfort's, and I am grateful for the advice given to me about the matter. Prisons do not run drop-in centres, but their employees may work in good faith and to the best of their abilities, after seeking the advice of the police and setting up an advisory committee. Wintercomfort and the Bus project certainly did that.

Despite the reliance that the Prison Service may put on its advisory committees or its links to the police, its employees or those who manage prisons on its behalf could be subject to proceedings without any warning, in the same way as those who run day centres. The law could apply to any day centre or hostel in the country, or to those who administer university lodgings.

I suspect—but I have not yet found out whether it is the case—that a confidentiality policy would apply if someone in prison said, "Look, I have a drugs problem, can I get confidential help?" The Minister may not deal with that today, but it applies to those who run hostels or day centres. There must be confidence between the people running an organisation and those who ask for its help. That applies to the staff of charities, and I suspect that it also applies in prisons.

It is also important that people comply with the law. I suspect that some people in prison, if they were consulted confidentially, would not share information unless there were a court order. Let us remember that there was no court order in relation to Wintercomfort. It is for Parliament to make the duties of prison staff, prison governors and Ministers clear, just as we should make clear the position of charity workers, so that there is no ambiguity. I cannot believe that, either in day centres or prisons, those who need help are refused it. It is not consistent with a civilised society that people who run projects in day centres or prisons to the best of their abilities, who do not connive in or profit from the supply of drugs and who do not pursue any political agenda should be imprisoned for sentences of draconian lengths—or at all—for simply doing their jobs. The response from ordinary people is epitomised by an e-mail that Mike and Mary Evans sent to the Home Secretary after listening to the "Face the Facts" programme last night. They were disturbed by the case and say that, when people are

part of the solution to the drugs problem

but are

treated as though they are the problem,

something is wrong. It is for Parliament to raise the issue.

I have focused the debate on prisons and other centres of drug misuse, because in the whole Prison Service in the first 11 months of 1999, prison staff were prosecuted in relation to the supply of drugs on three occasions. Hon. Members and those who work in this field, in prisons and elsewhere, should not rest until there is justice, and that applies in prisons and day centres.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Does the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) have the Minister's permission to speak?

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker.

12.41 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I congratulate the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) on securing the debate. It is timely, and I have a great constituency interest in the matter. I agree that we must do everything possible to reduce the use of drugs in prisons and, if possible, eliminate it.

It may help my right hon. Friend the Minister if I describe my experience of visiting my constituent, Ruth Wyner, in Highpoint prison three weeks ago. I was searched and put through the full procedure before I entered the prison. Sniffer dogs were in evidence and I assume that, if I had been carrying any contraband material, they would have picked that up as I went into the prison. What perturbed me was the fact that, after I left the prison, Ruth Wyner was, I understand, strip-searched. I do not know whether that was meant as ritual humiliation or whether there was a necessary purpose behind it. If my understanding is correct and she was strip-searched, was she being treated differently from other prisoners? Did prison officers consider that they had a well-founded suspicion that I had covertly passed her contraband material in breach of prison regulations? If not, what was their purpose?

The hon. Member for Worthing, West carefully enunciated the policy of Wintercomfort and the confidentiality agreement, which was a reason why my constituent was arrested and convicted. It may be interesting to know that Ruth, while in Highpoint, has been involved in a training course to become a Samaritan for other prisoners. While undergoing that training, she was told that confidentiality was extremely important when talking to other prisoners about their problems. Ruth's response was, "Does that include drugs?" "Of course," was the reply. What is the difference between the situation in prison and Wintercomfort's policy concerning the importance of confidentiality towards vulnerable clients, which landed Ruth in prison?

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to speak and I thank the Minister and the hon. Gentleman for their courtesy.

12.44 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): All hon. Members will be grateful to the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) for raising the issue, which is serious both in its broad context and, for Ruth Wyner and John Brock, in its narrow context. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate the inhibitions under which I must operate in terms of the case's appeal status. As it is sub judice, it would not be appropriate for me to refer specifically to that case, but I am happy to deal with the broad context.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: On a technical detail, we know that an appeal against the sentence will be heard, but it has not yet been agreed that there should be an appeal against conviction. Are Ministers inhibited in speaking about the conviction if an appeal has not yet been allowed against it?

Mr. Boateng: In the final analysis, that would be a matter for you and your colleagues, Madam Deputy Speaker. Call me a cautious, old-fashioned lawyer, but when there is a whiff of an appeal, my policy is to make no reference to the specific facts that support conviction or to those matters prayed in aid of the appeal.

In relation to the broad context that the hon. Member for Worthing, West raises, we understand the concerns that some agencies have following the convictions of Ruth Wyner and John Brock. Managers, staff and trustees of day and night shelters should ensure that all reasonable steps are taken to prevent the supply of controlled drugs on the premises in accordance with the law. The key lies in an effective drugs policy that enables managers and staff to work effectively with the police to prevent drug dealing on their premises.

The Home Office and, where relevant, colleagues and officials in other Departments—I think especially of the Department of Health—will consider the extent to which it is necessary to give further guidance in the light of the case. That is being given urgent attention as we speak, not least because the Government recognise the onerous responsibilities that fall on managers, staff and trustees of such centres. They do a difficult and challenging job in circumstances that are often equally difficult and challenging.

I shall try to deal with the broad question asked by the hon. Gentleman and the specific points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell). Drugs are a real and present danger in our society. We are determined as a Government to develop and implement a concerted strategy to tackle drug misuse and stifle the availability of illegal drugs on our streets—in the wider community and in prison. The key to that lies in an effective strategy to prevent the supply of controlled drugs in prison, and in the Prison Service ensuring that drug use and trafficking in prisons are perceived by all concerned as serious offences that merit firm action. A prisoner may be segregated. He may also be transferred, to disrupt the network of contacts and supplies. Both responses are appropriate, although the latter is, rightly, more frequently used.

Experience tells us that the fact that someone has been convicted of a trafficking offence does not automatically mean that he will try to deal drugs while in custody. The prison authorities must, however, be alert to that possibility and some prisons have developed innovative strategies for managing drug traffickers. Elmley prison, for example, has designed a separate unit and regime for traffickers to address their offending behaviour, while Whitemoor prison has developed a protocol for the identification and management of suspected traffickers. I sat in on a course in a women's prison that was specifically designed for women used as carriers by unscrupulous criminal elements, who are often based overseas. Those women had been shamefully used, with disastrous consequences for them and their families, and courses have been developed to assist them. We also know that there is an advantage in dealing with drug trafficking by indirect methods. Dealers cannot operate without supplies or a market and the Prison Service devotes much effort to preventing drugs from being smuggled into prisons and to breaking the habit of identified drug users.

The general emphasis in recent years has been in improving security procedures, for which the hon. Member for Worthing, West was good enough to give the Prison Service credit. That has brought real benefits in tackling drug trafficking. A range of measures has been adopted to improve perimeter security, including increased patrolling, searching the ground near the perimeter fence before inmates are allowed access, and the use of dogs and of closed circuit television. Drug detection dogs are increasingly used, actively and passively, to deter and discover drug smugglers and there will in future be at least one drug dog for each establishment. I have witnessed the benefits on the ground of that measure.

Domestic visits are the most common means of smuggling drugs into prison. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge related her experience of a visit to her constituent. The searching of all visitors and the use of the security procedures that she detailed are, for good reason, common occurrences. The use of dogs and specific counter-measures such as the provision of lockers for visitors' luggage and improvements to the layout of visit areas, including the provision of low-level fixed furniture and the increased use of CCTV, all have a role to play. The hon. Member for Worthing, West described how drugs use at Highpoint prison has decreased as a result of the vigilance of staff; the response to testing supports that finding. I am sure that hon. Members understand why such vigilance should be maintained.

Intelligence-led searches are part of such vigilance. If smuggling of contraband is suspected, prisoners will be strip-searched after domestic visits. After my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge had done me the courtesy of calling my private office yesterday, the Prison Service told me that the search of her constituent was the result of random search procedures used at Highpoint. Following domestic visits, a 10 per cent. random search takes place. I am assured that such a search was involved in the case of Ruth Wyner. No discourtesy was intended to my hon. Friend, and no suggestion was made that any contraband had been passed over. I apologise if my hon. Friend felt that the search was deliberate; it was not. It was part of the random security measures used at Highpoint, which have had positive results.

Mr. Bottomley: No Member of Parliament would mind being searched in extremis. We should not be treated differently from other people, and the explanation given could apply to any of our constituents. I should add that I am grateful for the interest of my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), who is also present for the debate.

Mr. Boateng: The interest of all hon. Members is welcome, and reflects interest in the wider community. We have set aside an additional £76 million for the

[Mr. Boateng]

Prison Service to develop its drug strategy over the next three years. That money will mainly be used to expand drug treatment programmes in prisons.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge, who mentioned confidentiality, and the hon. Member for Worthing, West raised the important issue of how to involve the voluntary sector, which has an enormously important role to play as part of the CARAT service which will provide counselling, assessment, referral, advice and throughcare. We are forging good links with the national health service and the voluntary sector in ensuring that a range of suitable programmes for prisoners is available to cover all drug problems, whether low level, moderate or severe.

We want to build confidence and trust between the Prison Service and the voluntary sector, and that of prisoners and users, which will involve a respect for confidentiality. However, people involved in the voluntary sector and CARAT teams must understand that confidentiality has limits. CARAT teams are different from the Samaritans, which is a life-saving operation that does wonderful work with listeners in prisons, and which, according to tradition and accepted practice and procedure, is based on complete confidentiality. In specific, exceptional circumstances, such as the possibility of an escape or the introduction of illegal contraband into the prison, everyone working with CARAT teams must understand that they have a duty to inform the appropriate authorities. There is a distinction between the two organisations.

This is an important topic to which we have not been able to do justice. I reiterate my thanks to all hon. Members who contributed. We shall continue that vital work with care and sensitivity, ensuring that it is evidence-based and that best practice is developed and spread throughout the Prison Service to tackle a problem that affects the whole of society and to which prisons are not immune.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 1 March 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

AWE Aldermaston

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

9.30 am

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Like other hon. Members, I have been up all night, so if I seem a little inarticulate, it is because I have not had much sleep.

I am delighted, Mr. Deputy Prime Minister—I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker; that was not a good start.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I can see that the hon. Member is going to have some difficulty this morning. He really must not compromise me in that way.

Mr. Rendel: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall do my best.

I am delighted to have secured this morning's debate. It is on a subject that has become very worrying in the light of recent Health and Safety Executive reports about data falsification by British Nuclear Fuels plc at its Sellafield reprocessing plant. Indeed, the issue has become even more pressing since I first requested this Adjournment debate, as the problems at BNFL have now forced the resignation of the chief executive.

On 1 December 1999, the Secretary of State for Defence announced his decision to award the contract to manage the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston to AWE Management Ltd., a consortium that comprises Serco Defence Support, British Nuclear Fuels plc and Lockheed Martin Corporation. On 1 April 2000, the new contractors will take over from Hunting-BRAE, the consortium that has run the site since 1993. The new contract is worth £2.2 billion and it is due to run for 10 years. The consortium will also manage the nuclear warhead assembly plant at Burghfield on behalf of the Ministry of Defence.

That announcement raised several questions in my mind, not least what grounds there could possibly be for awarding the contract to a consortium that included BNFL, a company not noted for the excellence of its record on nuclear safety. Was that decision made on the basis that it would save money, or was it made because Hunting-BRAE's record was felt to be inadequate? Hunting-BRAE was convicted as recently as 13 December 1999 of illegally discharging radioactive tritium from AWE into a stream that passes through the village of Aldermaston and then feeds into the river Thames. The company had previously been fined for a plutonium leak that contaminated two people who worked at the site.

It would be appalling if the Government were to admit that the contractor had been chosen purely on cost. I hope that no Government, of whatever hue, would put cost ahead of safety at such a sensitive site. If the Government's grounds for choosing the new contractor were health and safety, however, as I hope to demonstrate this morning, there are good reasons for thinking that an equally appalling mistake has been made, even when all the concerns about Hunting-BRAE's safety record are taken into account.

As time has gone on, and as more details have emerged about the scandal of the fuel rods at Sellafield, I have become increasingly worried about what the reasons behind that decision might be. At its Sellafield site in Cumbria, BNFL manufacturers mix uranium-plutonium oxide fuel pellets—MOX pellets—combining them with other components to make complete fuel assemblies for use in nuclear reactors. The fuel assemblies are then supplied to countries, including Japan, Switzerland and Germany.

Problems arose, however, in August 1999, when BNFL discovered that its technicians were falsifying data measuring the size of the MOX fuel pellets. The Health and Safety Executive called in its nuclear installations inspectorate to investigate. Although the NII report stressed that the matter was a contractual issue between BNFL and its customer—in this case, a Japanese company—it was clear that what had happened was a deliberate breach of operating procedures at Sellafield. BNFL's initial investigation was found by the NII to be too narrow because it had been rushed. It had also assumed that the problem of falsifying data was confined to one shift, which we now know not to be true. The NII concluded that, although various individuals were at fault, there had also been a systematic failure that

> could not have occurred had there been a proper safety culture within the plant.

Although there was no excuse for process workers deliberately falsifying data to avoid a tedious job, management allowed that to happen and therefore bore a large measure of responsibility.

A second report, requested by the chief inspector of nuclear installations, found that there had been deterioration in safety performance at Sellafield and once again expressed concerns about control and supervision at the plant. Three significant issues needed to be addressed. First, there was a lack of a high-quality safety management system across the site, a problem compounded by "overly complex management structure". Secondly, insufficient resources were available to implement even the existing safety management system. Thirdly, the report referred to the lack of an independent inspection, auditing and review system within BNFL.

The report concluded:

> Without a vigorous independent inspection, auditing and review system, the Health and Safety Executive does not see how BNFL can make acceptable and timely progress in delivering a high-quality safety management system.

If that is true of BNFL at Sellafield, why should anyone believe that such a company will have got its act together in time to take over the management of AWE on 1 April and to deliver a high-quality safety management system there?

It is clear from both the reports that the BNFL management allowed a catalogue of errors to occur at Sellafield and that safety fell well below the standard that NII requires of a nuclear installation. Since the first press stories, five process workers at Sellafield have been

[Mr. Rendel]

sacked, and this week we have heard that the company's chief executive, John Taylor, is also expected to resign. On Monday, *The Independent* reported claims that the chairman of BNFL, Hugh Collum, had alerted Ministers to his concerns about the company last October, well before the Government announced the decision on the new contract. The investment bank advising the Government on the public-private partnership for BNFL apparently expressed similar concerns. The Government knew that there were significant problems with BNFL well in advance of their announcement of 1 December, so if the contract goes wrong, they must share a large part of the blame.

The Government should also have been aware that Lockheed Martin, another partner in the AWE Management Ltd. consortium, has a safety failure record that—believe it or not—rivals that of BNFL. I understand that the company has managed four sites with a nuclear role on behalf of the United States Department of Energy and that one of them is now under a new contractor. The sites—a plant known as Y-12, the Oak Ridge national laboratory, the Idaho national engineering and environmental laboratory and the Sandia national laboratory—have all been subject to safety failures similar to those that occurred at BNFL's Sellafield plant.

I could hardly believe that an Office of Oversight existed when I read about it, but there is something called that in America. Its name does not mean that it has missed something out by mistake, but merely that it oversees other people. The Office of Oversight, working on behalf of the United States Department of Energy, reported that workplace safety and environmental protection at the Idaho plant had deteriorated over four years. In October 1997, two people operating the reactor at the advanced test reactor critical facility were found to have falsified records—that rings a bell—to show that the safety systems had been tested as required when they had not been. The safety systems are supposed to shut down the reactor automatically in an emergency. In the previous month, six workers were contaminated because of the violation of nuclear safety rules. At Oak Ridge, the Office of Oversight found that the rate and seriousness of reportable accidents and incidents was increasing. On 5 November 1999, enriched uranium operations at the Y-12 plant were halted after a practice run failed to demonstrate that the plant was ready for the safe restart of enriched uranium operations.

Lockheed Martin's safety record worries me and my constituents sick, not least because the problems identified by the Office of Oversight closely mirror BNFL's failings. The two companies are remarkably similar. Many hon. Members will have heard the "File on Four" programme about the failures and will be equally worried. It is of particular concern that the Secretary of State, in spite of the findings, decided to award the contract to a consortium that includes not just one but both those companies.

When *The Independent* published the story about MOX fuel, I immediately wrote to the Minister urging him to reconsider the decision. I have not received a response. During last Monday's Defence questions, in response to the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), who is also concerned about the future of Aldermaston and Burghfield—I am glad to see him here today—the Secretary of State said that the Government

> have instructed the Chief of Defence Procurement to examine the terms and conditions of the new contract to ensure the pre-eminence of public health and environmental safety as they affect the workers and the facility, and also the general public.—[*Official Report*, 21st February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1223.]

He went on to say that the NII can impose high safety standards before granting the licence to the new contractors. Frankly, that is not good enough. Indeed, it is of little comfort to my constituents, many of whom are worried about what is going on at Aldermaston under the NII-regulated regime.

The safety records of BNFL and Lockheed Martin speak for themselves and must not be dismissed lightly. The Minister cannot pass the buck by insisting that the Chief of Defence Procurement is responsible and that the matter has passed from his hands.

Even if the safety considerations, hugely important though they are, do not persuade the Minister to cancel the newly signed contract and re-tender it, there is another reason why re-tendering will be necessary. To survive as a company, BNFL needs customers, but its customers know that it has grossly misled them over the sensitive matter of the honest and accurate description of fuel rods. If you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were the manager of a Japanese, Swiss or German power company, would you dare to purchase fuel rods from a company that had misled you? If you were brave—or foolhardy—enough to do so, would you not expect the citizens of your country to rise in protest at such an appalling decision? It is inconceivable that any of BNFL's customers will be willing—or will be allowed by citizens of their countries—to continue to trade with a company that has shown itself to be irresponsible in the handling of highly sensitive materials.

Without customers, BNFL cannot survive. Questions hang over the future of Sellafield. It is reported that other countries are calling on us to shut it down. If BNFL fails to survive, where does that leave the new contract? It might be possible—technically at least—for the consortium to continue as the management of AWE with Lockheed Martin, an American company, in sole control of the United Kingdom's principal nuclear weapons establishment. But even if the contract terms make that a theoretical possibility, and I do not know exactly what is in the contract, I cannot believe that it would be acceptable to any British Government. The only other possibility is that the collapse of BNFL, which must happen, leads to the collapse of the new contract. Would it not be better if the new contract were broken now and re-tendered rather than if it collapsed in a few months?

My constituents' concerns are not based on any hostility to AWE. Indeed, many of them work there. However, they are concerned about its future and want to know that those responsible for managing the site can be expected to put safety before anything else.

It would be much the best thing if the Minister now declared that the safety concerns with respect to BNFL and Lockheed Martin had persuaded him to cancel his newly signed contract. If he will not do that, I predict that the collapse of BNFL will force him into that position in the near future.

9.45 am

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), who in this context should, I suppose, be described as my hon. Friend, on securing this important Adjournment debate. Like him, I have been involved in the issue for many years. We both attended the successful community inquiry in Reading in 1993 just after he was elected. That dealt in detail with the health, safety and environmental aspects of what happens behind the wire at AWE Aldermaston.

The community inquiry, which was chaired by the eminent Queen's Counsel, Helena Kennedy, concluded that we suffer from the British disease of secrecy. It is not that my constituents or the people of Newbury, Wokingham or elsewhere want to know how an atomic bomb is made, but they have a right to know that what happens during the process is not a danger to them or the local environment. I share the concerns of many people who have campaigned for many years for a culture of greater openness at AWE Aldermaston.

In 1993, the management regime changed to something affectionately known as GOCO-Government-owned, contractor-operated. Some naive people, mainly on the left, have argued that that in itself led to a diminution in safety standards. That is fundamentally untrue. The Ministry of Defence will admit in quiet, private moments that many of the problems at AWE Aldermaston occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, when the safety culture was even poorer than it is now. One of the problems of my constituency in particular, being downwind and downstream of AWE Aldermaston, is that at times of flash floods all sorts of radioactive materials are washed off the site. They have probably been buried for many years. The Ministry of Defence and whoever operates AWE Aldermaston do not know where, because the culture at the time in question was so different.

What I have described does not mean that since 1993, when immunity was lifted and the site came under the regime of the nuclear installations inspectorate and other bodies such as the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive were given a locus, the safety regime has been at all satisfactory; it is just that the lid has been lifted a little. As the hon. Member for Newbury said, there has been a prosecution in Newbury magistrates court. Two workers were contaminated as a result of plutonium leaks. If I may correct the hon. Gentleman slightly, on 13 December—the case is referred to in an early-day motion tabled in our names—the Environment Agency prosecuted the management of AWE Aldermaston for deliberately discharging radioactive material into the Aldermaston stream, which, before it flows into the Thames, flows into the River Kennet, from where Reading's drinking water is taken. That was a flagrant breach of safety procedures and the law, and a matter for some concern.

No wonder local people, including my constituents, are worried about the management regime at the plant. The decision to award the contract to AWE Management Ltd. was for most of my constituents a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. We have heard about the appalling safety record of Lockheed Martin. I have been in contact with several people at AWE Aldermaston and elsewhere. In some cases, for employment reasons, they contacted me anonymously. When they heard that Lockheed Martin was in the frame for the contract to run AWE, the overwhelming message was, "God help you." As was highlighted, its track record in the United States was little short of lamentable. That was before the blatant and deliberate falsifying of nuclear data at Sellafield occurred.

Like other hon. Members, I received a letter from Baroness Symons towards the end of November, informing me of the new management arrangements. I was concerned then, but I am far more concerned now that I have heard what has happened in Cumbria. The resignations and Ministers' statements that followed did not further reassure me—they made me absolutely convinced that the contract must be reviewed and that safety, and the interest of the local and national environment, must be made paramount.

I shall quote from a letter that I received two days ago from a worker at AWE Aldermaston, who signed it "A very concerned Worker". From the style of writing, I think that it is one of several communications that I have had over the past couple of years. It begins:

> Dear Mr. Salter, I note from the recent press cuttings that you have some concern relating to the management of the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston and Burghfield, although your concerns seem only to be focused on the performance of the current contractor, HuntingBrae. While your concern has an undeniable basis, a far more significant concern has arisen in that AWEML will be taking over the management contract from April 2000 for a . . . period of 20 years. The first question you must ask yourself, is why did HuntingBrae lose the contract. Current opinion within the workforce indicates a lack of safety performance and a slowness in taking remedial action.

He lists details, and continues:

> A further failure may have been the fact that the Liquid Effluent Treatment Plant for Radioactive Waste is still inoperable after eight years, and we are still using a plant that was condemned in 1977.
>
> If it is true that HuntingBrae lost the contract through poor safety performance, why then are AWEML being allowed to manage such hazardous sites, bearing in mind the safety track records of BNFL and Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, which begs the question—

the first question that I should pose to the Minister—

> are MOD PE Contracts Branch competent to carry out the required technical assessment.
>
> In recent interviews with Junior Ministers, a lack of knowledge of the poor performance of the incoming contractor both at Sellafield and in the US has been profound.
>
> Interface with AWEML during the lead in phase to the new contract engenders serious misgivings on the new contractors grasp of the management function required to control such hazardous processes.

My correspondent's next point worried me gravely. He wrote:

> Throughout the early life of the new contract, the workforce is to be downsized by a further 1,500 personnel, although no specific areas have been identified as redundancy targets.
>
> During the tenure of HuntingBrae the workforce has been seriously depleted, to such an extent that much of the technical knowledge and experience, particularly in the nuclear and chemical process areas no longer exists.

In an instruction to me, he wrote:

> What you should be pursuing is the terms of the new contract—

and the way in which the Department concluded that a consortium including Lockheed Martin and BNFL were suitable for managing an atomic weapons establishment.

[Mr. Martin Salter]

I should briefly pose five further questions. First, will the Minister give insight into what research the Department did, before awarding the AWE contract, into Lockheed Martin's record in the United States? Secondly, was the Minister made aware of how poor Lockheed Martin's safety record at the four sites that it managed for the Department of Energy in the United States was? Thirdly, is the Minister aware that members of the work force are unhappy that an American company will be running the UK's nuclear weapons plant? Fourthly, exactly what role will BNFL play in maintaining the UK's Trident programme at the Atomic Weapons Establishment? Fifthly, have the recent revelations about MOX data falsification at Sellafield caused the Minister to reconsider his decision to award the Aldermaston and Burghfield contract to AWE Management Ltd?

The need for ministerial intervention is clear. Only yesterday, I learned that an electrician was burnt on site at AWE Aldermaston and is currently undergoing treatment at a specialist burns unit for his injuries. AWE's track record on safety, under the MOD, Hunting-BRAE or any other management regime, is simply unacceptable. Will it be improved by the involvement of BNFL and Lockheed Martin? I think not. To put it simply, people who tell lies, falsify data and prove themselves to be untrustworthy should not be allowed to play with nuclear weapons, and they should certainly not be put in charge of this country's nuclear defence capability.

9.55 am

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham): I am grateful to the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) for asking those questions and for leading the debate on these sensitive issues in recent months.

I share many of the worries of the hon. Members who represent neighbouring constituencies. Burghfield is in my constituency and, as far as I can judge, my constituents' concerns fall into two categories. I say, "As far as I can judge," because I have received only a couple of letters on the issue in quite a long time. However, I suspect that that is not a fair reflection of the underlying concern. Those who are most directly involved express the first concern. Those who work in the organisation are worried in case too many jobs are cut, which not only would affect their immediate family circumstances but might jeopardise safety by removing too many people from the work force. The whole work force needs to be reassured that the new contractors, whoever they may be, will make safety their overriding priority and understand the need to motivate and retain a good work force who are dedicated to that task. That emphasis on safety must come from the top, but it must infuse the whole organisation. We need a work force who are persuaded by their management that safety is their overriding priority and who are given the operating climate and facilities to enable them to get on with the job of ensuring that safety is guaranteed.

The second worry of my constituents is more general. They wish to be reassured that they are living near a safe installation that will not pollute the rivers and jeopardise health. Several inquiries have taken place to investigate whether the incidents that are known to have happened so far have had any adverse consequences on the health of the general population. As the hon. Member for Reading, West said, there may already be several nasty substances on the sites, which might leach into water courses during heavy rains or flooding. We would like to know more about that, as well as about what action will be taken in future to clean up and contain any problem that has accumulated over many years of operation.

Is the Minister at all persuaded by the comments of the hon. Members for Newbury and for Reading, West that the position is so difficult that the contract needs to be re-tendered? That is one way in which the Minister could proceed, but the Minister must also consider the contractual arrangements that have already been entered into and who else might be able to provide a better future, and he must think about the pickle that he has got himself into by having gone so far against the advice of the hon. Members for Newbury and for Reading, West. I am not one of those who has wanted to conduct a public debate about the issue because, although I share the enthusiasm of other hon. Members for openness and sensible publication of information, I believe that these sensitive issues are best sorted out by those in the know, whenever possible. I try to achieve that by correspondence rather than by rushing to the local newspaper.

A second possibility, which the Minister may prefer, is to continue with the current contract, which will come into operation on 1 April if nothing else changes. If that were to happen, the least that the Minister could do for the local community would be to explain what action was being taken, especially in the light of the discoveries at BNFL Sellafield, to ensure no repetition of any such conduct under the new contractual arrangements.

Some of the employees and many of my constituents, if asked, would expect a full review and statement from the Minister on how the new arrangements will differ from the mistakes made by participating companies in the past. We should need more than mere words; we should need a formal agreement to show that safety had been written into the contract from beginning to end, that there would be a substantial tightening of working practices and that safety would come from the top and be the absolute priority. It would also be useful if the Minister were to provide a statement on how any accumulated problem in the organisation would be approached. That statement should cover the questions of substances possibly already on site, and of staff training and motivation, so that the concerns expressed by Members and their constituents could be properly addressed.

I make those proposals in a constructive spirit, because this issue is too serious to turn into a party political row. One could say that Ministers were being complacent, or that they were not keeping up with the job. I received some very complacent answers from the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett)—now the Leader of the House—when she was in overall charge of nuclear safety at the Department of Trade and Industry. However, this is not an appropriate occasion for that kind of debate.

This matters to our local communities, and I am here as a representative of my constituency. I agree with much that other Members have said, but I wish to make my own statement in my own way, because it is important for the Minister to understand the feeling in the constituency about the sensitive issues of employment and safety that predominate in local debate.

10.2 am

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) on securing this debate. It would have been unnatural if Parliament had not had an opportunity to discuss such an important matter at a time when the contracts for supervision of the two facilities might be about to be changed, against the background of the failures of the existing contractor and by the prospective contractors. It is extraordinary that the Government should place a contract with a consortium, both of whose partners have so dubious a safety record.

The hon. Member for Newbury summarised clearly the track record of British Nuclear Fuels and Lockheed Martin, and I need not go over that ground again. I understand that the Oak Ridge and the Idaho incidents have, rightly, been treated very seriously in the United States, which will affect the willingness of other public authorities—or, perhaps, private corporations—in the United States to put their trust in Lockheed Martin as a suitable manager of nuclear installations.

We have a great deal to be proud of over the past 50 years in the British nuclear industry. It would be wrong to conduct this debate without recognising that Britain had the first commercial fission reactor, and that the Aldermaston facility has done a superb job in providing for our essential nuclear deterrent over 50 years. Safety failures have occurred from time to time, but that should not eclipse the record of considerable achievement, for which we are all enormously grateful.

The British nuclear deterrent played a significant part in keeping the peace, and in our eventual victory, in the cold war. We must pay tribute to the generations of British scientists and engineers who have done a superb job. British Nuclear Fuels, which reprocesses nuclear fuel on behalf of some extremely sophisticated customers, has a fine record. There are no customers more sophisticated than the Japanese, Swiss and Germans. They have placed their confidence in British Nuclear Fuels and, as a result, very important business has been generated in this country.

In marked contrast to that positive record, we should be particularly concerned at recent events at Sellafield, which constitute a betrayal of that record and of the traditions of a plant that has served the nuclear industry and this country well for a long time. It was right for the chief executive, Mr. Taylor, to resign, although I assume that he was unaware of, and certainly did not authorise, any errors of commission or omission in respect of safety procedures under his control. It is right that those at the highest level should take responsibility for such a serious incident. Any putative successor should be made aware that, should a similar incident occur, his career would come to an end as well.

Mr. Taylor has taken the right action, and it is right that individuals involved in safety failures at Sellafield should also be fired, but even that response is not adequate. There is prima facie evidence that deliberate, wilful and reckless breaches of safety rules have been compounded by the falsification of records. I shall go no further than to say that, if that is true, the individuals concerned should be subject to criminal sanctions. It is not for me to pre-judge decisions taken by the prosecuting authorities or the courts. However, Parliament should establish whether the law provides a suitable basis for an appropriate response to allegations not merely of inadvertent omissions—which, although they would not justify a criminal sanction, might justify a sacking—but of reckless and deliberate safety failures. In such circumstances, mere corporate sanctions or the sacking of the chief executive is insufficient.

For all the reasons given by the hon. Members for Newbury and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Workingham (Mr. Redwood), nuclear safety is important. Before we can reassure the public on this matter, we need assurances from the Executive branch of Government, and I hope that we shall hear them in a moment. It is also important that the legislative branch of Government take the matter on board by ensuring that the law is adequate and the penalties and legal deterrents appropriate to the gravity of the case. Mr. Cook—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. The hon. Gentleman is doing very well, and I do not wish to disturb the flow of his argument. However, all hon. Members will appreciate my reminding him that, when the House, in its wisdom, embarked on this experiment, it was decided that this Chamber should be an extension of the whole House, and that the Chairman be addressed as "Deputy Speaker" unless a Committee is in session. I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate guidance on that matter.

Mr. Davies: I certainly appreciate that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I apologise wholeheartedly for that breach of protocol. This is the first time that I have taken part in a debate in this Chamber, and I hope that that might be considered a sufficient excuse, but I certainly take on board your point and I apologise for my mistake.

The hon. Members for Newbury and for Reading, West and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham were right to speak as they did. Given their constituents' profound anxieties about some of the recent safety failures, including that at Hunting-BRAE, which appears to have polluted the Kennet, they spoke in extremely measured tones. I can imagine the pressure that would be placed on me if there were a threat, let alone a case, of that kind in Lincolnshire. All three hon. Members showed considerable moderation in their comments. Their demands for reassurance from the Government are entirely reasonable, and I hope that they will be satisfied.

The central questions to which the Minister must give a concrete response are: what confidence we can have that these failures, which appear to be almost systemic in British Nuclear Fuels and Lockheed Martin, will not be repeated under the new contract? What new procedures and sanctions are in place? What is new about the way in which the contract has been framed?

I should be grateful if the Minister would deal with another issue. What is the role of the Ministry of Defence, especially the Defence Evaluation and

[Mr. Davies]

Research Agency, in such contracts? The Government plan to privatise DERA; they expect to raise £250 million pounds from doing so, and if they do not get it there will be another hole in the military budget. Is DERA acting as a dispassionate adviser to the Government on the specifications and negotiations involved in the contract? Is it a source of reliable independent technical advice—which the Government clearly need—or a potential rival bidder for the contract? In other words, is it one of the companies, which hon. Members have asked the Minister to list, that is an alternative to the Lockheed Martin and BNFL combined consortium? Clearly, one organisation or corporate entity could not adequately fulfil both roles without conflicts of interest arising.

Safety requires three key elements. First, it requires engineers and scientists of the greatest technical competence. Secondly, it requires the highest motivation and integrity—not only internal integrity, but an external framework of discipline in safety that includes the necessary sanctions for misbehaviour. That is essential in generating a culture in which safety is considered to be a central and non-negotiable element of the conduct of operations. Thirdly, it requires a proper set of checks and balances. A clear distinction between the role of the contractor and that of the customer is essential, so that it is plain who is advising one and who is advising the other, and how the chain of responsibilities operates. There must be no conflict of interest and no fudging of responsibilities.

Mr. Rendel: I believe that I can help the hon. Gentleman about DERA. The letter that we received from Baroness Symons when the contract was awarded stated that two consortiums had been unsuccessful, one of which included Hunting-BRAE. DERA was a member of that consortium, and is thus part of one of the competitor consortiums that bid for the contract when it was awarded to AWE Management Ltd.

Mr. Davies: As the hon. Gentleman may have surmised when I was speaking, I had at the back of my mind a slight suspicion that circumstances might be as he just described. I preferred to ask my question of the Government openly. Nevertheless, a response is required. It is important that we receive the relevant assurances from the Government. Time constraints should not interfere with the Government's ability to deal authoritatively with such important issues.

10.15 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I certainly do not feel constrained by time. I am sure that hon. Members will be glad that the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) excused himself for his performance on the grounds that he had been up all night in the Division Lobby. We would not otherwise have noticed. Unusually, and unnaturally for a Liberal Democrat, his speech was remarkably brief, which has allowed me more time.

Before I respond in detail to the points made, I want to take the opportunity to send best wishes on behalf of all hon. Members to the member of the contractor's staff who suffered flash burns in an electrical accident at Aldermaston yesterday. He is in a stable condition in hospital, and we hope that he makes a speedy and complete recovery. As you will understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been asked to withhold his name to protect the feelings of his family. We do not yet have a report on the circumstances or causes of the accident, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) did not wish to imply that we already knew those circumstances, or that there was a particular cause.

On the main point of this debate, the MOD fully shares hon. Members' concerns about the safety record of the consortiums that bid for the running of AWE at Aldermasteron, and, indeed, the winning consortium. The Ministry fully supports the strong line taken recently by the Department of Trade and Industry in setting up an inquiry into BNFL's safety culture at Sellafield. That is clear evidence that the safety watchdogs established to oversee nuclear installations in this country are willing to act independently, quickly and robustly when incidents of such a nature are identified. I applaud such vigour, and I am sure that the watchdogs would be equally critical and responsive should such an incident affect any MOD installation.

As hon. Members know, the Department of Trade and Industry is due to produce a detailed report on BNFL by the middle of April, which slightly constrains today's discussion, in terms of the Government's response. Clearly, it would be inappropriate and imprudent for me to prejudge the issue today; I am sure that hon. Members will understand that. However, I should stress that the MOD is working closely with the officials carrying out the inquiry, to examine whether there are implications for safety operations at Aldermaston. Not only will we study the inquiry's findings carefully, as hon. Members would expect, but, if lessons are to be learned, the MOD will insist that they are fully implemented. Furthermore, I emphasise that, if necessary, existing contractual arrangements will be extended, or direct MOD management imposed, until new appropriate arrangements are made for the long-term running of the site. It is unusual to reach such a conclusion first, but it is appropriate in view of the concerns expressed by hon. Members. It makes clear the direction in which the Government are moving.

I am also aware that similar criticisms were levelled in the media, and repeated in this Chamber today, in relation to Lockheed Martin, which is one of the three shareholders in the new consortium. Those criticisms relate to its safety record at its facilities in the United States. Those facilities are subject to the closest scrutiny by the US regulatory authorities. In line with our traditional strong relationship with the United States on the defence and the scientific side, which has rightly been the subject of many comments in the House over the years, we understandably maintain regular contact with them.

The United States Department of Energy, the responsible authority, recently issued a report on an incident at the Oak Ridge facility in December last year, in which a number of workers were injured. We are studying the findings to see whether there are any lessons to be learned for AWE. However, the independent British nuclear installations inspectorate reviewed the incident at the time, as it does all incidents that may have a bearing on operations at Aldermaston

or elsewhere, even if they take place outside the United Kingdom, and concluded that the Oak Ridge case had no bearing on the operation of our installation at Aldermaston. Hon. Members who have had any involvement with the nuclear industry will know that there is a regular exchange of information between the major operators and inspectors around the world to ensure not only that lessons are learned in each country but that the highest standards are maintained.

The media suggestions that Lockheed Martin's contract to run the Oak Ridge site has been shortened as a result of its alleged poor safety record appear to be unfounded. We have looked into the matter, and I am advised that the contract has been extended and that the company is competing for the new contract when the current one expires.

Mr. Quentin Davies: As the Minister probably has better sources of information than I do, will he confirm, or perhaps refute, the suggestion that has been put to me that the United States Secretary of Energy, Bill Richardson, has refused Lockheed Martin permission to restart operations at the Oak Ridge plant in Tennessee

because of security concerns and its—

Lockheed Martin's—

failure to demonstrate in a practice run that it was ready for the safe restart of enriched uranium operations?

Is that report correct?

Mr. Spellar: I am not sure whether two issues are getting mixed up here. One is the general relationship between the United States Department of Energy and Lockheed Martin. The second is its view on whether a certain plant is technically ready and able to start up. One could have confidence in a company's general competence, but might consider that a piece of equipment was not yet ready and required further work and testing, particularly in the nuclear industry, to have the greatest possible assurance that it would run satisfactorily. There are a number of extremely competent defence contractors, but we would not necessarily accept a piece of equipment if we were not satisfied that it was technically compliant.

I shall look into the quote from Bill Richardson. However, following our inquiries, our opposite numbers in the United States Department of Energy have not suggested that their confidence in the company's overall performance has been undermined by the recent incidents. I give the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) the undertaking that, if he will let my office have a copy of the item to which he referred, we shall look into the matter. For the reassurance of the residents in the area, as well as anywhere else, we want to be clear about any uncertainty felt by anyone, especially someone of the standing of Bill Richardson. Previously, he was the United States representative at the United Nations and a distinguished congressman for New Mexico, a state that contains several of the USA's nuclear facilities, including the Sandia laboratories and the Los Alamos facilities.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 21 February, we have instructed the Chief of Defence Procurement, Sir Robert Walmsley, to examine the terms and conditions of the Atomic Weapons Establishment contract to ensure the pre-eminence of public health and safety as it affects the public and workers at the facility. I join hon. Members in paying tribute to the skill and expertise of the plant workers, many of whom are at the leading edge of technology and science, in maintaining and advancing our nuclear deterrent. It would be improper not to use the debate to report the public's appreciation and understanding of their capability and dedication.

Mr. Rendel: I am grateful to the Minister for his commendation for the staff concerned. However, will he tell us why the Chief of Defence Procurement has only now been asked to consider whether the contract is sufficient in terms of its emphasis on health and safety? Would it not have been rather better to consider the contract before deciding what would be the new consortium?

Mr. Spellar: With the conduct of an installation such as AWE Aldermaston, safety questions are inevitably at the forefront of our thinking. In the light of incidents extraneous to Aldermaston, notably at Sellafield but also in the US, it was only right and proper to ask the Chief of Defence Procurement for further examination and insurance. That seems appropriate, and I can imagine the criticism that we would have faced had we not done so. It does not mean that we believe that the procedures are unsatisfactory, but it is obviously right to take this action, due to current public and parliamentary concern.

We have also insisted that all BNFL nominations to senior positions at Aldermaston are fully vetted and are unconnected to the incidents at Sellafield. That is important in the light of hon. Members' comments in the debate. If necessary, BNFL will be asked to replace nominations with other candidates of proven experience and reliability.

However, I stress that the safety of the Aldermaston site has always been our top priority, and we are determined to ensure that safety is not compromised for any reason. The new consortium is due to take over operations at Aldermaston at the beginning of April, subject to the caveats that I mentioned earlier. It will happen only if the independent regulator, the nuclear installations inspectorate, is fully satisfied that the consortium is in a position to implement the highest safety standards possible and is therefore willing to issue a licence to run the site. The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford outlined the need for checks and balances, and the independence and vigorous approach of the inspectorate is a real check and balance in the nuclear industry in this country.

The licence is a precondition for the new contract to take effect. Even then, the licence can be revoked by the inspectorate at any time if safety standards are neglected for any reason. In addition, the Ministry of Defence maintains full-time compliance officers at the site, with the authority to inspect any aspects of activities and to examine any report or paperwork relating to operations. If those officials have any qualms over safety matters, they are obliged to report them immediately to the MOD. Again, the Ministry of Defence—as the customer—has the power to suspend operations at the site and to cancel the contract at any time if safety

[Mr. Spellar]

matters are being affected adversely. I want no one to be in doubt that we shall exercise those powers if the situation requires it.

Mr. Salter: I am delighted that the MOD will not shirk its responsibilities to suspend operations or the licence if there is proof of safety breaches at AWE Aldermaston. Will the Minister say how many prosecutions it will take for the MOD to adopt that position? How many rivers will have to be polluted? How many prosecutions will there have to be in a magistrates court? Can we know what is, and what is not, an acceptable level of breaches of safety procedure under the law?

Mr. Spellar: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I shall deal with that matter when I deal with individual safety incidents. I stress that we shall insist on retaining the high level of safety standards that is already maintained. We shall be looking to whoever operates the site to act positively to improve current standards.

Before I come on to the record of Hunting-BRAE, on which I differ from my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West, it would be as well to go into the history of the site and explain how the particular situation has arisen with regard to its management. In the middle and late 1980s, AWE was struggling to complete its capital building programme and, equally significantly, to recruit, train and retain staff in sufficient numbers to cover the increase in work load that was created by the need to build and deliver the warheads for the new Trident system. For several years, such a problem had seriously concerned the Select Committee on Defence, which, as late as 1989–90, expressed the view that

> the manpower difficulties to which we referred last year have worsened ... Unless the remedial measures proposed prove effective, there is now a significant risk that some elements of the programme may fail to meet their scheduled delivery dates.

The remedial measures that the Defence Committee had in mind had been announced on 5 December 1989 by the Ministry of Defence. They involved the full contractorisation of the establishment, with land, buildings and other assets remaining in Government ownership—Government owned, contractor-operated, a GOCO site. The Ministry of Defence added that that move would require legislation and, until that could be achieved, it intended to appoint a managing contractor who would concentrate initially on manufacturing work and site support, and who would strengthen the establishment by bringing in, during 1990, a small number of experienced managers from the private sector. The MOD emphasised that there would be no change in the direction or purpose of the establishment's programme and that the first objective was to reinforce rather than replace existing AWE management.

It is worth while for me to dwell on the concerns of the Select Committee at that time. It was told that safety considerations would be one factor in the award of the eventual contract and that it was one of the areas where it was intended that the contractor would not be allowed to change or compromise on the current high standards. However, the Committee considered that, although the MOD compliance office would provide additional levels of scrutiny and audit, there was clearly some potential contradiction between the imposition of new management who were intent on change and the need, rightly, to maintain the existing safety culture. The maintenance of high standards in the face of management pressures to reduce costs would, thus, be dependent on the calibre of staff and resources allocated to the compliance office.

The issue of radiation dose limits was a further factor that concerned the Defence Committee, with potential contractors having to bear in mind the possible financial implications for future liability for compensation.

The 1989–90 Committee concluded:

> It is essential that the move to contractorisation is not rushed and that the details are very fully worked out before the contract is awarded. In particular, safety and security issues should be fully explored, and detailed and binding standards applied to all four sites set out in the invitation to tender and in the eventual contract. The financial implications of the proposal need further consideration and we remain concerned about the potential for conflict between commercial pressures—the need to make profits—and the requirements of the health and safety of staff at AWE and of the general public, of security and the work programme. We hope that by the time we come to take evidence on this subject again, the MoD will have made greater progress in establishing the detail of its plans and be able to offer satisfactory assurances on these points.

I mention those points because many of the concerns expressed by hon. Members were similar to those that we have heard today; in other words, that has rightly been a continuing theme.

By the 1991–92 Session, the Committee noted the MOD view that the interim contractor had made an encouraging start and had continued to meet stringent safety and security standards while achieving its programme commitments. The most significant element of that Committee's report, however, was that, for the first time in several years, it expressed no concern about AWE's ability to recruit and retain the necessary staff.

In the event, Hunting-BRAE took over the management and operation of AWE under the first term contract on 1 April 1993. As hon. Members will know, Hunting-BRAE was one of the companies that sought the new contract. Hon. Members asked about the composition of the various consortiums. The Hunting-BRAE contract included the existing members Brown and Root, Hunting Engineering and DERA, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford. AWE 2100 comprised Babcock Facilities Management, W. S. Atkins plc and an American firm, Science Applications International Corporation. The winning consortium, AWE Management Ltd., comprised Serco Defence Support, a British company, British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. and Lockheed Martin, which, although primarily an American company, has a significant and increasing presence in Britain, which is very welcome.

In the seven years since Hunting-BRAE took over, it has delivered the programme. It has done so without increasing staff numbers. In fact, the numbers now employed at AWE are substantially lower than at the start of its tenure. Impressive as those achievements are, they would have been of no benefit if safety standards had been allowed to fall. I am pleased to remind hon. Members that no such diminution occurred.

The 1992–93 Committee noted that there had been several safety-related incidents at the establishment over the previous 15 years, the most recent involving the

release of a small amount of radioactive material from a damaged container on 8 December 1992. The Committee reported that there was some unease among staff and members of the public and that that could best be assuaged by an independent assessment of safety levels at AWE. It therefore welcomed the fact that the Health and Safety Executive was undertaking a review of safety procedures and emergency arrangements and considered it important that the findings were made available to the public.

The results of that review were, and remain, important. The Health and Safety Executive concluded that, although AWE was acceptably safe, its safety arrangements were not demonstrably safe, and weaknesses existed in health and safety management. The HSE made 18 primary recommendations and a further 46 to which it required a response. It referred not to Hunting-BRAE, which had only just taken over the contract, but to the circumstances inherited from the previous management regime.

Most significantly, the HSE recommended that the Secretary of State for Defence should remove AWE's immunity from the Nuclear Installations Act 1965, which would make the establishment subject to nuclear site licensing and bring it in line with other civil nuclear facilities. That immunity was subsequently removed, and Hunting-BRAE went on to achieve site licences for the Aldermaston and Burghfield sites in July 1997.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West asked about prosecutions. Two prosecutions were brought by the nuclear installations inspectorate. The first was brought on 18 February 1997 under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1988, and involved an employee working with adhesives in a confined space who was overcome by fumes. The company involved was fined £2,000 and a further £2,000 costs. However, although the incident was regrettable and unfortunate, it did not involve nuclear materials, being more of a traditional industrial accident.

The second prosecution, which has already been mentioned, was brought under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 following an incident on 15 December 1997, when plutonium oxide was released during removal of a filter and was inhaled by three workers. The company was criticised for an inadequate safety culture, and was prosecuted and fined £22,000 with costs of £3,000.

The third prosecution, which my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West and the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford mentioned, was brought by the Environment Agency and related to discharging water contaminated with tritium into the Aldermaston stream. The Environment Agency stated that the discharges did not present a threat to public health or to the environment and, indeed, accepted that AWE could continue to allow such discharges. The Environment Agency's complaint related not to the nature of the discharges but to the fact that Hunting-BRAE had not sought formal permission from the Environment Agency to allow the discharges as it should have done.

Mr. Salter: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the discharges were within limits but were unauthorised. However, the company had no way of knowing whether the discharges would be within limits, because they were the result of flash flooding on the site and the inability of the ground water storage system at North Ponds to cope. The incident involved low-level radioactive unstable nuclear material, and the company had no idea how much was involved. Because of the inadequacy of its control mechanisms, it had no option but to allow the discharge to go into the water course. In different circumstances, the company might have breached recommended safety limits.

Mr. Spellar: The level of radioactive tritium in the tanks was sufficiently low as not to pose a threat to health, as the Environment Agency fully accepted. It was not a case of keeping dangerous materials that were fortuitously diluted; there were low concentrations of tritium, and, as I understand it, the Environment Agency had subsequently accepted AWE could continue to discharge down that route. It was rightly concerned about what it saw as inadequate procedures in AWE for seeking and obtaining authorisation to take such action, and it is right that the organisation should be called to account for that. We must get the issue into perspective to decide whether there was or would have been a threat to public health. We should bear in mind the way in which the media tend to deal with anything radioactive and the fact that the public are not necessarily able to ascertain levels of radioactivity and risk.

Mr. Salter: I may have some advantage over my hon. Friend, perhaps because he has not been fully briefed. Is he aware that one of the reasons why the management of AWE Aldermaston was in the invidious position of having to let an unknown quantity of contaminated water run into the water courses was that the Pangbourne pipeline was operating to capacity? Is it not a matter of severe concern that the pipeline is starting to flake? The management of AWE Aldermaston has a problem: if it puts too much water down the authorised route, uncontrolled amounts of plutonium and uranium will flake off the scale that has built up on the pipeline for 40 years. Shortly, Ministers will have reports on their desks recommending that the Pangbourne pipeline be shut down and that an evaporator be installed. Would that not be a far better way of avoiding this Mickey Mouse system of getting rid of contaminated water from a contaminated site on the edge of my constituency?

Mr. Spellar: Again, my hon. Friend has included the answer in his question. The matter would be resolved by engagement between AWE and appropriate regulatory authorities. It was self-evident in his points that they are engaged in those discussions, and we will await the outcome. That is the right way to proceed and it provides the checks and balances that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford said were required in the system. We must ensure that those checks and balances are working, and my hon. Friend's contribution showed that they probably are.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The Minister is describing failures relating to safety procedures that are found to be inadequate by experience and to inadequate investment and renewal of equipment. Does he accept that corporate sanctions are appropriate in such cases? The ultimate corporate sanction is to deny a contract

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

and to exclude the company from future bidding; other corporate sanctions involve fines. When different cases arise, however, I hope that the Minister will accept my earlier argument. I referred to cases in which procedures are in place but in which individuals wilfully and knowingly decide to breach them and, as was alleged about Sellafield, extend their misbehaviour by falsifying records. Does he agree that criminal sanctions are appropriate in such cases and does he believe that the criminal law is adequate for that purpose? I hope that he will address that specific point before he concludes his remarks.

Mr. Spellar: I fear that the hon. Gentleman is tempting me to stray beyond the bounds of my ministerial responsibility, even if not beyond those of the debate. His points should be directed at Ministers responsible for legislation on health and safety at work, for nuclear safety legislation and for the control of hazardous substances. He may need to check how his Front-Bench colleagues feel about extending the concept of corporate liability, but he may be aware that some moves have been made in that direction. I fear that we are stepping beyond the bounds of the Ministry of Defence and into areas controlled by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Education and Employment.

As well as the cases that I have mentioned, eight enforcement notices and 22 lesser communications have been issued by the nuclear installations inspectorate and the Environment Agency. Like prosecutions, those notices demonstrate the vigorous independence of the regulators and their determination not to compromise on safety at nuclear installations.

Mr. Redwood: The Minister said that the new consortium was still seeking a safety licence. Will he tell us what safety remit or requirement is being imposed on that consortium in the run-up to the granting of a licence? Has that remit been strengthened or amended in the light of recent events?

Mr. Spellar: The body that grants the licences, the NII, is independent of the Ministry of Defence, the Government and companies. It would be improper for the Government to engage directly in discussions between the incoming or outgoing consortiums and the NII. The inspectorate has an independent role within the regulatory framework. Consequent upon changes in legislation, Aldermaston and Burghfield are being treated as civil nuclear installations for the granting of licences.

As I said in response to a previous query—this may answer the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood)—we are satisfied with the safety provisions of the contract. In view of the present controversy, we believe that it is appropriate to ask the Chief of Defence Procurement to revisit those sectors to ensure that measures providing for the maximum possible safety are included in the contract. However, that is slightly different from the licensing of a company by an independent regulator.

Mr. Redwood: I partly accept that, but I hope that the Minister understands that the public and Parliament regard the Government as the ultimate custodian of public safety and public interest in the matter. It is not of much interest to the public to know that different people with different hats are responsible, and that the Minister cannot answer for them.

I hope that the Minister will extend his answer a little to try to offer my constituents and those of the other hon. Members here today some reassurance that, in view of the public's concern and the concerns mentioned by the two hon. Members who represent the area, the Government have taken a grip on the matter, that higher and better standards are expected and that they have taken appropriate action.

Mr. Spellar: The Department of Trade and Industry has ordered an inquiry into Sellafield. I am reluctant to be drawn into speaking of the independence of the regulatory authorities on matters of health and safety, as suggested by the right hon. Gentleman. We would rightly be criticised if Departments that could have a direct interest were seen to intervene directly in the affairs of independently appointed regulators. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman understands that propriety must be maintained. That does not mean that Ministers and Government are unmindful of the need and desirability for health and safety matters to be considered, but it is enormously important that we maintain the integrity and perceived independence of the regulatory bodies. I accept that, when there is a question of profit and loss or pricing levels, more of a public debate is held. However, the Government—as customer, not just as legislator—should have an interest in the health and safety implications of their operations. Equally, it is vital for the maintenance of public confidence that we respect the independence of the regulators and the licensing authorities.

Within that context, I reject media suggestions that Hunting-BRAE lost the contract because it had a poor safety record. Indeed, hon. Members made allusions in that direction today. It is untrue. All three of the consortiums involved in the bid were fully compliant on safety standards. That is one of the main criteria for being considered in the first place. Hunting-BRAE did a good job of running AWE. That was one of the factors that encouraged the MOD to renew the Government-owned, contractor-operated system. Hunting-BRAE also put together a strong bid for the new contract. Indeed, all three bids from the consortiums that I identified were impressive.

During its tenure at Aldermaston, from 1993 until now, Hunting-BRAE positively promoted a safety culture by encouraging staff to report, on a no-blame basis, and anonymously if preferred, any safety-related incidents that came to their notice. Several thousand such incidents were reported, the great majority of them minor. Supported and encouraged by the MOD, the company also adopted a policy of transparency on safety matters. That included establishing local liaison committees, whose members, including local people, as hon. Members will know, are regularly briefed by officials from AWE, the nuclear installations inspectorate and the Environment Agency.

Mr. Rendel: Since we are getting close to the end of the time allowed, will the Minister use some of it to answer two further questions? He has just told us that he did not

exclude other consortiums for safety reasons. Can he therefore tell us on what grounds the successful consortium was chosen? Also, will he deal with my earlier point and tell us whether he or his Ministry conducted his investigation into the likelihood that, given BNFL's problems, there would still be a BNFL in a few months' time? How did that affect his choice of consortium?

Mr. Spellar: The winning consortium was ahead in all apects of the requirement, although all the bids were compliant. I outlined earlier how we shall respond on the other matters following the outcome of the inquiry next month.

Mr. Rendel: The Minister gave an outline of future possibilities for BNFL, but I was asking what effort he made before the contract was awarded to look into the possibility that BNFL might not exist in a few months' time.

Mr. Spellar: BNFL exists and is a major company. It would be improper to prejudge the outcome of the inquiry.

The site, as I said, is also open to visits from interested parties such as Members of Parliament, and it attempts to publish as much information as possible about its activities. It is ironic that many of the media scare stories about AWE, billed as the results of investigative journalism, rely heavily on information put in the public domain by the company, but quoted misleadingly. Safety reports are regularly placed in the Library of the House of Commons. The local liaison committee includes councillors, members of the public and local authorities. Annual reports are published and presented to the public and there is transparency of safety incident reporting among the staff.

Hon. Members will recall that newspaper reports in October claimed that AWE had been at risk of a catastrophic nuclear accident several times in the previous 12 months and that it broke safety guidelines so often that only luck had prevented an accident worse than that at Tokaimura in Japan. That is simply not true. It was sensational journalism of the worst kind, and I am sure that the Members of Parliament concerned deplore it. We are pleased that Hunting-BRAE has tried to promote an open culture.

In conclusion, although the consortium will have the day-to-day responsibility for running the Aldermaston site, it will be subject to independent safety regimes, many of which I have outlined. Those will include Ministry of Defence compliance officials operating at Aldermaston, the Health and Safety Executive, the Environment Agency and the NII.

Housing (London)

11 am

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I begin by apologising because, although it is Wednesday morning in Westminster Hall, I am still in Tuesday night. I hope that hon. Members will bear with me if I make mistakes.

The debate is about housing in London. London is the capital, but it is also a world city, bearing comparison with Tokyo and New York. As a result, it attracts people from all over the United Kingdom and the world. It is a city of diversity. Many communities live within London's boundaries. They have different cultural backgrounds and many languages are spoken. It is also a city of contrasts. Great affluence sits beside deep-seated deprivation. For example, the City of London is probably the most affluent area in the European Community, but it sits cheek by jowl with Tower Hamlets, which is one of the most deprived areas. Nowhere are those contrasts more stark than in housing. London is a city of mansions and slums. It is two different cities, and there is inevitably a great disparity betwen the housing choices that are available to the citizens of those two cities.

The pressure on housing in London is acute. That has an impact on all aspects of London life, from the needs of the London economy to the life chances of its ordinary citizens. In the public's mind, the pressures that are associated with housing are those that are highlighted in newspaper headlines on soaring house prices or market rents. Often, however, the pressures involve that other city within the city and reflect the problems of homelessness, which is vividly displayed by the common sight of people sleeping in central London streets. For many Londoners, the idea of housing choice is an illusion.

The more affluent people in London look to the owner-occupied sector to solve their housing difficulties, but during the past year, prices have spiralled by 23 per cent. In January this year, the average price for a London house was £159,000, and a first-time buyer had to pay £120,000. The comparison of those costs with the average salary of key professionals, especially in the capital's public sector, displays a stark difference. A teacher who works in outer London is lucky to earn £20,000 and would probably earn less than that, perhaps about £18,000. Such a person is priced out of the market. He or she would probably be able to take out a maximum mortgage of just over £50,000, which would not go far in the context of prices in London today. Indeed, two teachers who are a married couple might just about be able to buy a home, but they would still be far short of the average amount needed by first-time buyers in London.

In a yet-to-be published report on house prices sent to me by the London chamber of commerce, the rapid increase in house prices was characterised as reminiscent of the boom in the late 1980s. That is not the only organisation to make that comparison. Indeed, last week, at a lunch for mortgate companies, Howard Davies outlined some research carried out by the financial service authorities into the nine biggest mortgage lenders, which have more than 50 per cent. of the mortgage market. The report highlighted the increasing generosity in lending by those mortgage

[Mr. Andrew Love]

companies, which are using salary multipliers of three and a half to three and three quarters. In addition to that generous lending, there is an estimated £83 billion of non-mortgage debt in the marketplace, we have high interest rates and, unlike in previous housing booms, inflation is unlikely to erode the value of mortgages because it is so low. That combination of factors led Howard Davies to urge lenders to act more prudently.

There is no mystery about why Howard Davies suggested that. Last year—eight years after the previous recession—30,000 properties were repossessed. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will recognise that the spiralling increase in house prices must be moderated. I would go further and say that, in consultation with those who set mortgage interest rates, the Government should consider introducing measures that will create sustainable home ownership. The previous Government failed miserably on that project and I hope that this Government will make a better fist of it.

There are more modest increases in the private rented sector—just 9 per cent. last year. A typical two-bedroomed property, if someone is lucky enough to find one, costs £278 a week. A similar property in Manchester costs £65. That shows the disparity that has emerged in the private rented sector between the capital and the rest of the country, which can be traced back to a decision by the previous Government during the late 1980s to deregulate rents. The Minister at the time said, "Let housing benefit take the strain." Well, it did take the strain, and they did not wait long before deciding to introduce restrictions on the amount of housing benefit that they would allow to take the strain. Those restrictions took the form of local reference rents and single room rents. However, because of the concern and scepticism about the impact of the introduction of those restrictions, they agreed to review the operation of local reference rents and single room rents after two years. The Conservatives were no longer in government two years later, but the review was carried out by the present Government, and it demonstrated what most people at the time already thought: that, if a cap is put on housing benefit, that will undoubtedly restrain it. I am afraid that there is little evidence that the much-vaunted prospect that it would restrain rent increases has happened. There is a lot of evidence, however, that it has had no effect in London. The Conservatives' proposition has not come to pass.

The important feature is the impact on tenants. Research conducted by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Social Security said:

> Few tenants were successful in negotiating lower rent levels with landlords . . . landlords said that they would rarely reduce the rent when a tenant was facing a shortfall as they saw paying the rent as the tenant's responsibility.

The evidence from reports and research suggests that the shopping incentive represented by local reference rents and single room rents does not work. As the departmental report says, landlords will not reduce rents, an especially important factor in areas such as London where there is a gross shortage of rented accommodation, and where all power is in the landlord's hands. Severe hardship is placed on tenants because shortfalls must be made up, normally through their ordinary benefits. The report also shows that, in almost four in 10 cases, the shortfall was about £20 or more. Inevitably, tenants had to take a large sum from benefit or fall into arrears. Like other hon. Members, I have constituents who have fallen into arrears and have eventually been evicted from their properties.

What is the net outcome of the two years' experience of the shopping incentives introduced by the previous Government? The Residential Landlords Association commissioned a report based on the Government's housing benefit statistics. It claims that more that 300,000 low-income tenants in England have been driven out of the private rented sector by the housing benefit restrictions since 1996.

The problem in the social rental sector is not affordability, as it is in the other two sectors, but access. Access is difficult because there is an acute shortage of suitable and affordable accommodation. That is a major issue for all London Members of Parliament. The problems in inner London, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) spoke some weeks ago, were reflected in parts of outer London. One in four of the constituents who come to my surgery are involved in housing difficulty; the cases are mixed, but the vast majority relate to the lack of affordable rented accommodation. Neither the local authority nor I can do anything tangible to assist them. The situation must be remedied. The reason why it is so stark is relatively straightforward—250,000 housing units in London have been lost through right to buy since 1980 and have not been made up. There has been some building, a substantial proportion of which has been in the housing association sector, but it goes nowhere towards making up that loss.

Factors other than right to buy are involved—the matter is more complex than that. Net new lettings in the social sector in the past two years have fallen by 17 per cent., causing a crisis in the London housing market. The consequence has been greater housing stress, especially for those on low incomes who have limited choices. That is reflected in many different ways, one of which is an increase in the numbers on housing waiting lists across London. Almost every authority other than those that choose not to put people on housing waiting lists shows that increase. As I can vouch from my own local authority, many people live in dire circumstances and cannot be helped because there is no accommodation.

Another consequence is a massive increase in the use of temporary accommodation—30 per cent. over the past two years—and, the worst of all worlds, the reintroduction of bed-and-breakfast accommodation, which has doubled to 6,000 and is rising. It is the most appalling accommodation to send young families into. Those statistics measure the hidden homeless, not the high-profile person sleeping on the streets. People living in bed-and-breakfast or temporary accommodation, sharing the misery and squalor of a hotel bedroom, face real problems.

The Association of London Government has called it the worst housing crisis ever, rather like Classic FM, which calls every record produced the best ever. That is perhaps hyperbole, but it gives the flavour of the crisis in the social sector in London. Last year, 40,000 people were accepted as homeless, and the number is rising.

Because all the permanent and temporary accommodation has been taken up, the system has silted up, with disastrous impact on the single homeless.

Most people think that the single homeless are young and mobile people from other parts of the country who can be flexible and move on. That is not always the case. On its telephone hotline, Shelterline, Shelter deals with many single homeless people, many of whom are middle-aged, whose patterns of employment and/or social living have been disrupted by changes in the London market. Such people are now excluded from help. Although Shelterline rings around for hostel or temporary accommodation early in the morning, it cannot meet their needs: they are put back on the street.

What needs to be done? I begin by welcoming the Government's initiative to help rough sleepers, "Coming in from the Cold", which has started a process that we believe will reduce by two thirds the number sleeping on the streets by 2002. I welcome the additional hostel places that that programme is making available and, in particular, the permanent units of accommodation that will provide a long-term solution for those who are on the streets. However, they are just the tip of the iceberg. If we are to address the wider homelessness problem, we must increase the supply of affordable accommodation.

That may sound surprising, but that recommendation has appeared in almost every report produced about London's housing crisis. The London Housing Federation's report "Closing Doors" says:

> there is an urgent need for the Government, together with the new mayor and Greater London Authority, to act to tackle the shortage of decent affordable housing for those living and working in the capital.

London Pride Partnership, a private/public sector partnership, called for a programme of new build to provide affordable accommodation. The idea behind that was to

> provide a major economic boost to London—reducing dependency on benefits and bringing work to many. The programme meets an opportunity as well as a need.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North said in his last debate on this subject, the Association of London Government has introduced an action plan to deal with the immediate homelessness crisis in the capital, which will provide 5,000 additional units of accommodation over the next three years.

The Government also face a major challenge to address what is happening in London. Enormous misery exists among the homeless who live in squalor in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, many of them with young families. This is also an economic issue, because of the need to house key workers and professionals to make the London economy more efficient. The only way to do that is to increase the availability of affordable accommodation. The opportunity is the spending review 2000, which Ministers are discussing. If they listen to this debate, I believe that money will be made available to the public or private sector, or a combination of the two, to ensure an increase in the availability of affordable accommodation during the next five years.

11.20 am

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) for securing this debate. It follows a debate that I secured on 19 January on the problems of housing in inner London. I welcome the Minister again today. I suspect that he will return to this Chamber increasingly in the future, because the deep concern of London Members of Parliament about housing in the capital will not go away. Consistent pressure will be put on the Government to intervene much more in housing in London.

As the Minister and hon. Members will be aware, housing problems in London are markedly different to housing problems in other parts of the country. Buying a house in London in the private sector is far more expensive than anywhere else in the country apart from the richest parts of the south-east. Private sector rents are astronomical compared with any other part of the country, and council rents tend to be slightly higher. The increase in the provision of social housing is much smaller in London than elsewhere.

We are asking the Government to recognise that London has a serious and peculiar problem. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton pointed out, London is not a city of two halves, but a city of three quarters and a quarter. Three quarters of the population are not finding life easy, while a quarter find life extremely comfortable. The kind of inner-London constituency that I represent is portrayed as wealthy and a home to all things upwardly mobile. Although such people undoubtedly live within it, the majority of people with whom I deal in my constituency—I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith) also has this experience—are living on below average or average incomes, and are finding life very hard.

The National Housing Federation report, "Closing Doors", which I am sure that the Minister has seen, is an excellent document that sets out the problems of council housing, private ownership, owner occupation and private rented housing. It then sets out the average private sector rents in London. In my borough, the average is £196 a week for a one-bedroomed flat, while, to rent a house in my constituency, one could easily pay £500 a week. Given average house prices, it is impossible for anyone living on an average income in central London—or almost anywhere in the capital—to even think about buying, unless they have an inheritance or other means of investing a large dollop of capital in a house initially. On average incomes of between, say, £15,000 and £17,000 a year, two people together—a joint income of £34,000 a year—would be lucky to get a mortgage of £90,000 or £100,000, which would not even touch base on a two-bedroomed flat in most parts of London. That is the stark reality.

The effect of the property boom on London as a whole is profound in many ways. All public agencies believe that they can cash in on the property boom by selling any piece of land that comes anywhere near their grasp, because there is a huge demand for land for private sector building. The social housing of the future is being sold as the empty land of today.

The London property boom is pricing poorer people out of central London. The problems experienced by teachers, nurses, lower-paid hospital medical staff,

[Mr. Jeremy Corbyn]

postal workers and others are becoming increasingly well-known. Unless there is greater intervention in the housing market and social housing in London, a truly disastrous situation will arise in respect of people who do essential jobs in inner London. To judge by local schools in my community, excellent young teachers who are determined to turn our schools around and contribute to the community are entering the profession. However, life is not easy for a young teacher who lives in a bedsit or shares a flat with three or four other people. No one wants to live that kind of life for long. After a couple of years, such teachers move to an area where housing is cheaper and the job is perhaps a bit easier, and the community and the children lose talented teachers. The same can be said of nurses, doctors and almost any other community skill that this country and our society desperately needs.

The Government must bear in mind the example of the previous Government, who were profoundly opposed to virtually every action taken by local government, and in favour of selling off all public assets cheaply. In effect, they were selling £10 notes for a fiver. For a while, that was politically successful, but London is now paying the price in terms of housing problems.

The Government should accept that London's problems differ from those in the rest of the country, and look at the public provision of housing. On taking office, they said that they would release capital receipts for housing improvements. That policy, which was commendable, necessary and welcome, and which I wholeheartedly endorse, has helped to deal with some of the backlog of repairs to major estates in London. In May 1997, Islington—despite what *The Daily Telegraph* repeatedly says, Islington does not differ markedly from the rest of London—had a repair backlog totalling £500 million. That is just one borough. Were that sum multiplied to take into account the whole of inner London, the resulting figure would be massive. Capital receipts will not meet that repair bill; new money must also be spent.

Capital receipts from the sale of housing will not meet the cost of replacing houses that were sold off and thereby lost to the public sector. That is partly because a discount is offered on council property—it has been reduced to £30,000—and partly because many valuations of council property are peculiarly low. Many find those valuations difficult to comprehend, given private market prices and the valuations put on council properties that were subsequently resold to people who did not need social housing. I know that this is a politically difficult issue for the Government to grasp. We are talking about a social demand, rather than a prsonal desire to make as much money as possible and obtain the cheapest possible housing. However, the reality is that we must look at the housing needs of the community as a whole.

The Government are right to spend money on estate improvements. In a previous debate, I mentioned the anticipated success of the single regeneration budget schemes in King's Cross, Finsbury Park and other areas in my borough. I fully commend tenant participation and tenant self-management. A couple of weeks ago, we had a successful conference on tenant participation in the borough of Islington; 350 representatives of tenants associations and residents groups turned up, and it proved to be a useful day's discussion. I welcome such developments. However, I do not welcome the pressure that is being put on local authorities to transfer their housing estates and stock to housing associations. That is presented as a free choice. Tenants can vote yes to the council or yes to a housing association. However, it is not a free choice because, given the borrowing restictions that are placed on local authorities, it is unlikely that they will be able to make any money available for the huge regeneration that is required on estates. That money is available only through housing associations.

I am worried that we are creating a massive community of housing associations, in which tenant participation, representation and democracy is sometimes good, but often truly appalling. The brick wall of administration that one comes up against in housing associations is far worse than local authority democracy. Although many people criticise what local government does, ultimately one can choose to elect or not elect one's councillor, but that is not so for one's housing association. It is important to protect democratic choice. Will the Minister deal with the need for a genuinely level playing field in estate transfers?

I turn to the administration of housing and housing needs. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton rightly mentioned housing benefit and the way in which the 1996 change in the regulations has lost many people their homes in the private rented sector. We should seriously consider the cost of housing benefit within our society. The Conservative Government had a passion for rent deregulation—ending any form of rent control and saying that the market rent must be paid through housing benefit. As a result, the public are creating millionaires every week through the bed-and-breakfast system and the private rented sector, because housing benefit has to pay the rent, whatever it is. I do not want to punish tenants or reduce their choice, but is it the best use of public resources to subsidise private landlords when we should be putting money into bricks and mortar for the future of the public? We should seriously consider how housing benefit can best be delivered.

I also ask the Government to examine the cost to local authorities of administering housing benefit. The benefit was created in the early 1980s, and local authorities were required to administer it—although there is no record of any authority wishing to do so; it was forced on them. The quality of administration varies enormously. During the debate in this Chamber on 19 January, I raised the problem of housing benefit administration in my borough. A company called IT Net runs the contract there and in the neighbouring borough of Hackney. The administration is appalling, as are the tension, stress and distress that that causes people. Many people have been threatened with eviction by the local authority and housing associations because their housing benefit has not been paid. An unknown number of private sector tenants have been threatened with the loss of their tenancies, which sometimes happens because people's benefit has been poorly administered. I am told that 24,000 unopened housing benefit application forms are held by my borough alone, and that Hackney holds a very large number. That figure represents 24,000 people who have, I presume legitimately, applied for housing benefit, and are not receiving it simply because the quality of adminstration in the privatised service is poor.

I do not expect the Minister to be an expert on the administration of housing benefit. That is not his function; he would not have time to do anything else if it were. However, I ask him to examine seriously the quality of service delivered by the privatised companies that have become involved in housing benefit in London, and the untold misery that they are causing.

Elderly people come to my advice bureau week after week in desperation and in tears. They are unaware that their rent is in arrears until the council tells them that that is the case because their housing benefit has not been paid. They try to trace their form, which has gone missing, and they are deemed not to have applied because there is no receipt date. They are then told that their rent is at least six months in arrears. They are in a desperate state as a result. I cannot stress too strongly how awful that is, at a human level, for those people. I want the Government to insist that local authorities administer housing benefit properly, and that those companies that cannot deliver the service should lose their contract immediately. That contract should then be given to a body that can deliver, preferably through the public sector.

The solution to housing problems in London has to be greater investment by the community as a whole in affordable rented housing for people who need it, otherwise social divisions and tensions in London will grow. The property boom is fine if one is already on the ladder. If one is nowhere near the first rung, one loses out entirely, and is faced with a lifetime of high rents. Private sector rents represent a higher proportion of salaries in London than in any other part of the country or, probably, of Europe. The Government must build on their achievements in estate improvements and in the rough sleepers initiative and, above all, put public money into building affordable rented housing.

11.36 am

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing this debate, and on his presentation of the case. I agree with his arguments, and with those made by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn).

I approach the matter from an outer London point of view. Outer London is often considered an affluent area, without housing problems. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton said, that is not the case. Areas of deprivation and housing need, and unemployment blackspots, often exist alongside affluent areas.

My constituency of Upminster is part of the London borough of Havering, and is effectively divided into two parts. One consists mainly of owner-occupied housing; the other contains part of the Harold Hill estate—a large, suburban estate built to accommodate the severe housing needs of inner Londoners after the second world war. Those people moved out to Harold Hill in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In many ways it was a fine estate, planned by the London county council and later administered by the Greater London council and, most recently, the London borough of Havering.

However, the first of the area's problems that I shall outline is its geographical position, which is relevant to the debate, especially in the context of outer London. It is completely surrounded by green belt. On one side, it is next to the M25, and there is also green belt between the London borough of Barking and Dagenham and the London borough of Havering, so there is little room for expansion into what would be greenfield sites. The green belt is preciously guarded and will continue to be so. Most of the land within the designated housing areas is taken up. Small pockets remain for development here and there, but there is little scope for increasing the supply. The housing is mainly low density, and there is limited opportunity for creating high-density housing within a planning context. That helps to create the scarcity.

In relation to the social factors, I echo the points made by my hon. Friends about the right to buy. There has been very high take-up of the right to buy in the area, because the available accommodation consists mainly of houses. That has led to a great reduction in the local authority's ability to meet the need for affordable housing. One must also consider the effect of the presence of an ageing population. People who moved out to the area just after the second world war are now in a later stage of their life. Many of them have lived in their houses since the early 1950s and will continue to do so. However, given that the actual number of people occupying each house is smaller, the housing stock houses fewer people.

Compared with other constituencies, mine belongs to the premier league in respect of the age of the population. which is very high. Matrimonial and family breakdowns mean that fewer people live in each house. Many young people remain unmarried for longer, which again leads to an increased demand for housing. As for the owner-occupied sector, the price of houses is very high. It costs about £250,000 for an average size semi-detached house. Although statistics show the borough to be below the London average, the overall average disguises the real position.

The local authority housing stock is significantly smaller as a result of the right-to-buy scheme. Housing association stock is scarce because few associations in London have been able to move to the outer boroughs to expand their housing provision. Housing in the rented sector is scarce, too. Most owner-occupied housing is not available for rent. All that has led to a significant housing problem. The number of households on the housing register is 1,511 and the number on the transfer waiting list is 1,243. In the local authority sector, the average waiting time for a transfer to a three to four-bedroomed house is 38 months and for a two-bedroomed house, it is 32 months, so we can understand how such a problem impinges on those who require housing in the area.

What does the present position mean? Many families now live in cramped conditions It is common for a family living in a two or three-bedroomed house to find that alternative accommodation is not available in the local authority sector, the housing association sector or the private sector. Often, when people get married and/or have children, they cannot find accommodation and have to live with their parents in crowded conditions. About 60 per cent. of my advice surgery cases are about housing. My constituents tell me horror stories about the conditions in which they are forced to live. Such living conditions result in health problems, dissatisfaction, disenchantment, social exclusion, family

[Mr. Keith Darvill]

breakdown and, in some cases, crime. They lead to significant social costs, such as costs to the health service, social services, police services and the legal aid budget. Such knock-on effects lead to investment in failure rather than success.

We must bear in mind the effect on public services. During the past fortnight, two head teachers have written to me complaining about their inability to attract teachers to the area because appropriate housing is not available, as a result of which they cannot provide the school curriculum that they want to provide. The Metropolitan police service has a similar problem. Frequently, after a few months new recruits move out to other parts of the country where housing is less expensive. How can the problem be resolved? I support my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North, who said that there was a need for urgent intervention. Local authorities and other agencies should work with the private sector to identify brownfield sites. We need a programme to drive that along.

In the public sector, we must ensure that there is a programme working with housing associations to reduce the number of people waiting for accommodation. If the local community can see a reduction in the numbers on the waiting list, it will be confident that the problem is being tackled. At the moment, the opposite is happening, and lists and numbers are increasing. We must deal urgently with those serious problems.

There is a programme in east London for the regeneration of docklands and the Thames gateway. That will attract jobs to the area, but the lack of affordable private sector housing will have a detrimental effect on the regeneration programme. Employers will not be attracted to the area if the opportunities to create employment are reduced because the work force cannot find housing. Education is fundamental, as is the crime reduction programme. We all endorse such programmes and wish them success, but if we do not deal with the housing problem, they will be put in jeopardy.

11.46 am

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I, too, would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) for securing the debate. Housing is one of the most important and least discussed issues in the House, which remains a scandal when we consider the situation that faces many Londoners, including many of my constituents.

I would like to echo everything that has been said about the need to tackle homelessness in London. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), needs little reminding about many of the issues that we have raised. Good work is being done. The rough sleepers initiative is a fantastic start, and I am confident that, with extra resources and Louise Casey in charge, the targets for reducing homelessness will be met.

The problem that affects my constituents and other Londoners most acutely is invisible homelessness. In Tower Hamlets, there are almost 17,000 households on council waiting lists, 12,000 of which are in my constituency. In the past three years, I have met almost 1,000 families that live in overcrowded, substandard housing, and hundreds that live in homes that are damp and in much need of repair. There are so many stories of personal tragedy that I cannot compress them into a few minutes. When I come out of my surgery, I sometimes feel as though I need counselling, and that I am suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. I cannot believe that there is so much human misery in 21st-century Britain, and I wonder whether British people—not to mention colleagues in parts of the country that do not face the crisis—realise what is happening.

Two weeks ago, a woman visited my surgery to explain that her entire family—her, her husband and her three daughters—lived in one room of a bedsit flat. Some people in my constituency live with six people to a room. There is a family of 13 in two bedrooms. A 19-year-old woman came to see me who had lived in the same bedroom as her father for her entire life. That should be unacceptable and unnatural to Parliament, the Government and the country. It is a Dickensian life style. Moreover, poor housing obviously worsens health problems, creates family tensions, prevents children from doing well at school and reduces their chance of finding and retaining fulfilling employment. Not since the aftermath of the second world war have a Government poured the necessary resources into low-cost affordable housing. Instead, social housing has been provided on the cheap, and the social costs have been reaped later.

In my constituency, the new deal for communities has recognised many of the entangled problems of housing. I pay tribute to the Government for having introduced that programme, because it is truly radical. It empowers the community to say what it wants and gives it some control over housing, which traditionally only middle-class people have had. Working-class people have, on the whole, not had such control or empowerment. In addition, it tackles the problem holistically, which has not been done before. The programme is truly wonderful, but it is truly not enough. It affects only a small number of my constituents, and we have not been able to roll it out or to use the principles that it embodies in other areas.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) said, the cost of housing in London has spiralled out of control. I am worried, having witnessed it in my own constituency, that soon London will contain only the very rich and the very poor, and no one in between. That is especially clear from the experience of my constituency, as the City is pushing eastwards almost hourly. Local people and key workers are being pushed out. A nurse on £20,000 a year—a good wage, one would think—has absolutely no chance of buying a flat in my constituency. The same goes for other professions such as teachers and policemen, which goes a long way towards explaining the difficulties in attracting, and, more importantly, retaining staff in vital public services in London.

I am pleased that the Government have promised £35 million to build new homes and refurbish and repair existing properties in Tower Hamlets over the next year. It would be churlish not to acknowledge that that is three times the funding that the previous

Administration provided, and means that the Government have invested an additional £40 million in housing in the borough in just three years.

That money will help to ensure that urgent repairs and improvements to council properties are completed, and that some families living in overcrowded conditions are rehoused. It is more money than we have received from any Government in recent memory, but it is not enough. We need year-on-year increases in the housing investment programme for local authorities in London. That programme should ensure that teenage boys and girls do not have to share bedrooms with each other or with their parents, that people with disabilities are not stuck on the top floor of a block without a lift, and that people born and bred in the east end do not have to leave. We fail to give people hope if we do not tackle overcrowding and squalid conditions, which is the moral argument, and we fail economically if we cannot provide people in inner London with a home fit to raise a family, which is the economic argument.

Social housing must be not only decent but affordable. Council rents in Tower Hamlets have in the past compared favourably with those in other-London boroughs and housing associations. The decision to keep rents low was right at the time and helped keep many residents out of the poverty trap. Unfortunately, however, residents are paying the price for that now. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister recognises that a rent rise of 25 per cent. in just two years is not sustainable. I also hope that he will act on my public plea and ask his colleagues in the Treasury to grant Tower Hamlets an exemption from the rent rebate subsidy limitation regulations. If that is not granted, all the Government's excellent initiatives in Tower Hamlets will be negated by the huge rent rise.

I also hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take account of the concerns about the Court of Appeal's decision to block the Government's plans to protect sitting tenants who are paying registered fair rents from high rent increases. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions was refused leave to appeal to the House of Lords, but the Government plan to petition the Lords to reopen the case. I am sure that my hon. Friend knows that every London Labour MP backs the Secretary of State in that petition. If it were rejected, my hon. Friend would have the support of every hon. Member to introduce primary legislation that would reverse the effect of the judgment and restore the limits on registered fair rent increases set in the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rents) Order 1999.

In conclusion, I should like to put the importance of housing in perspective. The case that I mentioned earlier, of the woman who came to my surgery, never leaves my mind. Her four-month-old baby had died and the doctor's notes said that it was due to the housing. It is a matter of life and death, and there is no greater social exclusion than death. Given the Government's commitment to tackling social exclusion and addressing child poverty within the next 20 years, I hope that they recognise that that can be done only if the housing crisis is tackled. Tower Hamlets is not in a position to make good the historical underfunding and poor-quality housing in the east end. To my deep regret, it is not hyperbole to say that children are dying because of housing conditions. Will my hon. Friend undertake to inject the necessary urgency into the debate and give housing what it requires—money?

11.57 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing this key debate. I should like to consider several questions: whether there is a housing shortage—that is an easy one to answer—what the impact of the shortage is; where and how the housing should be built and who should be allowed to build it; what other measures will help the shortage; and finally, if time allows, what role the mayor and the Greater London Assembly will have in regard to housing.

On my first question, there is no doubt that there is a shortage of housing. Many hon. Members have cited evidence of a shortage: surgery cases, the actions that local authorities have to take—my own has had to call a halt to transfers—and soaring house prices. According to an estate agent in Kew, there are some nice starter homes in Kew costing £400,000. I am not sure who can afford starter homes at that price, but it is certainly not nurses or policemen—perhaps it is people in internet start-up companies. There are also the predictions. It is said that another 3.8 million homes will need to be built by 2021. There is clearly a shortage.

What is the impact of the shortage? We are witnessing a boom and bust in house prices. The hon. Member for Edmonton referred to a 23 per cent. increase in house prices. Overcrowding and homelessness are problems both on the streets and in some accommodation, where people are sometimes forced to stay for longer than they would like because they cannot afford to buy a local house. There is also the clear impact on public services and on public-sector workers to which other hon. Members have referred. The best example that I can think of is a school that tried to purchase a nearby house that became vacant. Unfortunately, it was unsuccessful, but it had wanted to provide cheap, rented accommodation for young teachers who could not afford to live in the area. Does the Minister accept that the Government need to consider London weighting and decide on action to make living in London more affordable for key workers?

There is broad agreement that housing should be built on brownfield sites, which is exactly what is happening in London. Clearer guidance on cleaning up contaminated land will be needed, and it becomes more important as the easier brownfield sites are used up, leaving heavily contaminated sites that require clear rules to be brought into use. A subsidy such as the greenfield development levy could be used to cross-subsidise the cost of decontaminating such sites to bring them into use. I understand that the Deputy Prime Minister may be considering that proposal, and I hope that the Minister will comment on it.

The problem can also be addressed by bringing into use unoccupied properties located above shops, but that will require much greater co-operation between a raft of organisations. A couple of weeks ago, I visited a site in my constituency where clearly the housing trust, a number of retailers—including a large retailer, Lidl—and others, such as the freeholder, should get together to improve security and to make what were fairly pleasant flats much safer for residents having problems with people breaking in at the back of the property.

The next question is: how should new housing be built? If there is a positive side to the requirement for

[Mr. Tom Brake]

large numbers of homes to be built in London—Shelter cites a figure of 600,000—it is the opportunity to do something about sustainability. Properties can be built using tighter building regulations, improved insulation standards and greater energy efficiency, and can be placed closer to transport links as part of the sustainable integrated transport policy. Why are developers still allowed to build retail premises close to high street locations with good transport links—the areas where young people want to live—with no flats above them? Why is that empty space left, when it could better used?

Who should be allowed to build the homes? All the organisations currently building them should be allowed to continue, whether as registered social landlords or private developers, but local authorities should also be allowed to build. I cannot understand why the Government have inherited the previous Administration's reluctance to let local authorities build. As the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) said, at least people are able to get rid of local authorities when they do not like what they are doing on housing—an option that is not open with some of the other providers. Why cannot local authorities borrow to invest in housing stock?

What measures could help this dire situation? First, we could consider introducing tougher penalties for private developers on small sites who adopt a build-and-run philosophy. Such developers quickly build a development and go, as Nova homes has done in my constituency. They run away and leave the new occupiers with properties that are on unfinished roads, without streetlights or adequate landscaping. Government support is needed to ensure that developments are of an acceptable standard. In addition, there should be more part-rent, part-buy schemes for people who are entering the market for the first time or who are in difficulties and want to reduce their mortgage payments by switching to a part-rent scheme until their financial situation improves.

The mayor and the GLA have a positive role to play in housing. That needs to be highlighted because the mayoral debate has focused on personalities rather than policies, which is a scandal. It puts Londoners off what should be an exciting initiative. Instead, the wheeling and dealing, the fixing and fudging, have devalued the mayor's currency. There is an opportunity for the mayor and the GLA to get the different parties together and to use the spatial development strategy and the mayor's facilitating role. They could identify the housing need in London, which local authorities may be a little scared of doing. But when a local authority has played its part and delivered on its housing figure, the mayor should not impose an excessive quota so that the local authority has to make up the shortfall if other local authorities have not played their part.

There is clearly a shortage of housing in London. Everyone knows that. It has a massive impact on the ability of local authorities to house the homeless and asylum seekers, and to tackle overcrowding. There is broad agreement on where housing should be built. We have an opportunity to do something about the sustainable nature of homes. There is, of course, controversy over who should build them, but simple measures can assist us in dealing with that problem and help to tackle the housing shortage. However, the Minister must answer the outstanding question of whether the Government have the political will to solve the housing crisis which, according to the Association of London Government, is the worst ever. If the Minister does not make that commitment clear, I hope that it will be given in the housing Green Paper. I look forward to the Government providing the financial means to prevent the housing crisis from turning into a housing catastrophe.

12.7 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on securing the debate and the excellent way in which he made his case. Given his experience with the all-party group on homelessness and housing need, he is well informed about the subject. As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) said, the subject is important. It does not get aired enough in the House of Commons. The hon. Lady in particular knows some of the desperate problems that many of her constituents face in inner London.

London is not simply a microcosm of the housing problems that people face throughout the country. As the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) said, it also has specific problems, not least because of its high property prices and the high living costs that go with them. It is a tale of two cities—of three quarters and a quarter, as he non-metrically put it. Bearing in mind the Government's key pledge that everyone will have the chance to live in a decent home, it is interesting to note that the contributions that have been made, especially by Labour Members, highlighted the problems but contained little praise for the Government's achievements, with the exception of the rough sleepers initiative and the limited new deal projects in Bethnal Green and Bow. As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, it is truly not enough.

When on earth will the long-awaited Green Paper on housing be published? There is a housing crisis in London. About 184,000 households are on waiting lists and the number of households in temporary accommodation has doubled. As the hon. Member for Edmonton said, the number of people living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation has doubled in the past two years to about 6,500.

The Association of London Government estimates that the number of temporary accommodation households will have risen to at least 51,000 by 2002. That will be a record. Temporary accommodation causes enormous disruption to families and to the communities in which they live and from which they are being pushed; it disrupts schooling, especially of children with special needs, and employment. That has a knock-on effect on the rest of the country, because many of those families are pushed out to resorts on the south coast, such as Worthing in my constituency.

Another subject that has not yet been raised is the fact that about 19,000 destitute asylum seekers, including families with children, are housed by London social services departments in temporary accommodation. That puts enormous pressure on temporary accommodation. Shelter estimates that about 40,000 households are officially recognised as homeless by the

London authorities; that figure probably represents more than 100,000 people. Another factor is that about 56 per cent. of those people are estimated to be from ethnic minorities. It is thought that that problem is felt disproportionately by those from ethnic minorities, not least those living in the constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow.

I have not mentioned the problem of rough sleepers. Despite the initiatives undertaken by the previous Government, particularly the rough sleepers initiative started in the early 1990s my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), more than 400 people still sleep rough on the streets of London every night. I would like to see more being done to help with the medical problems that many of those people suffer. I also want greater preventive measures to be taken to stop the break-up of families, which leads to young people, particularly those younger than 16, leaving home and living rough. The problem will not be solved by the appointment of a £90,000-a-year street czar whose opening gambit was to say that we need to destroy the culture of kindness—whatever that may mean.

Hon. Members have spoken of problems in the private market. We are experiencing a housing boom, and there is every chance that it will lead to a housing bust. The Chancellor would be prudent not to allow that; he often speaks about prudence and wanting to get away from the boom-and-bust mentality with which he so easily labels the previous Government.

There are many two-bedroomed flats; for example, I saw some in Hampstead advertised at the weekend starting at £400,000. There is a chronic shortage of affordable housing. None of us would deny that. The north-south divide causes enormous problems, with the great prices of London property being set against the much lower prices of the north-east and north-west of England. According to the Council of Mortgage Lenders, the number of repossessions is starting to creep up again.

There is a shortage of affordable private rented accommodation; that part of the market represents only 10 per cent. of all housing. We need to encourage the expansion of private rented accommodation, not merely put extra regulatory burdens on that sector. One problem is that lenders do not treat private rented landlords as favourably as they treat social housing landlords and other publicly backed agencies when it comes to raising capital. That is a barrier to more money being made available to that sector.

Other hon. Members have touched on the fact that we need not only more homes but homes that are inhabitable and that do not suffer from fuel poverty, as many do. I am sure that many hon. Members will support the reasoning behind the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, which we shall soon consider.

So far, the Government response has been a lot of promises, reports and hot air. A study of the DETR annual report clearly shows a significant reduction in the total public expenditure on housing. The capital spend through the Housing Corporation has dropped from more than £1 billion in 1996–97 to a projected £686 million in 2001–02, and the revenue spend has been considerably reduced. The Government have reduced the social housing building programme for the coming year by more than 25 per cent., which equates to 8,000 homes that will not be built. When does the Minister expect Government spending on housing to return to that of 1993–94, under the previous Government?

The subject of council house rents has been raised in the press recently. We are promised words soon from the Deputy Prime Minister on the possible equalisation of council and private sector rents. In somewhere such as Westminster, council rents—currently about £50 or £60 per week—would rise to £200 a week. That sounds like a crude approach that would result only in ghettoisation, with poorer people forced into cheaper rundown areas outside central London and some of the boroughs that have already been mentioned. I hope that it is not the crude attempt that it was portrayed as in the newspapers. If it is, the Government will succeed only in creating even greater housing apartheid.

Much work is going on. Let us not forget that the housing associations were a success story of the previous Government, bringing far more private and voluntary sector money into housing and freeing up local authority resources to concentrate on other priorities. Let us not forget the great success story of large-scale voluntary transfers; they were initially opposed, but more than 100 local authorities have now taken them up. The Alliance of Councils for Successful Stock Transfer was formed at the LGA conference last July to promote greater use of such transfers. Let us not forget the previous Government's imaginative rent a room proposals, and the estates challenge money.

We want to see a more imaginative and more radical approach, to bring precious resources into housing. We want to see a ladder approach to the provision of housing, with the homeless on the lower rungs given maximum mobility, and with private home owners on top. The Government and local authorities should work together to provide the encouragement and incentives to people to move up from rung to rung. Too many people are caught in a trap of declining public housing, often on hostile estates, lacking the resources to move out or up. Tenants are less likely to move out of social housing if other options become more expensive. The problem is being exacerbated. One wonders if that is why the Labour candidate for mayor of London currently occupies a council property in inner London.

We must see clear rewards and incentives for good public tenants who look after their homes and who do their bit for the community. There is precious little incentivisation at the moment. We must see greater encouragement for councils to improve turnaround times for unoccupied housing, with schemes to allow worse dwellings to be renovated by willing tenants with grant help, who could then qualify for a share in the house. We need much more imagination regarding flexible tenure, allowing young people especially to get their foot on the rung through accumulating greater shared ownership in houses. Schemes such as "do it yourself shared ownership" worked well. The Government must do more, and much can be achieved through imaginative community-based solutions, but they need to be sustainable and long term. Above all, we need a holistic approach, especially on homelessness.

I shall end with a handful of questions for the Minister, to which, given the shortage of time, he might like to reply in writing. When shall we see the housing Green Paper? What plans does he have to produce a

[Mr. Tim Loughton]

register of brownfield sites, especially in London when—or if—we see spending on new housing match the rhetoric and achieve the 1993–94 levels, so that we might not go for the soft option of new build on greenfield sites? When will the Government give details of the replacement for the estates renewal challenge fund, which is due to end next year? Will it involve real new, rather than recycled old, money? What practical proposals does the Minister have to promote affordable housing, and what definition of affordability would he use in the social rented sector? What is he doing to stop young homelessness at source, and to promote the maintenance of family home environments?

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) touched on the role of the new mayor and the GLA in tackling housing problems. What priorities have been set for them, and what will be the role of the mayor's spatial development strategy in promoting the development of affordable housing? Finally, why have lenders to the social housing sector been told that no decisions are being taken on London housing until after the mayoral elections, and that the Government office for London is simply minding the shop at the moment, and not making any operational decisions, while we all suffer the crisis that we have heard so much about today?

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) for initiating this important debate on a subject that I know is dear to the heart of every London Member. I appreciate that many of my hon. Friends have been up all night. It obviously takes more than an all-night sitting to deter my hon. Friends from representing their constituents as forcefully as they have done today.

The debate is the second that we have had in the past month or so on this important issue. As has been pointed out, the subject will not go away. I fully expect to be back here discussing the same issues in years to come. The problems are large and there are no overnight solutions.

I lived in inner London for many years until 1985, when I moved north and, of course, I am here three or four days a week. I therefore have first-hand experience of the problems described by hon. Members. In particular, there has been mention of the stark contrasts—as if between two different planets—affecting people who live cheek by jowl in different parts, or even different streets, of London. Where I come from, in the north, we have a different problem—a surplus of property. However, before any hon. Members cast envious eyes, I remind them that that brings its own social problems, which I do not wish on them when they have enough of their own.

It takes some restraint to reply in a dignified manner to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton). I do not recognise the figures that he read out—or rather, I think I do, but he gave a clever interpretation. He asked when we would return to the spending levels of 1993–94, but wisely missed out the years in between. Under the previous Government, there was a year-on-year decrease in housing investment in London. Indeed, 1993–94 was a good year, by the standards of what followed. Much of the decline and many of the stark contrasts about which we have heard today—although not all, of course, since they would be a problem in the capital whoever was in government—came about on the hon. Gentleman's watch, or at least while his party was in control. There were year-on-year cuts in public housing throughout the country, but particularly in London, in that time. I am pleased to report that spending in the next financial year will be substantially up on even 1993–94, let alone 1997–98. It was then less than half what it will be in the next financial year. I do not think that we shall take any lessons from the previous Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton talked about moderating rent levels. I think it unlikely that we shall intervene in private sector rents, if that is what he was suggesting. We are laying down clear guide rules on rents where transfers occur—about which there is, I realise, concern—to make sure that excessive rent increases do not result.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) mentioned the difficulties with housing benefit administration, which apply not only to private companies but to some local authorities. That is a serious problem. We are promoting best value, and inspections of the delivery of services will be carried out in the hope that local government services can be improved across the board, but especially in relation to the administration of housing benefit. My hon. Friend asked about a level playing field for estate transfers. I acknowledge the importance of that and understand that it will be discussed by Housing Ministers.

I am grateful to my hon. Friends for acknowledging the efforts that have already been made. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham would do well to study them. The hon. Gentleman asked about the Green Paper—that is coming shortly, as we say in government. He also mentioned the problem of asylum seekers. London's problems, severe though they are, have been exacerbated by the large numbers of asylum seekers. One of the things that the Government have done to reduce the problem is to initiate a programme of dispersal around the country. Indeed, in Sunderland, where previously there were none, we are now accommodating asylum seekers in some of our surplus properties because we recognise that it is a national problem and should not be confined to the areas where those people happen to come ashore.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) asked about the rent subsidy limitation for Tower Hamlets. If she will forgive me, I shall write to her on that matter. I was asked many questions and I am unable to answer them all in the short time available to me. However, I want to make one general point. There is a huge imbalance in this country, as there is in other countries, between the capital city and other areas. Inevitably, there is a population drift in the direction of the capital city, and a policy of predicting and providing will not work in relation to housing any more than it works with roads. We can pour in extra resources, and we will do that. I acknowledge the bald point that has been made by many hon. Members, especially about creating affordable housing in London. However, we

should not imagine that simply pouring in resources, without asking sufficient questions about how those resources are spent, would solve the problem. Having lived in inner London for a long time, I know that many of the resources that were made available to deal with the problem were badly misspent, but that has considerably improved in recent years.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: Forgive me, but I have only three minutes left.

The Government must implement a regional policy to moderate the reasons why people tend to drift towards London. Of course, one of the main reasons is for work, so we must create jobs and sustainable life in all parts of the country because that is one of the ways in which we can reduce the enormous pressure on London.

I want to say a few words about the increase in housing investment that we have made in the three years since we came to power. We have reversed the decline in housing investment presided over by the previous Administration and initiated a massive investment programme to improve both the quantity and quality of social housing in London. Allocations for housing investment by local authorities and registered social landlords in London between 1997–98 and 2001–02 will total about £3.8 billion, of which about £1.3 billion will come from additional resources made available by the Government. London boroughs have received £400 million of those additional resources so far. That represents almost 30 per cent. of the national total of extra resources and reflects the high level of deprivation to which my hon. Friends have referred. I believe that Edmonton received a 36 per cent. increase this year.

We have increased the resources made available to London through the housing investment programme. The 2000–01 settlement comprises a £613 million package, which represents a 54 per cent. increase on the resources provided in the previous financial year. The package also brings together several previously separate capital programmes into a single housing "pot", giving London boroughs greater flexibility in deciding their spending priorities. I am confident that authorities will take full advantage of that new freedom to strike the right local balance between investing in repair and renovation of their own housing stock, and encouraging the provision of new units of affordable accommodation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Time is up.

Carers (Barnsley)

12.30 pm

Mr. Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): I am delighted to draw attention to the report that was published recently by Barnsley council's social affairs and health scrutiny commission, entitled "Care for Carers". That commission is chaired by my good friend, Councillor Len Picken, who is a carer himself. The report identifies many of the problems associated with carers that the Government must tackle. Last year, the Government produced a comprehensive and worthy report, entitled "Caring about Carers", a copy of which I have in front of me. It identified some of the problems, many of which the Government are addressing.

To set the scrutiny commission's report in context, it is important to remind hon. Members of some of the characteristics of my Barnsley constituency, which is in South Yorkshire. It is one of the most socially and economically deprived constituencies in the United Kingdom. One in three households has at least one disabled person—a legacy of the former mining industry. It is not surprising that South Yorkshire was recently granted objective 1 status by the European Union, given that, according to a recent estimate, the gross domestic product per capita is approximately 62 per cent. of the European average.

The former pit villages that make up the vast majority of my constituency are renowned for their close-knit community spirit. That is exemplified by the number of carers who provide help and support that might not otherwise be available. However, there are several reasons why it is not always possible to be precise about the number of carers. Many of those who carry out caring tasks do not see themselves as carers, and would not wish to be referred to as such. They see their role as one that any family member would fulfil for a sick or disabled relative.

Despite such difficulties, it is to some extent possible to quantify the number of carers. There are some 5.7 million carers in the United Kingdom who look after people who are frail, ill, disabled or unable to cope. In other words, almost one in eight people is a carer. Of those, some 1.7 million devote at least 20 hours a week to caring. Currently, three fifths of all carers receive no regular visitor support services. In Barnsley, there may be as many as 26,591 people acting as carers, 7,091 of whom devote more than 20 hours per week to the task. That estimate contrasts sharply with the carers' register, which is compiled by the carers' advice line. Despite a major effort to contact carers, only 2,500 are registered in Barnsley. More than 110,000 registration forms were sent out recently, but only 1,000 were returned.

The Government are keen to improve the information that they hold on carers, and intend to trial a new question for use in the 2001 census. It will focus on the provision of personal care and inquire about the number of hours of care provided per week. I fully support this initiative to identify the carer situation more accurately.

The difficulty of being sure about the number of adult carers pales into insignificance when compared with the difficulty of obtaining accurate information about the number of young carers. It has been estimated that in the United Kingdom there are some 51,000 young carers. Best estimates suggest that in Barnsley, 90 year 7

[Mr. Jeff Ennis]

pupils care for a younger child every day or most days, 58 year 7 pupils care for an older relative every day or most days, 104 year 10 pupils care for a younger child every day or most days and 32 year 10 pupils care for an older relative every day or most days.

The impact of being a young carer can be severe. A recent national survey showed that many young carers suffer from depression, social problems and physical difficulties. It also showed that 70 per cent. of former young carers suffer long-term psychological effects, 28 per cent. have suffered health problems such as bad backs as a direct consequence of lifting the person for whom they are caring and 70 per cent. felt that their education had been affected, leading to poor exam results.

As many as 71 per cent. of young carers have been bullied because other children think that they are odd, 51 per cent. have been physically hit or grabbed, 79 per cent. have been called names and 20 per cent. have missed school as a result of being bullied. Most worrying is the fact that 33 per cent. of young carers have not seen their teachers about tackling the bullying.

When the commission took evidence relating to young carers it found that it was extremely difficult to establish the number. Hon. Members welcomed the new project being undertaken in partnership with education services to identify young carers and find ways to build up relationships to support them. As a result of that evidence, the director of education in Barnsley has been asked to liaise with all schools to raise the profile of young carers and highlight the social, psychological and educational consequences of being carers. He has also been asked to encourage all schools to incorporate specific references to young carers in their anti-bullying policies.

A common theme that emerged from the evidence-gathering session with carers' representatives was the difficulty of gaining access to the right information and support at the right time and in the right manner. A number of witnesses highlighted the need for a single point of entry to services and information. Any review of information requirements should include a feasibility study into the establishment of a carers' centre in Barnsley.

I am sure that the Government are fully committed to the principle of establishing carers' centres, particularly with the assistance of the voluntary sector and where carers are involved in the management. Carers' centres not only provide information, advice and support mechanisms but can also act as one-stop shops and help to give carers a break from their caring responsibilities.

The commission also heard evidence from witnesses who felt that existing support to carers was too focused on office hours. Many informal carers provide care 24 hours a day every day of the year. They may need support and information outside normal office hours. If they cannot get such help, they may feel let down or even scared. The focus of services in Barnsley should therefore be reviewed to assess support and information options outside normal office hours.

I know that the Government intend carers to access support and information on a 24-hour basis via the new NHS Direct telephone service, which has been available in South Yorkshire since last December. The new NHS Direct service has been well received by my constituents, and is much appreciated. However, the Government need to monitor closely the future take-up of the service by carers, especially in out-of-office hours. I hope that NHS Direct will introduce mechanisms to achieve such close monitoring and scrutiny. If NHS Direct does not have the desired effect, serious consideration should be given to establising a 24-hour national carers' helpline, perhaps in collaboration with the voluntary sector. The Government already fund a helpline run by the Carers National Association, which operates during normal office hours.

It was clear from evidence given to the commission that carers are beginning to feel involved and that their concerns are being heard. In written evidence submitted by the Alzheimer's Society, concerns were expressed about the limited number of carers attending meetings of carers' forums. Those forums appear mainly to be attracting carers' representatives. Although I do not want to detract from that important work, such concerns raise questions about how representative the forums are, and whether the council is receiving the full range of carers' opinions. There was a feeling that social services should review, in partnership with carers and carers' organisations, the way in which carers are involved and consulted. The commission made a number of positive suggestions on the issue, including giving consideration to agreeing and establishing carers compacts, which would clearly set out the relationships between carers, carers' organisations, council officers and elected members. Like tenant compacts, they should be seen as a way of increasing local democracy and strengthening and sustaining local communities.

The scrutiny commission strongly believes that communication is one of the main underlying issues. A training programe for front-line staff, which is drawn up in conjunction with and attended by carers and carers groups, would go a long way towwards resolving such issues. Witnesses who gave evidence to the commission felt that the conditions of many carers and those for whom they care could be improved by providing a greater amount of training for the carer. Although it is recognised that formal carers, whether paid or voluntary, require training in many areas such as lifting, handling and moving, as well as the use of specialist equipment, often the same level of training is not often provided to the informal carer. The consequences of a lack of adequate training can be health problems for the carer, and may eventually lead to the need for more expensive support services. The commission feels that it is important and sensible to review the level of training given, especially to informal carers.

The Government's strategy for carers comprises three key approaches, which tie in closely with many of the recommendations made by the scrutiny commission. First, carers should receive improved information so that they can become real partners in the provision of care, and access wider and better sources of information about the help and services available. Secondly, support should be given to carers by the communities in which they live, in terms of the planning and provision of services used by carers, and those used by the people for whom they care. Policies should be developed in the workplace to assist in combining employment with caring. The Government are already taking action on

family friendly employment by offering employees unpaid leave for family emergencies, which is a step in the right direction. Thirdly, carers should be able to make real choices about the way in which they run their lives, so that they can maintain their own health and exercise independence and so that their role can be more fully recognised by policy makers and the statutory services. I commend Barnsley council's scrutiny commission report on caring for carers to the Minister for his consideration.

I congratulate Barnsley metropolitan borough council on being one of the first councils in the country, about a year ago, to modernise its structure to the new Cabinet-style model of local government, which the Government are trying to promote nationally. The scrutiny commission's report on carers highlights one of the many benefits to be gained by local councils in modernising for the benefit of the local council tax payer.

In conclusion, I believe that the Government recognise and support the major role that carers play in our society. In future, all organisations that are involved with caring must focus on not only the person being cared for, but the carer.

12.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) on choosing this subject for debate, and on his constructive and thoughtful comments. I am delighted that Barnsley council has responded so positively to the issues raised by the social services inspectorate's report "A Matter of Chance for Carers". I also welcome the fact that Barnsley's scrutiny commission has sought directly to involve carers in discussing current service provision and the best ways to develop services in future. Those are positive developments.

Such a framework is exactly what a best value authority should be developing in planning carer services. It is also exactly the kind of process that is encouraged by the national carers strategy, which stressed that such consultation with carers should form an integral part of each local authority's strategy for spending their carers special grant. The good news for carers in Barnsley is that the carers special grant for 2000–01 will be £234,000, which is more than double the amount of last year's grant. That new money for Barnsley will be spent on providing respite breaks for carers, which is a crucial service that carers value highly.

Another piece of good news for Barnsley is that it has been successful in bidding for Invest to Save money. Invest to Save is a Treasury-led scheme to promote new projects that bring together two or more public service bodies to deliver services in an innovative and more efficient manner. At £550,000, Barnsley's was the fourth largest single allocation of money to a local authority this year, and, at £918,000 over two years, was the second largest single allocation to a local authority. The Barnsley scheme focuses on developing a single information system for health and social care, allowing for integrated services in mental health, learning disability, children's services, physical disability and elderly care. The result will be services that are more convenient for service users and their carers, and more effectively provided by integrated teams of national health service and local authority staff. That is excellent and positive news.

On a national level, the Government have taken several steps to address the "lottery of location" that was described in "A Matter of Chance for Carers". I do not have time this morning to explain what has been achieved in relation to all 78 commitments that the Government made in the national carers strategy. I will therefore confine myself to the issues that my hon. Friend raised and talk more widely about how we see matters developing in future.

Most importantly, I congratulate Barnsley council on its attempts to reach out to carers. Nationally, some 29 per cent. of heavily involved carers are receiving some form of social services help. Many carers do not approach services at all until they are in crisis. That underlines the importance of a good awareness-raising strategy based on better information for carers and a prevention strategy that helps carers to think ahead.

Some 40 per cent. of heavily involved carers change each year because of death, the change of the carer or admission to a residential care facility. In Barnsley, that would mean that about 2,800 carers each year may need a local authority assessment. Improving the quality of information about what carers want is therefore the key to making services responsive in the right way at the right time. That underpins the approach that has been taken in Barnsley.

It is for that reason that the Government have developed the referrals, assessments and packages of care project, known as RAP, to provide for the first time a coherent set of national statistics on adult community care. The first indications are that the number of assessments of carers—in terms of the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995—between 1 January and 31 March 1999 was approximately 60,000 for England. The second dress rehearsal of RAP is running from 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000. We are confident that it will yield a greatly improved level of response and that the impact of the national carers strategy will be to increase the number of carers' assessments undertaken by local authorities.

The new Carers and Disabled Children Bill will give carers new rights to assessments, even when a service user refuses one. This, and the new power for local authorities to provide carers with certain services in their own right, will give further prominence to carers' assessments. Alongside the additional resources for breaks, to which I have referred, and the greater awareness of carers through the national strategy, the Bill is also likely to increase the number of carers who come forward for assessment. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough will agree that those are positive developments.

The carers special grant to local authorities across England will provide £140 million over three years to help more carers to benefit from flexible breaks. Barnsley's carers plan for spending the special grant shows the effectiveness of this policy. Carers have been consulted at all stages of the development of the plan. They want the traditional services to continue; they also want greater flexibility and simpler access to breaks, hence Barnsley's new voucher scheme to maximise carers' choices. That is an excellent innovation. Those

[Mr. John Hutton]

are just the kind of flexible schemes that local authorities should be developing. The new Carers and Disabled Children Bill—sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry)—will give local authorities additional powers to develop schemes that allow carers and service users to have a choice between providers, as well as flexibility in relation to the timing and type of breaks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough spoke eloquently about the problems faced by young carers in Barnsley. The Government also want to ensure that young carers, like all children, have an education and enjoy good health and leisure time. Barnsley is right to focus on schools as the places in which to address the problems of young carers. The social inclusion pupil support guidance on pupil attendance published by the Department for Education and Employment in July 1999 included, for the first time, guidance on supporting young carers. It also suggests ways of linking to social services and local voluntary organisations.

In addition, learning mentors are being piloted through the excellence in cities initiative in six areas, to provide one-to-one support for children with problems at school, including young carers, and to help them to access external support. The Department of Health is also fully involved with proposals in the new youth support service, which will aim to provide a single point of contact for young people to get advice on social services, benefits, housing, careers and so on, and to put them in contact with relevant profesionals such as health and social workers.

Under the national healthy school standard, which is part of the healthy schools programme—a joint initiative by the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health—there are criteria against which school achievements will be assessed. One of those will be that pupils' views should be reflected in school activities, including pupils with special educational needs and health conditions, as well as disaffected pupils, young carers and teenage parents.

The Government are also committed to ensuring that local authorities recognise the need to sustain and enhance the number of young carers' projects. From the second year of the carers special grant, local authorities will be able to spend allocations on both adult and children's services. That will enable them to help carers of all ages and to fund projects focused on young carers' needs. I hope that young carers in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough will be able to benefit from that.

The Government intend to strengthen children's services planning by making it a corporate responsibility of local authorities and the Department of Health. Plans will be required to demonstrate coherence across all relevant local plans and to address national and local objectives. The quality protects programme relates to young carers and to the support of families caring for disabled children. Its contribution will be crucial.

Officials from the Department of Health will meet carers' and children's organisations later this month to discuss further support for young carers' projects nationally. Child and mental health services funding will also be provided with £90 million between 1999 and 2002, some of which will have an impact on young carers' access to counselling services. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough that, last year, £105,000 was made available to support service enhancements in Barnsley and a further £105,000 will be provided in the coming financial year.

My hon. Friend referred to the need for carers to receive information about local services. The Carers' helplines offer crucial advice and support. Carers National Association's helpline, which is funded through grants from the Department, deals with 10,000 calls a year. Local helplines, through carers' centres, also provide a range of emotional support and information. Furthermore, 24-hour access to help and advice is currently available from several different sources, including the Samaritans, which provides emotional support for carers. For information on the national health service and related services, there is NHS Direct, to which my hon. Friend referred. It receives 100,000 calls per month.

There is also NHS Direct on-line and the new carers' website, which is available 24 hours a day for those carers with access to such technology. NHS Direct could refer on to local provision by social services emergency teams and ambulance services, as appropriate; otherwise, most information needs can be met during office hours. In fact, the experience of 24-hour carers' helplines throughout England has revealed that little use has been made of them at night and they have, therefore, reverted to office hours or extended office hours. We shall review the whole issue most carefully in future.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for suggesting that NHS Direct might seek to record contacts from carers to ensure that they are using the service. I understand that there may be some room for manoeuvre in the future as NHS Direct develops. At present, however, although NHS Direct offers an excellent service to carers, the questioning of callers to ascertain their exact caring status may not always be possible. I agree with my hon. Friend that we must continue to explore innovative ways in which to involve carers in planning and developing their services. Carers' centres have an important role to play, but we must make use of new technology. Carers' satisfaction surveys will provide useful information in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of those services.

I could say much more about what the Government are doing to promote services for carers as I could about what is happening in Barnsley, but what is enormously encouraging is that there is a clear willingness in my hon. Friend's constituency to engage with carers' organisations and carers themselves to review the current range of services that are provided and to use in imaginative ways the new and additional resources that the Government are making available to support local authorities. That is a positive step forward and I congratulate the council, as I do my hon. Friend on the support that he provides to it.

My hon. Friend began his speech by drawing attention to the high levels of deprivation in his constituency and the implications that that has for those who care for people with disabilities. In areas such as Barnsley and in my constituency, too, which has a similar profile, it is incumbent on us in government, local authorities and the national health service to

continue to explore ways in which to develop services, to put carers at the forefront of our concerns and ensure that our services are responsive to their needs. With the continuing support of the Government and that of my hon. Friend, I am sure that, over the next few years, we shall make significant progress, put carers firmly on the map at the top of our list of priorities and improve services and the range of support.

Health Authority Appointments (Essex)

12.58 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): There is much that I could say about yesterday's domination of the media by the national health service. The position on appointments is an absolute sham and I am delighted to have the opportunity to share with the Minister my thoughts on how my constituents in Southend, West have been badly let down. What I am about to do, Mr. McWilliam, is something that I have never done in my 17 years in Parliament. It goes completely against the grain to have to name individuals and talk about such matters publicly. I am completely frustrated, so I have followed all the proper procedures, written letters and talked to individuals. All the relevant documents have been copied to Ministers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. If the hon. Gentleman wants to follow all the proper procedures, he had better start calling me Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Amess: I apologise. I checked with two individuals who gave me different advice before the debate started. I am sorry that I chose the wrong one.

I regret that I have to air the matter publicly, as we would not be in such a serious mess if representations had been listened to properly. I shall speak about a travesty in the health service. I have found complete abuse in relation to South Essex health authority, the appointments to the primary care trust and the merger of the Thameside and Southend trusts. What has been brought to my attention is appalling.

As the Member of Parliament for Southend, West, I was asked to give my views about two individuals who could have been appointed to the post of chairman of South Essex health authority. Other local Members of Parliament had the same choice. I knew one of the individuals, and I was passive in my response to the chairmanship. South Essex health authority has huge powers and responsibility, so the way in which it is managed is important.

My attention was drawn—not by Mrs. Rosie Varley, the regional chairman—to a report to the health authority and the eastern region of the national health service executive. It was prepared by Peter Brokenshire, the chairman of Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority, and I was flabbergasted to read it. The report was well distributed internally, but the chairman of the region and Ministers thought, for some reason, that local Members of Parliament had no need to see it. It clearly details an appalling set of circumstances. Relationships had completely broken down, to such an extent that the chief executive, the chairman of the health authority and a Labour councillor were not speaking to one another.

The Minister looks surprised, but the report contains evidence of a complete breakdown in relationships. People might say that I will quote selectively from the report, but I would be happy to quote it all if there were time. Mr. Brokenshire says that the achievements of the health authority are generally

> good, the control, governance and accountability processes that are in place seem sound, so I have had to ask myself, why the current tensions and adverse climate between some Executive and some Non Executive Directors exist.

[Mr. Amess]

The report suggests that there were tensions from day one between the board and some executive and non-executive directors, and that

> These tensions have escalated into a lack of trust and respect, because of the circumstances surrounding the deterioration of relationships between the Chairman ... and the Chief Executive,

so much so that the chairman said that she had lost confidence in him and wanted him removed.

When new structures are set up and a new chairman is appointed to work with an existing chief executive, a learning curve will be involved. That learning curve had a disastrous effect on staff morale. Ministers and the chairman of the regional authority knew about the problem but did not have the common courtesy to alert Members of Parliament, who continually expressed anxiety in Parliament about their local health service. It is a disgrace.

The lengthy report states:

> The Chief Executive considers that the Chairman does not understand the NHS and big organisation realities, raises expectations that cannot be met, gets involved in management issues and does not focus on the big picture.

It continues in that vein. The instigator of the report felt that the chairman's main charge against the chief executive was not as important as the chairman felt that it was.

The primary care group will become a primary care trust. I shall not bore the Chamber with my feelings about primary care groups and primary care trusts. I realise that the Under-Secretary was not in post when we considered the Health Bill in Committee last year, but I spoke at great length about how I feel about primary care groups and primary care trusts.

General practitioners in Southend were balloted, and the majority voted against becoming a primary care trust. In a letter from the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), to the chief executive of South Essex health authority, it is clear that the Minister is extremely worried that doctors have not been sufficiently involved in the process. I am sure that the Under-Secretary will have the letter. According to the letter, the Minister expects the primary care trust to demonstrate before 1 April 2000—a month's time—that all the problems have been corrected. That is utterly ridiculous.

The Government often consult us about such matters when no one is here, and we sometimes have only two weeks or 10 days, or are not consulted. I have categorical evidence that the Government have been central in controlling the end result. They make wonderful speeches and create wonderful photo opportunities while at the grassroots my constituents suffer.

Most doctors do not want a primary care trust. Interviews will be held tomorrow for the new chief executive of the primary care trust. I have read the recommendations for the interview procedure, which state that it would be preferable if a nurse were present, although it is not essential, but that at least one doctor should be present. However, it does not seem as though doctors will be involved in that appointment.

After 1 May 1997, Labour said, "We are in a new era now that we have got rid of the shocking Conservatives after 18 years. We know all about their political appointments, and we are not going to have any of it. Politics doesn't come into it." However, day in and day out, politics dominates all appointments in my constituency. I was presented with a choice of two people, both of whom are active members of the Labour party. I wrote to Mrs. Rosie Varley to explain why I did not consider either of them to be suitable. Knowing about Mr. Brokenshire's report, I said that it was extraordinary that one of the candidates had recently been the subject of a critical report.

It must have been difficult for Ministers in conversations with Mrs. Rosie Varley about how to deal with the chairman of South Essex health authority. Ministers think that Members of Parliament are so lazy and uninterested that they cannot understand what is going on. I made all that known. Before Christmas, I had a most unsatisfactory telephone conversation with the chairman of the region; she listened to all that I had said, but I have categoric evidence to show that it has all been ignored.

On primary care groups and primary care trusts, there has been no improvement in general practitioner support since the vote. Services are substantially worse since the primary care group was established. There are major waits for appointments, surgery and accident and emergency services. There have been severe cuts in community services—for example, one doctor who had 0.6 of a health service visitor now has none at all. There has been a loss of occupational therapists, hearing therapists, dieticians, and of practice-based community staff, who have lost motiviation due to their new cramped and unwelcoming premises. Waiting lists for physiotherapy and for magnetic resonance imaging scans have increased to 26 weeks. We all know that the Government are fudging the issue of waiting lists. It is a disgrace.

Because the wretched Government are obsessed with targets and with trying to kid the people—for the general election next year—that all that they promised has been delivered, everything is being rushed. Either they do not understand the issues—which I think is the case—or they are concerned only with their own political interests. How else can one justify the problems that I have detailed? Morale is very low. The cardiologist at Southend, for example, has funding for only four NHS coronary angiographies a week. The number required is 10 times that, so several people on the list are dying. This scandal goes on and on.

I also wish to draw the Minister's attention to the merger of Thameside and Southend community NHS trust. Members of Parliament were, of course, consulted on that, but if they were Conservative Members, the consultation was a sham. Last year we were invited to talk about the trust and views were expressed that, although there was well-judged support for the merger, it should not be done in such a way as to constitute a takeover of Southend. That was said all along—yet an absolute takeover has occurred. Again, that is an absolute disgrace.

What angers me so much is the disgraceful handling of the appointments. We had a superb chairman of Thameside, Mr. John Vesey, but because the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancreas (Mr. Dobson)—who now wants to be mayor of London—instigated whistleblowing, when allegations concerning the chief executive of the trust

were reported to Mr. Vesey, an investigation followed. A constituent of mine was one of the informants. What happened? The two people who had done what the Secretary of State wanted and became whistleblowers—my constituent and the chairman—were removed. I have reports and papers on it. The person about whom the complaints were made, the chief executive, not only stayed in post but has now been appointed the chief executive of the new combined trust. That is another disgrace.

I have before me the lengthy audit report concerning allegations about a property, 87c Grand parade, being used as an office at considerable public expense, a trip to Paris and taxi expenses. I also have all the evidence on sloppy structures. The Government know all about that, but because it does not fit their agenda, they have reappointed the chief executive.

The appointment procedure was a fiasco. The job was advertised at short notice while people were away; someone who would have been an excellent candidate was told that it was not worth applying because it was a more-or-less foregone conclusion that the existing chief executive would get the job. That hypocrisy will affect my constituents.

When it came to appointing the chairman of the new combined trust, no one was consulted. It was the usual two-week period of consultation. The choice was between two people, one from Thurrock and the other from Southend. I said that, because Thurrock would be heavily represented, I wanted a Southend chairman. Was it a surprise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when yet again my input was wasted and the person from Thurrock was chosen—a person who had only a few months' experience of the national health service?

We have a primary care trust in Southend that the doctors do not want, with a chairman who has been the subject of a critical report. Thurrock and Southend have been merged, and we have a chief executive who was the subject of another critical report and a chairman from Thurrock. As it stands, only one person on the new merged trust will come from Southend.

I pay tribute to the British Medical Association, the NHS Confederation and the others who have briefed me. The information that I have shared with hon. Members this afternoon has come from the many doctors and local practitioners who have approached me on the matter.

I feel uncomfortable at what I have had to say today. Three weeks ago, I was here on another matter; I thought that I had dealt with it fairly, but I got absolutely nowhere. However, as a result of that debate, I received a letter the very next day from the Prime Minister, and the matters that I had brought to the attention of the House are now being dealt with.

I am sick to death of dealing with a Government who say that they are democratic, who say that they want to embrace the whole community and who say that they want to listen, but who listen only to their supporters. I have clear evidence that if the Government were being even-handed, and if they did not take account of the fact that they were dealing with a Conservative Member of Parliament, they would act in the best interests of my constituents in matters of health care. They clearly have not done that.

1.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing this debate on the health authority appointments and structures in Essex. As the Minister with responsibility for non-executive appointments, I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I know that the hon. Gentleman feels aggrieved that his views on recent appointments in south Essex were not taken into account. However, he is mistaken to believe that.

It may help if I say how the national health service non-executive appointments are made. The preliminary sifting and interviewing of candidates are overseen by an independent person whose role is to ensure that the procedures comply with guidelines issued by the commissioner for public appointments. As well as the independent member, interview panels normally include two NHS representatives from outside the area of the organisation involved, typically the chairmen of health authorities or health trusts. That panel decides which candidates should be included on a regional register of those judged suitable for appointment. When trust and health authority vacancies arise, the regional chair recommends to Ministers preferred and alternative candidates who are either on the regional register or serving as non-executives and eligible for reappointment. For chair appointments, the interview panel usually includes the regional chair and an independent member. The panel decides which candidates have the qualifications and abilities to carry out the role of the chair. The regional chair has ultimate responsibility for the shortlist of names that goes to Ministers for consideration.

The Secretary of State is responsible for deciding the criteria for candidates. Ministers, acting on behalf of the Secretary of State, are responsible for the final decision on who should be appointed. Ministers can become directly involved in the initial sifting and interview process only if the correct procedure has not been followed or when there is evidence of unfair discrimination. That is properly and strictly in accordance with the guidance issued by the commissioner for public appointments, which we are required by law to follow. There is no scope for Ministers to substitute names of their choosing. They can ask the regional chair for alternative names, but only when they have good reason for believing that none of the recommended candidates should be appointed. Ministers are obliged to inform the commissioner if a complete slate of recommended candidates is rejected, and they must specify their reasons for that decision.

Members of Parliament are consulted by the regional chairs on the names that they are planning to recommend to Ministers for chair appointments. Their comments are passed on to Ministers and they, not the regional chair, take them into account before reaching a decision. I was struck by the hon. Gentleman's choice of words when he referred to being given the "choice" between candidates. Along with other hon. Members, he was asked for his opinion, but Members of Parliament do not have the right to choose. Their views are part of a range of views that are sought in the selection process. As with Ministers, Members of Parliament are not able to substitute names of their

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

choosing for those recommended by the regional chair, nor can they provide additional names. That would run counter to the clear guidance produced by the commissioner for public appointments.

All candidates for the appointments must be able to demonstrate a strong personal commitment to the NHS and the needs of the local community. Candidates are considered solely on their merits and the contribution that they can make, not their politics. The hon. Gentleman referred to allegations of political bias that have been made by Opposition spokesmen in the past few years. In response to those allegations, the commissioner for public appointments announced last July that she would scrutinise the NHS appointment process. She rightly stated:

it is clearly in the interests of all concerned that the appointments process in the NHS is above suspicion.

The Government entirely agree with that sentiment.

We welcome the scrutiny and have given the commissioner every assistance in the work involved. The results are expected shortly and we shall make a statement on the report. However, it is worth noting that, after previous annual audits of NHS appointments, the commissioner has been substantially content with the integrity of the system. In the 1998 annual report, the then commissioner wrote that his audit of NHS appointments had found

no evidence of Ministers intervening to ensure the advancement of their nominees.

He went on to say:

patronage on behalf of individuals is clearly not an issue.

Now that I have established the principles of the appointment process, I shall refer to specific constituency issues raised by the hon. Gentleman. He must be only too aware of the additional demands placed on the NHS in Southend by the area's large elderly population and the fact that it has the largest area of social deprivation in south Essex. Southend has specific health needs, and the Government investment programme demonstrates our commitment to meeting them. The aim of everyone interested in health care in the area must be to work together to tackle those needs and inequalities and thereby raise the health status of the residents.

One of the steps taken to achieve those goals is the development of the Southend primary care group to primary care status, which will take effect on 1 April. It provides an unparalleled opportunity for local stakeholders, including family doctors, nurses, midwives, health visitors, social services and the wider community that they serve to shape services so as to provide better health care and to work to meet the needs that I have identified. I know that the hon. Member for Southend, West has reservations about the move to trust status and that the local medical committee GP ballot did not show an overall majority of support for the move to trust status. However, it appears that the reasons for that result are varied and are not unrelated to the timing of the ballot, which did not allow the PCG to visit all the general practitioners' practices, to explain the objectives and overall vision of the primary care trust or to address the concerns of individuals before they were asked to vote.

I turn to the Brokenshire report and to Katherine Kirk, the chair of the health authority, who is now appointed to take over the PCT. The report makes clear the strained relations between the chair and chief executive of South Essex health authority. However, as it points out, those problems must be considered in the context of the exceptional circumstances in which the new South Essex health authority board was launched. The board faced a huge agenda of change which was made all the more difficult because all but one of the serving non-executive directors left, which resulted in a continuity problem. The report suggests that more could perhaps have been done properly to induct the new board members.

Importantly, the report states that many of the difficulties mentioned have been addressed. South Essex health authority, of which Katherine Kirk is currently chair, performed well throughout the year. It is on target to achieve financial balance and its in-patient waiting list target. In addition, it coped well with significant winter pressures, working closely with NHS trusts and other agencies to deliver its winter plans. The report refers also to a lack of focus in responsibility and roles, which is probably the crux of the matter. I hope that the hon. Member for Southend, West will be reassured to know that the regional office is keen to ensure that new PCT chairmen are given appropriate induction, training and development opportunities. In addition, they will have specific development opportunities and added learning facilities to help them fit into their roles.

I am extremely disappointed to learn that the merger of the community trusts, which was supported by all parties, is being promoted as a takeover by Thameside community trust, with the implication that it is at the expense of Southend community trust. I find the view of the hon. Member for Southend, West all the more baffling considering that the appointment process has not yet been completed. To date, the chairman and two non-executive directors—one from each existing trust—have been appointed, and at least another three remain to be appointed. They have been and will be chosen from the whole pool of locally approved candidates. Those already on NHS boards will be considered alongside those on the regional register.

It was made clear that the chairman would be expected to provide evidence to the regional office to show that the support of local GPs for the PCG move to trust status had increased when approving PCT status. The chairman will also be responsible for ensuring achievement of the PCT objectives, in particular that of improving the resident population's health and health services in the key areas specifically outlined in the consultation process.

The hon. Gentleman's objections on the abolition of fundholding related to community involvement and to working together. It is, however, exactly those things that the new PCT will provide. The local community now has a tremendous opportunity to move forward and open a new chapter in health care in south Essex.

I urge all involved to put the differences of the past behind them. Everyone needs to grasp this opportunity to develop and improve health services. Local residents will be the losers if we fail.

Family Reunification

1.30 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate a subject on which for some years I have tried to explore and influence Government policy.

Usually people who have been given exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom will originally have applied for asylum and been given exceptional leave instead. However, there are other people who fall into that category. The current policy is expressed by the Home Office as a concession, allowing family reunion once someone has had exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom for four years.

A couple of examples illustrate how that policy can operate. In a case that I came across a year or so ago, a man from Sri Lanka who had arrived in 1991 as an asylum seeker was given exceptional leave in 1993—so he had waited two years for that decision. Four years later, in 1997, his family in Sri Lanka—his wife and three daughers—applied for family reunion. The wife and two of the daughters were given entry clearance visas, but the third daughter was refused, on the ground that she was no longer dependent because she was 19. I remind hon. Members that the man had been in this country six years when this happend. In every other respect he fitted the immigration rules.

That is not an isolated case. I recently saw a man who was worried about his family. He has been given exceptional leave and knows that he may now have to wait four years before his family can join him. He is suffering serious mental health problems caused by stress.

The consequence of our present policy on people with exceptional leave is, in some cases, permanent separation. When the wife of the Tamil man was told that one of her daughters could not come to the United Kingdom, she said that in that case she would not come. She would not leave her 19-year-old daughter on her own in Colombo.

The policy certainly makes it far more difficult for people to settle down and adapt to life in a new country. Also, it leads to pointless appeals against refusal of asylum. When a person whose asylum claim has been rejected, but who has been given exceptional leave, discovers that the latter status does not allow family reunion, he or she appeals on the asylum claim. The result is the clogging-up of tribunals with appeals that are pointless because the person has permission to remain here in any case.

I recognise that there is an argument that exceptional leave to remain is not the same status as asylum and that the very strict terms of the 1951 convention are different from the other grounds that permit someone to stay in this country. Once we have granted exceptional leave to remain, for a year in the first place and then, usually, for three further years, the numbers of people who do not qualify for permanent permission to stay are absolutely minute. The last time that I asked for figures on the number of people who were refused an extension of their exceptional leave at the end of one year, then after four years, the numbers for any one year could be counted on one's fingers. The reality is that those who are given exceptional leave will, in time, be given permanent permission and qualify for family reunion. All that the present policy does is delay the process and cause problems.

I want to concentrate on the broader context of the issue and consider how our policy on family reunion fits in with other changes. In October this year, the Human Rights Act 1998 comes into force and the European convention on human rights will become part of UK law. The convention includes an article on the right to family life. The Government are also emphasising the importance of family life in other contexts. Last year, the Home Office published a welcome consultation paper on the settlement and integration of refugees—the first such paper—which referred to the importance of people being able to settle, put down roots and develop a normal life. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees believes that a reunited family is in a better position both to settle and to consider its options. Some UNHCR papers refer to the possibility that a family might consider voluntary repatriation to its country of origin if conditions there have changed, and is more likely to do so if it can discuss the issue as a family living together rather than as one that is scattered.

The policy must also be regarded in the light of the draft EU directive. In October last year, in Tampere, the European Council reiterated the point that the European Union must try to offer fair treatment to third-country nationals who reside legally in the EU. As one of the steps towards that objective, the Commission now says that third-country nationals legally resident in EU member states should have rights of family reunification, subject to several conditions. The Commission makes the point—a fair one—that family reunion in its broadest sense is the main form of legal immigration to most of the EU, as it has been for some years and as is the case in north America. Reunification of families produces stability and enables people to lead more normal lives and put down roots.

We now have a draft EU directive and we have seen the first response from the Home Office in the explanatory memorandum. I suspect that this is, if not the first, one of the first of several such proposals that we shall have to consider during the next few years in the field of asylum and immigration law, which flow from the Amsterdam treaty. The key issue for the UK is to decide what our position is in relation to that treaty and whether to opt in to the proposals. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the directive and the initial response of the Home Office. I have some concerns about the Home Office initial response, although I agree with parts of it. I am not clear why the Government believe that action at Community level, rather than at member state level, will not produce benefits. If we do not opt into the directive, we might operate family reunification policies that do not reach the level of such policies across the rest of the EU. I am not sure to whose benefit that would be.

The directive would give a right to family reunion to EU citizens who are not exercising their right to free movement, and to third-country nationals who are legally resident. Safeguards are built in, although I have doubts about the wording of some of them. One that especially caught my eye would allow member states to reject an application if it could be shown that the marriage was contracted for the sole purpose of

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

enabling the person concerned to enter or reside in a member state. That reeks of the return of the primary purpose rule, in a form little changed from the one that we rightly abolished a couple of years ago.

The directive requires applications to be decided in six months. The Home Office's response is that it needs flexibility to allow for geographical and seasonal variations in application numbers. It might have other reasons for not wanting such a time limit. However, saying that decisions cannot generally be made within six months is not a strong argument.

A key issue, relating to my earlier point about people with exceptional leave, is the provision that the qualifying residence period for family reunification must not exceed one year. I was puzzled by the Home Office response, which suggested that, at present, families could join the sponsor only when they had been given indefinite leave to remain—when they had permission to remain permanently in the UK—and that the time scale for that would vary depending on the nature of the case. It would vary, but it would do so because of where it happened to be in the Home Office computer system, rather than the nature of the case.

We do not restrict family reunion to people given permanent permission to stay. I have heard it argued that the status of exceptional leave cases is temporary—different from refugee status, which is permanent—and that we should therefore not give family reunification. However, we allow people with temporary status to bring families to the UK, such as students and people with work permits. The argument about temporary status does not hold water, even for our present policies. If we have a policy that allows students, who are certainly not regarded as permanent residents, to bring their family with them, it seems odd that we would not allow families to join people given exceptional leave—technically a temporary status, but one that would almost certainly become permanent.

A couple of the articles talk about settlement given to family members who have been in the UK for more than one year, and whose family situation is changed by separation, divorce or death. I am again puzzled by the Home Office response, which talks about the current policy on victims of domestic violence and people who become bereaved, because it applies to such people during their first probationary year. They would get indefinite leave to remain once they had got through that year in any case—they would have a right to permanent permission.

Our current policies are somewhat harsh and cause problems for families. In time we may find that some of those policies fall foul of the Human Rights Act 1998 and end up being less generous than the EU proposals. The key issue is how we approach those proposals, given that they may be the first of many on immigration and asylum.

It would be a mistake if the immediate signal that we gave was that we were likely to pull out because we were not interested in being in there. We should agree that the gap between the rights of EU nationals and third-country nationals is too wide and we should recognise the value of family reunion. We must approach the directive from the point of view of the desirability of agreeing and achieving good common standards across the EU and influencing the parts of the directive about which we have doubts. I hope that we will be fully engaged in that process and thereby improve our own legislation. By becoming involved in influencing the directive, we shall contribute to a fairer system across the EU.

1.46 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): First, I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on securing a debate on this important issue. He and I may approach it differently, but we agree that it is important. I congratulate him most warmly on bringing it to the attention of this Chamber, because these proceedings are followed closely by people outside. My hon. Friend comes to the debate not only with constituency expertise, but as the distinguished chairman of the all-party group on refugees.

The Government have made it clear that they are determined to operate asylum policies that are fair, firm and fast. That is why, when we took office, we commissioned the work that led to the White Paper and put in place measures to ensure that the legislation operates as we wish it to, in what is perhaps the most comprehensive overview of recent immigration and asylum matters. Our family reunion policies not only form part of that legislation, but right the wrongs in the system that we inherited.

As my hon. Friend rightly said, although the families of those recognised as refugees in the United Kingdom are eligible to join them in this country immediately, the families of those who have been refused asylum but granted exceptional leave to remain must normally wait until they have completed four years in that category before their families are eligible to join them. My hon. Friend has covered the reasons for that, but it is worth my mentioning them briefly.

As I am sure hon. Members appreciate, exceptional leave to remain may be granted for a variety of reasons. As my hon. Friend conceded, a person who is granted exceptional leave does not have to meet the strict criteria required of someone recognised as a refugee under the 1951 United Nations convention relating to the status of refugees. Therefore, there is a considerable distinction between the two groups.

People who have been granted exceptional leave to remain have considerable entitlements in the United Kingdom, but I am not persuaded that it would be appropriate to offer them the full range of benefits currently available to refugees. Under the 1951 convention and the way in which it is applied by countries that are signatories to it, that is a special status and carries with it special entitlements. It is right to maintain those special entitlements.

I must make it clear—my hon. Friend will know this from his constituency experience, as do I—that our family reunion policy includes a concession with some flexibility, which allows discretion for humanitarian reasons. There is some discretion within the family reunion concession and, in such cases, consideration is given to whether the families of people with exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom should be allowed to join them in this country before the four-year

period has elapsed. My hon. Friend will have brought such cases to the attention of the immigration and nationality directorate.

When considering whether it is appropriate to exercise discretion in that way, we have regard to the United Kingdom's international obligations. The circumstances of the sponsor in the United Kingdom, or the applicant abroad, may merit compassionate treatment. It is not possible, and would not be right, to detail all the factors that might be taken into account when deciding whether to exercise discretion, but they include the degree of dependency, the hardships faced by the applicant, the health of the sponsor or the applicant, and the age of those concerned. I emphasise for the record that that is not an exhaustive list, because exceptional circumstances are, by their nature, exceptional and it is not possible to list them in one place.

It is important to point out that we are prepared to extend the family reunion policy in response to international circumstances, particularly when the need to provide immediate protection warrants that, as was the case during the Kosovo crisis when we operated a humanitarian evacuation programme. Under those arrangements, procedures were put in place for applications to be processed quickly and allowed members of asylum seekers' extended families to join them in the United Kingdom if that was justified.

My hon. Friend referred to the European Union draft directive on family reunion and I am grateful to him for doing so, because it provides me with the opportunity to outline the background. I fully appreciate that the Commission's proposal is intended to identify guiding principles for a common European policy on family reunion. However, if the United Kingdom opted in, many of the directive's provisions would entail changes to our family reunion policy which we would find it difficult to accept. Some of those difficulties are that the sponsor in the United Kingdom should make the application for the family reunion, no fee should be payable, there should be a minimum standard for maintenance and accommodation—my hon. Friend may not be happy with some of those provisions—and family members should have an autonomous right to settlement. The Government also have difficulty with the aim to make the position of European Union citizens who have not exercised their right to free movement comparable to that of citizens who have exercised it by bringing them within the ambit of Community law. That would significantly weaken the United Kingdom's marriage rules and efforts being made to tighten them up in the face of marriage abuse for immigration purposes. Furthermore, we would also have the difficulty with existing Community law in relation to dependent relatives, who are currently required to meet strict qualifying criteria. I hope that that is helpful background information, in addition to that provided in the explanatory memorandum. We will consider our position in relation to the proposal, and will advise Parliament accordingly. I assure this Chamber that we will participate in discussison of the text, and that policy issues will be drawn to the attention of the Commission and other member states.

I want to deal with others issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow. I am delighted that he mentioned the paper on refugee integration, which I regard as an important contribution to the debate. I am sad that it has not received the publicity and focus that it deserves. It is vital to those who are interested in the issue. Those to whom refugee status is given should be aware of all the possibilities available to them to make a new life. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's endorsement of that aspect of our work.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the delays in the process. However exercised he is on the matter, he is not as exercised as I am, as it is my job to speed up the process as much as possible. I am sure that he will have seen the figures that we published on Friday, which show record numbers of decisions being made. We want to make progress on that. I am not complacent; I appreciate that much remains for us to do, and that people's individual circumstances and futures are at stake. Delays in the asylum process are unacceptable. They disadvantage those involved in the process, which is why, as he will know, we took steps to improve the system inherited from the previous Administration. Resources are being introduced to ensure that all initial asylum decisions are taken within two months, and appeals resolved within four months. That is the target towards which we are working.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of the four-year period for entry clearance. I assure my hon. Friend and this Chamber that we are trying to apply the principles of joined-up government to the processes. A joint unit to combine the work of the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be established, which we hope will drive the speeding up of the process.

I end as I began by congratulating my hon. Friend on securing the debate and presenting it in the manner in which he did. Fundamental issues are at stake, and we are at one in wanting to speed up the process, and on the need for it to be firm, fair and fast.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 March 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Town and Country Parks

[*Relevant documents: Twentieth report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1998-1999 HC 477 and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4550.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I am glad that Parliament has the opportunity to debate the Select Committee report "Town and Country Parks". However, I express a fear shared by many hon. Members that debating Select Committee reports in Westminster Hall can be rather like the Committee talking to the Committee. Nevertheless, I am pleased to see present the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), the Opposition spokesman, and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes).

I begin by expressing my thanks to all who helped prepare the report, particularly our specialist advisers, Alan Barber and David Lambert, the members of the Committee and the Committee staff, who all worked so hard. I also thank all those who sent in written evidence or who gave oral evidence and those who made our visit to Greater Manchester so informative.

The report starts with a quotation:

> The measure of any great civilisation is its cities and a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces, its parks and squares.

Those words of John Ruskin sum up the emphasis that the Committee wanted to put on the place of parks in our great cities. No stronger criticism can be made of the last 20 years of the 20th century than the neglect, public vandalism and destruction that happened in so many of our parks. Nothing shows more the difference between private affluence and municipal decay than that during those 20 years so many people spent their time cultivating their own garden plots while, just around the corner, so many of our parks died.

The cover of the report highlights that tragedy. In some ways, it may not have worked as well as we expected. We hoped that it would be distributed with half the covers put on inside out. We hoped that half the copies would show the pictures of neglect and that the other half would show the pictures of success. I can see you puzzling over this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but if you take the cover off—it is like a dust jacket—you will see the two sets of pictures. I am not sure about the parliamentary conventions on visual aids. The pictures on the inside of the cover show the tragic pictures of what has happened in so many of our parks—neglected monuments, leaking water features, unkempt grounds that have suffered vandalism, crime and graffiti, unused or unusable playgrounds and ruined bowling greens. Some local authorities decided to go for wilderness areas rather than continuing to tend the gardens, the idea being that a little wildness in a park is attractive. It could be, but maintaining that wilderness to make a happy place to visit is often more difficult than keeping flowerbeds neat and tended.

We listed all the ways in which so many of our parks suffered during those 20 years. Although so many parks suffered so much, the cover contrasts that depressing picture with pictures of people going to parks and thoroughly enjoying themselves. The activity is free and almost everyone can participate in it—permission is not necessary and people need not worry whether they are wearing the right clothes. Anyone can enjoy healthy recreation, or just look at the attractive flowers. There are play areas for children, and opportunities for people to walk their dogs, to develop community activities and the community spirit and for education. Paragraphs 32 to 56 of the report set out the vast number of opportunities that people have to enjoy themselves in our parks.

There is a contrast between parks that are suffering neglect and decay and those that are still wonderfully attractive. The Committee was sad to find that some of the most attractive parks were in the more affluent places and some of the least attractive and most rundown were in the poorest and most deprived parts of towns. Those with the biggest houses, most access to motor cars and the best spaces for private gardens had some of the best public parks. People living in high-rise flats or terraced houses, with no opportunity to have a garden, had some of the most deprived parks. The opposite should apply.

The decline of the municipal park can be attributed to many factors, but about 10 years ago a dedicated band of people decided that they had to stop the decline and to regenerate parks. They had to find the money and the enthusiasm to protect the parks that gave so much pleasure in the past and could give so much pleasure now. I pay tribute to all those who campaigned, and to the green flag scheme to give awards to especially attractive parks.

That is a brief description of the state of parks and campaigning activity; I want now to turn to problems. The first problem that we highlighted was that many local authorities did not know how much parkland they had. That seems surprising—I was amazed during the inquiry that, in so many cases, we could not find that out. The question had almost crept up on authorities. For much of the 20-year period in which buildings were being pulled down, bits of land were landscaped—when a new road scheme has developed, the extra bit of land was often grassed over and one or two litter bins were put in and cotoneasters and berberis were planted. Litter would blow across the landscaped area into the so-called flowerbeds. That land cost money to look after as it was added to the parks and recreations department's lot.

In a city such as Manchester, parks did not diminish. During those 20 years, the city kept its parkland and often added to it. However, its population dropped dramatically by a third during the period. The amount of parkland per person increased substantially, so maintaining it became a greater burden. I should pay tribute to the work that Manchester has done with some of its parks. The cost of maintaining them all is formidable.

[Mr. Andrew F. Bennett]

Manchester had fine historic parks such as Philips park and Queens park. There should be more recognition of a national duty to look after parkland, especially if it is of historic value. The duty should not rest only with the city's council tax payers.

On the issue of town versus country, we wanted the title for the inquiry to be "Town and Country Parks". We thought that town parks might be declining because the emphasis had switched to new country parks, but we found no evidence of that. Country parks are in better heart than urban parks but, on the whole, there is no conflict. However, there was a small concern that one or two country parks were starting to decline.

There was much argument about how far compulsory competitive tendering could be blamed for the decline of parks. The Select Committee was clear that it wanted to place the blame not on CCT, but on the process of CCT. A battle occurred between the Government, who wanted to push the process forward, and local authorities, which did not want to follow it. The outcome was disastrous for parks. I hope that, in replacing the compulsory competitive tendering regime with best value, we will start the process to restore parks, but I have not been encouraged by best value so far. There is a fair amount of waffle, but not much specific factual content.

Paragraph 165 of the reports states:

> In implementing best value, we expect all local authorities to have a Master Plan for parks and greenspace and to ensure that local people, as well as members of the Council, have easy access to a regularly updated version of it. Local authorities should use the Master Plan to show how their parks address the many cross-cutting issues which both Government and the Local Government Association are promoting such as sustainable development, life long learning, crime and disorder and social exclusion. The public—

this is the key point—

> should also have easy access to detailed plans for each park or small group of greenspaces and know what budget is allocated to each one.

It also stipulates that nationally set target indicators should be taken into account. I hope that they are in place, but I fear that they are disappearing under the best value regime. We need some clarity so that my constituents can see the state of their park, examine the local authority's plan for it and decide where it is going wrong. That would do a great deal to enhance democracy. I hope that the Minister will be able to say in detail how best value will work for parks.

Although there is disappointment about how compulsory competitive tendering has been applied to parks and some concern about best value, parks have been let down in other ways. English Heritage has done a good job to list historic public buildings that need to be looked after, but its record on stepping in and protecting parks is lamentable. As the Select Committee will consider that issue shortly, I shall say no more on it.

It was heartening to learn that, in many parks, people have grouped together to form friends of the park. They should be given every encouragement, not just so that they can put together a lottery application, but so that they can campaign to look after their park. The groups could also develop voluntary activities. That is a personal view; it is not expressed in the Select Committee's report. An increasing number of people who can best be described as the young elderly, have the opportunity to put in some form of community service and they should be encouraged to help look after parks. I hope that the Government will consider ways of making it easier for people to do that, and possible to have flowers in flowerbeds in parks that have been grassed over. Much of the effort involved in that task is in planting the flowers, so if someone could provide the money for seeds and tools, some voluntary effort could be made. I am not suggesting that voluntary effort should take the place of the work of councils, but that would be one way to regenerate the attractiveness of our parks.

I pay tribute to the fact that heritage lottery money has produced an improvement in some parks, but of the 5,000 municipal parks recognised as significant, only 93 have received money so far. That is a very small number. It is exciting to see what has been done in those parks and that money was well spent. However, I emphasise that it is not just a question of carrying out capital works in parks; it is also necessary to look after them. I hope that the new opportunities fund will be able to offer a little more money for work in parks.

I now turn to one of the central issues highlighted in the report: the lack of a champion for the urban park. A considerable amount of evidence suggests that we need someone to campaign for the urban park, as the Countryside Agency has campaigned for country parks. We need an urban parks and green space agency. When I looked at the Government's response to the report, I was particularly disappointed that the Government could not see any way of supporting that idea. We need a national body to campaign for the urban park and ensure that the good practice that operates in some parks is spread throughout the country. Such a body could tackle the problems of training because, as parks have declined, the number of trained professionals who know how to look after and manage them has also declined.

Parks need more money. The Minister should lobby the Chancellor of the Exchequer because parks could be one of the recipients of money from green taxes. The whole intention of a green tax is to change people's behaviour, so it should be a temporary source of money. If some of that money could be used to regenerate parks, they could be restored to their previous standards.

Finally, the Government should see the urban park as an engine for urban regeneration. The Government have the opportunity to consider the matter in the urban White Paper, in which there should be no timidity. The White Paper should be a bold declaration of the Government's aspirations for the next five to 10 years. I fear that the Department is waiting to see how much money it can get from the Chancellor in the present spending round before it curtails its ambitions to the amount of money available. The urban White Paper should set out the Government's plans for urban regeneration and, if we cannot have all the money at the start, it should set out a timetable for obtaining that money, rather than trimming its sails to the amount of money that is available over the next three years. I plead that the park should be at the centre of that ambition. New York, Paris, Barcelona, Seattle and other cities have shown that whole areas can be lifted by starting regeneration with parks.

If we want to make our cities attractive places, we should bear it in mind that their greatness will be measured in the quality of their parks. I return to the John Ruskin quotation:

> The measure of any great civilisation is its cities and a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces and squares.

The Select Committee report points the way for the Government to use our parks as a way of regenerating our big cities and of giving a great deal of pleasure to the large numbers of people who still go out to enjoy them.

2.50 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I welcome the Select Committee report on town and country parks. Although I believe that the Committee might have been carried away by its own zeal in making some of its more bureaucratic recommendations, a report that draws attention to the value of our parks and the threats to them is long overdue. There is no doubt that, unless our parks are better protected, they will continue to be eroded, such is the pressure of development. However, I note in the Committee's recommendations that it sees no point in legislating to give statutory protection for parks.

I should like to use this debate to describe what is happening to the five historic parks in the borough of Bournemouth, which contribute so much to the attractions of our resort and which are the subject of protective legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) wishes to be associated fully with my remarks. Three of Bournemouth's five parks are located in his constituency, although King's park, the park currently under most threat, lies in mine.

Bournemouth's five parks have long been subject, Sir Alan—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is making his debut in Westminster Hall, but I remind him that the correct form of address for me is Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Atkinson: Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you for putting me right.

Bournemouth's five parks have long been subject to the protection of local Acts. In 1984, the local authority sought Parliament's approval for the consolidation of various local powers into what became the Bournemouth Borough Council Act 1985. Section 28 of the Act—another section 28—relates to the five parks and confirms the council's principal obligations as their trustee. Those obligations are to keep the parks unbuilt on and to preserve their natural aspect and state. There is no doubt, that without the foresight of the councillors who petitioned Parliament for the special protection provided by the Act, many of the five parks would now have been built on, for example, for the proposed residential development in Meyrick park in 1985 or the proposed road scheme through Redhill common in 1998. Both sites are situated in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West.

Last year saw the publication of two major schemes that would have had a major impact on King's park in my constituency. Unlike most other parks in Bournemouth, King's park provides a wide range of organised sports and recreational facilities in addition to its open space. By far the largest enterprise is the Dean Court football ground, the home of AFC Bournemouth, or the Cherries, who are now halfway up the second division. They defeated their Blackpool rivals last weekend by two goals to one. Such was the cash crisis faced by the club several years ago, I had to appeal to my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) when he was Financial Secretary to the Treasury for a stay of execution. Since then, the club has been revitalised under the inspiring leadership of its chairman, Trevor Watkins, who rescued professional soccer for the town with his pioneering, community-based approach, inspired by American clubs. Despite the understandable reservations of my constituents in the neighbourhood, Bournemouth borough council has approved a new £9 million all-seater stadium, which will involve rotating the current ground by 90 degrees. Restrictive covenants have been lifted on public land needed for the scheme. The Football Trust has pledged £3 million and Bournemouth council has approved a £1 million loan. I hope that the project will be a great success for the club and I am pleased to support it.

Unfortunately, the council is minded to allow another development in King's park which undoubtedly goes against the spirit of the 1985 Act and which the Charity Commissioners may yet determine to be illegal—as I believe it to be. That is the leasing of part of the public open space in King's park to a private developer for a commercially operated ice rink as a regional venue for competition ice skating. That building would have spectator seating and cover 100,000 sq ft. The proposal seems to be outside section 28 of the Act and consequently a serious breach of trusteeship duties by the councill. It is certainly contrary to the principal obligation that section 28 imposes on the council: to keep the five parks from being built on.

Thanks to the tireless dedication of one councillor in particular and several constituents, the matter has been drawn to the attention of the Treasury Solicitor, who is rightly concerned. It continues to be the subject of negotiation between the council and the Charity Commissioners. I hope that the council will be told that it cannot proceed and that a commercially operated ice stadium—which I accept would enhance our town as a resort—should be developed on a brownfield site.

It is in response to the Select Committee's report that I have used the Bournemouth experience to emphasise that legislation has its uses in helping to protect urban parks from development, even when the local authority concerned is not abiding by the relevant Act.

Another threat to urban parks such as ours in Bournemouth is not mentioned in the report, but it should be. It comes from their invasion almost every summer by travellers. Last summer, they invaded King's park, Redhill common, Millham Meads and Iford playing fields in our borough. Two weeks ago, a group of them left King's park after occupying its paying car park for six weeks. The experience of people living in the neighbourhood is the same every time. Crime and vandalism rise. Garden sheds and garages are broken into. Pets disappear. Human excrement is left. When, eventually, the council obtains a court order to remove the invaders, a great deal of rubbish is left behind to be cleared up at the council tax payer's expense. I

[Mr. Atkinson]

applauded the Home Secretary last year when he described such travellers as crooks who thought that they had a licence to commit crime and act unlawfully, and said that it was time to end sentimentality about them as travellers. He certainly did not deserve to be reported to the Commission for Racial Equality for his comments. He was speaking the truth.

Bournemouth's parks are of course not the only ones that are regularly invaded and there have been questions and Adjournment debates on this national problem. I hope that all local authorities that are as frequently affected as mine will, perhaps through the Local Government Association, press the Government for new powers to enable them immediately, without having to obtain a county court order, to obtain possession of any council-owned land in the occupation of caravan-dwellers, travellers and gypsies. Better still would be the power to have licences taken away from those licensed to drive the vehicles. I am surprised that that threat to our parks was not considered by the Select Committee in preparing its otherwise worthy report.

2.58 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I welcome the debate on parks and hope that it and the Select Committee report, rather like the report on allotments, will focus continuing attention on something valued by many people that for a long time was ignored and neglected by those with responsibility.

Parks are recognised as an important public asset. Access to green space and parkland is especially important in urban areas. The importance and value of parks have long been recognised for recreation, health, community development and education, especially in studying biodiversity and wildlife, but increased emphasis has been given recently to the value of parks in urban regeneration. The provision of green space and parkland has been recognised belatedly as an important part of urban design and land-use planning. I was pleased that the importance of providing parks in the way in which communities want them, as part of urban design and regeneration, was recognised in the Rogers report on urban renaissance.

Parks can be made available in several ways—in small projects and larger ones. Sub-regional projects, such as the Mersey forest scheme, are important in providing parkland in urban areas. That scheme is one of 12 national community forest projects, in which local authorities join the public and private sectors to consider the provision of recreational space, the development of environmentally friendly land and the encouragement of wildlife and biodiversity across a large area. The aim of the Mersey forest project is to produce a high-quality environment in and around towns and cities. Such projects need to be supported by a wide variety of funding institutions, and their local relevance to urban areas, including town centres, must be recognised.

Parks and green fields are also important in localised areas and one-off schemes. Particular emphasis should be put on retaining local playing fields, which often provide opportunities for local recreation in highly urbanised areas. I welcome the Government's recent moves to support the retention of playing fields, going against the previous Government's policy of encouraging local authorities to sell off playing fields.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I have leapt to my feet because the hon. Lady is repeating the Government's oft-quoted mantra that we sold off playing fields and this Government have not done so. Is she not aware of the statistics that show that the rate of sports field sell-off is vastly greater now than under the previous Government? The Ministry of Defence is selling two in my constitutency.

Mrs. Ellman: I recognise that the previous Government advocated selling off playing fields and that this Government are doing the opposite.

Parks and green space have been, and still are, extremely important in the inner-city constituency that I represent. Those spaces are provided in various ways. The large areas include the magnificent Princes park, which was designed by Paxton in 1840 to enhance the potential of the property being developed then and which greatly benefits local people now; and Sefton park, which was built in 1872 by the local authority on 200 acres after an international design competition. There are local spaces, such as Greenbank park, and magnificent Georgian squares, such as the Faulkner, Abercromby and St. George squares, which were built originally to provide communal facilities for the surrounding high-quality terraces. There are parks on brownfield sites, such as Everton park, and inner-city projects, such as the town centre projects run by the KIND organisation, which finds green space and opportunities for ecological education in the middle of the city.

All those parks and green spaces are much valued by people in inner-city Liverpool, but it is clear that much work needs to be done in them. For example, there is a great deal of acitvity in much-loved Sefton park, financed by European regional development funds. The park is also awaiting lottery funding. Rangers in that park do an excellent job but, ironically, a conflict has arisen as heritage lottery funding designated to restore part of the park to how it was in another era requires trees to be destroyed. I hope that that conflict will be resolved.

The friends of Sefton park palm house have done a magnificent job in bringing together funding from the local authority, Europe, English Heritage, heritage lottery and private sources to restore the palm house for public benefit.

During the Select Committee investigation, it became clear that there were several reasons for the decline of parks and green spaces in urban areas in the past 20 years. Cuts imposed by central Government on local authorities had taken a toll which, with compulsory competitive tendering, led to a reduction in both maintenance standards and, indirectly, horticultural skills. Responsibility for and an overview of the importance of parks and green spaces were lacking. It is clear that progress is now being made and that changed uses of parks are being defined when appropriate.

There is new interest in local authority funding for parks. However, local authorities must have access to funding if that is to be a realistic prospect. Friends'

groups are developing to support parks, although how much responsibility they can be expected to take in the long term is not certain. Long-term funding from joint sources is especially significant, and European funding, lottery funding and heritage funding are all important. However, examining how funding and support can be maintained over time and brought together for a single purpose is equally important.

Liverpool is now regenerating. Liverpool Vision, the new company set up by the regional development agency, English Partnerships, Liverpool city council and the private sector, is now assembling plans for redesigning Liverpool city centre which include ideas for building green spaces and parks into the urban environment. Those proposals are being consulted on.

There are hopeful moves to support the future of urban parks, such as regional and local plans for culture and tourism that examine the value of parks as cultural and economic assets. The local authorities' duty to be responsible for the social, environmental and economic well-being of their area is, potentially, very promising.

I hope that those combined forces will help to achieve recognition of the importance of parks and green spaces in recreation, health, pleasure, education and the design of the urban fabric. The report and our debate will be worth while if they contribute to achieving that.

3.8 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): First, I apologise that I may need to leave before the Minister's winding-up speech if our debate goes its full length.

The report is excellent. It is detailed and comprehensive and I agree with almost all of its key recommendations. More information, however, is needed on the key recommendation on the role of the agency. My informal soundings suggest that the agency should be supported in spreading best practice and collating information about parks. I do not support the idea that it should direct or dictate what happens locally, but I am sure that the Committee is not advocating that.

I should like to focus on a limited number of areas in the report. Other hon. Members have already touched on the importance of identifying how many parks there are in the country so that we can monitor them and work towards improving their condition. I should like to touch first on the safety and security aspect, then on friends of parks and the funding issue, to which other hon. Members have already referred, and finally on the Government's response to the Select Committee report.

There is no doubt that the major deterrent to park use concerns safety and security. I can think of a number of factors in my constituency, which I am sure will apply across the country. Drinking in parks by groups of youths, for instance, is clearly a deterrent to park users. I can think of other examples where parks, because they are open spaces where people can come and go easily, have been used to bombard passing buses with bricks or stones, thereby forcing bus companies to reduce bus routes or take a bus off entirely. But there are solutions. Closed circuit television is an obvious, albeit costly, solution, with heavy revenue implications for staffing the CCTV cameras or the monitors so that they are used effectively. Much more work can be done on parks constabularies. Three London boroughs have parks constabularies and that should be promoted.

Another possible and controversial solution is to push for more cycling in parks. I wish that there were a more rational approach to cycling. It seems to generate more heat and less light than any other matter. I occasionally cycle with my daughter, who is two and a half years old. She is secured in a cycle seat and wears a helmet. Recently, when I was cycling in a local park, I overheard people muttering about these cyclists cycling through the park, yet I was cycling past them at a pace that was slower than had I been on foot. There is an irrational concern about letting cyclists use parks. Having more people in parks, whether pedestrians or cyclists is one way of addressing concerns about safety. The more people there are, the safer people feel.

Friends of parks are an excellent initiative. I am sure that all hon. Members will have participated in events in their constituencies organised by such bodies as friends of Mellows park and friends of Oaks park in my constituency. One of the concerns identified by the Select Committee was that some friends were feeling put upon and were being asked to take on too much responsibility. That is not the case where I am. They feel comfortable with their responsibilities and, if anything, would like to take on additional responsibilities rather than cut back on them. One area of concern that should be looked at is that it is the young elderly who are involved in these organisations, as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) pointed out. Perhaps we should promote young friends of parks to get young people and children involved in helping to run their parks.

As we have already heard from two hon. Members, funding is central to their concerns. It is the single biggest issue for all local authorities. All hon. Members know that what slips when budgets are tight are the so-called soft cuts—the things that allegedly do not hurt anyone. The maintenance of parks may be affected. Fewer flowers and shrubs may be planted and there may be more grass because that is easier and less costly to maintain. Paths and fences may not be repaired as quickly as in the past. It is in that respect that the Government's response is weakest; they sing the praises of parks but fail to take account of the cost implications, which can be heavy. In their response, the Government state that they have abolished crude, universal capping, and perhaps that is true. What is certainly true is that a clawback operates. The further a council's spending deviates from what is considered to be appropriate, the harsher is the clawback.

The Government do not agree that less local authority funding should be provided by Government grants. That is one way of saying that they do not agree that more funds should be raised locally. Why should not more funds be raised locally? That is something that the Select Committee advocated when considering other reports. What better way is there of re-establishing the link that seems to have been broken between our constituents, the local authority and their voting habits in council elections? If that link were restored, there would be a higher turnout at local elections and authorities would have more flexibility to take decisions about their priorities, or what their electors want to be their priorities.

The Government's response offers no help in respect of the Select Committee's request that they should help local authorities to find ways to reverse cuts in park

[Mr. Tom Brake]

maintenance. The Government were silent on the funding issue, but they made some commitments. I hope that the Minister will provide more details of those commitments and perhaps set out a time scale.

When will the parks database, which is mentioned in paragraph 7 of the Government's response, be established and able to take research inquiries? In paragraph 26, which relates to trusts and friends organisations, the Government state that they will

consider further the issues raised in conjunction with the LGA

and others. What are the terms of reference for the review? When will the report be published? When will we know what the Government's deliberations have produced?

The Minister has already been asked whether she will be talking to the Chancellor about funding. If he says that the country cannot afford it, will she point out that he is about to give away £2.5 billion in tax cuts? Perhaps the Minister will press him on the matter.

All hon. Members can agree on the subject of town and country parks. As the Government's response states, well-maintained parks and open spaces are essential to improve the quality of living and working environments. Saying that those things are essential will not improve the parks, but dissemination of best practice and increased resources will.

3.18 pm

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): As someone who joined the Environment Sub-Committee relatively recently, I especially welcome the report. In highlighting the importance of parks as green lungs and oases for our cities, the report has done a good job, if a depressing one, in also highlighting the decline in the state of some parks in recent years, something that should worry all hon. Members. I congratulate the Chairman of the Environment Sub-Committee on the cover of the report, to which he referred in his opening remarks. To anyone who does not want to delve into the words of the report, the pictures on the back and front tell the story. We have already heard various reasons for the decline, such as the natural ravages of time, inadequate capital for repairs and improvement, lack of maintenance, other demands on local government, which is an important contributory factor, and the effect of compulsory competitive tendering—a lesson that I hope has been learnt in relation to best value.

I want to talk specifically about parks in our great cities. Leeds is a city of contrasts. It has its own north-south divide in terms of prosperity. It also has a wide variety of green open spaces. Anyone who has been to Roundhay park or Temple Newsom is able to attest to that. Cross Flatts park in Beeston in my constituency epitomises, in many ways, the problems that we are discussing. It is a monument to Victorian vision. A substantial recreation space, it lies between two communities, and people talk about houses as being either above or below the park. To those who live to the east of Cross Flatts park in tightly packed, back-to-back houses with no gardens, it is an important recreation space.

The park is vital to the community, but over the years it has suffered from under-investment. All the issues raised in the report can be used in respect of the park: the railings disappeared a long time ago, there are no permanent park staff and people are sometimes afraid to walk across the park at night. The Public Accounts Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry into the Audit Commission performance indicators, and it would be nice if a performance indicator could be used to measure the problems in public open spaces.

The good news is that help is now at hand. Partly because of lottery funding and the fourth round of the single regeneration budget funding, there is an opportunity to make a difference. I congratulate the city council on its approach to the park. It has used a consultation technique, "planning for real", with which some hon. Members may be familiar. It has worked successfully in the community of Beeston and Holbeck. It involves setting out a large-scale map of the area and inviting people to put little flags on the map setting out what is needed in certain areas, such as new railings or better lighting. People being involved in the planning of their areas makes a great difference because ownership is crucial to sustaining and developing an interest in our parks and open spaces.

I am pleased to tell the Chamber that new fencing is to be put around Cross Flatts park so that joyriders who, for some strange reason, like to bring their cars into the park and burn them out, can no longer do so. A nice old building, known locally as the Watsonia, is being refurbished so that community groups and young people can use it. Vandalised tennis courts that have been neglected over the years symbolise more than anything else the decline of our public open spaces. Two such courts are to be renovated so that they can be used and the other six will be turned into a multi-purpose hard play area, which is a wonderfully flexible phrase to describe the fashion activity of the moment, whether it be football, roller-blading, skateboard or basketball.

A different example of the community approach is the millennium green in Woodhouse. The local community took the initiative in identifying an embankment that was covered with rubbish, neglected and overgrown. It received lottery funding to turn it into a small park and recreational space, and work has already begun. It is an absolutely wonderful project, and the local community is making it happen. It is working with Leeds Groundwork. As the millennium green is created, there will be a training programme, which will give unemployed young people the opportunity to learn more about horticulture and land management. I have no doubt that, at the end of that process, the sense of ownership and the pride in the millennium green will be all the greater because the community itself created it. Another example is St. Matthew's community garden in Holbeck, where an old graveyard is being turned into an open space.

Last autumn, I visted the Meanwood Valley urban farm in my constituency to collect acorns. It is a wonderful green corridor of animal husbandry, horticulture and open space. I was taking part in the constituency oaks project. Growing a tree from seed puts us all in our place: I have grown several oak trees from seed and know that the trees will be here long after all of us have disappeared into the dust of time. It, too, engenders a sense of ownership. One feels very strongly about a tree that one has planted and grown from a seed, and one has a unique bond with it. One of the problems in our parks is vandalism. How often have we seen a new

tree snapped off a few days after it is planted? I should like to think that if we had planted a tree and seen somebody snap it off, we might be courageous enough to go up to that person and say "Excuse me, do you know that I planted that tree?" I suspect that I know what the answer would be, but I hope that the person would say, "I am very sorry, I didn't realise that it was your tree." If one thinks about it, all the trees in our parks are ours and we must develop a greater sense of ownership.

As hon. Members may gather, I am rather keen on trees. One of the other distinguishing features of Leeds is the contrast between north and south in terms of the number of trees. Trees are everywhere in the north-west, but south of the River Aire, and especially in south Leeds, which I have the honour of representing, there are not that many of them. Trees act as a buffer against noise and they soak up CO_2, as we know. Even in the ordinary urban environment, trees soften the landscape and provide beauty and the opportunity for contemplation. Trees within a city create a park on their own, and I am keen that we should have many more in our city. I never thought that I would say this at the time, but as a youngster I used to be intimidated by the London county council park keepers in Holland park. Even if one was climbing a tree with a view to mild enjoyment—I never tried to damage trees—they intervened forcefully. The park keeper, who was the expression of our sense of community ownership and responsiblity for trees, is a great loss.

My final point concerns the future of parks in cities. Where are new parks going to come from? The Victorian Society made an important point in the evidence that it submitted to the Select Committee. It stated:

> Public parks did not come into existence by chance, or simply survive as accidentally undeveloped ground. They were deliberately created.

As our cities develop and change, we need to think about where new parks will come from.

Mr. Bennett: It is perhaps unfortunate that my hon. Friend was not a member of the Committee when we considered evidence relating to the new Hulme development in the city of Manchester and the creation of a new park there. If my hon. Friend goes and looks, he will see a well-loved park whose creation was influenced by local people. The cover of the Select Committee report has a picture of youngsters driving up the wall and thoroughly enjoying themselves in that park.

Mr. Benn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I look forward to having that opportunity. When the Committee visits Leeds in the near future, my hon. Friend will have a chance to see the millennium square, one of the new projects being developed there.

I believe that civic vision and leadership still have an important role to play, as they did in the 19th century. The millennium square is to be the middle of the town centre and will be the first new square in the city for 60 years. It will be a new focal point with trees, a fountain, cafés and flowers and it will be capable of use for open-air concerts and other events. In a sense, it will be a bridge—I am not quite sure whether a square can be a bridge—between the report and the inquiry currently being undertaken in connection with the urban White Paper. The project will happen because it has been planned for. The centre of Leeds is a hive of activity and development, which is a sign of its great economic success. Two large developments are being planned, at Clarence dock and Tetley's wharf, and they will add greatly to the city's regeneration. However, as I have said to the planners and developers, we should not concrete over every square inch of the land. We need green space so that, if we are successful in bringing people back to the city to live, their children will have somewhere to play.

People will be drawn to live in the city by the exitement and bustle, and the fact that it is a thriving place, but they also need opportunities for tranquillity and contemplation. The parks—the green lungs and oases—provide us with the opportunity for that.

3.30 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is a pleasing and daunting experience to follow the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) who transported this mundane Chamber into something better with his lyrical description of the parks in Leeds and his historical vision of oaks. It is interesting to speak after him because the Benn dynasty played a significant part in ending the hereditary principle in the House of Lords. He appears to have inherited the best instincts of the long Benn dynasty in the House of Commons and is, perhaps, a walking endorsement of all that is good about the hereditary principle. We welcome him to the Select Committee and look forward to his contributions.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) who led the inquiry. I was going to say that he has moved on to better things, although I am not sure that a job in the Conservative Whips Office is better. Still, he has moved on and cannot be here today.

We have had a difficult week, especially with the all-night sitting, but two pleasant experiences have made my life slightly better. Yesterday, I had the good fortune to be invited to lunch in the Carlton club, and today I went to the Savoy hotel for the Automobile Association's awards lunch. Both occasions gave me the opportunity to walk across parks—Green park to the Carlton club and along the embankment to the Savoy—which gave me a chance to think about the reports. I was struck by the fact that both Green park and Victoria embankment—I apologise to the Royal Parks Agency and others who will write to me tomorrow to tell me that I am wrong—are living examples of what parks should not be. It is difficult to walk along Victoria embankment; it needs to be reorganised to make it pedestrian accessible. Many of the plants are overgrown; the section in front of the Ministry of Defence is an empty patch of green grass, and rather low-quality grass at that. Victoria embankment is one of the finest park sites in London, and we should be maximising the benefits that we get from it.

That experience, although pleasant, highlighted the problems that the report tries to address. Most of our town parks were first planted or donated 100 or 200 years ago. They were quite well maintained for a long

[Mr. James Gray]

time, but for a large part of the last century—certainly since the second world war—most of our town and country parks have been in gradual gentle decline. It is timely that we are considering what can be done to put them right.

Despite the Government's complexion, it is true that we are enjoying relative economic prosperity, thanks, of course, to the golden legacy that they inherited three years ago. It is at such times that we can consider what to do about heritage, history and parks, so that we can pass them on to people who may be less fortunate economically. I welcome the report, even though I was not able to take as active a part as I would have liked in the study that preceded it.

Our 250 country parks attract a not insignificant 57 million visits a year. Five thousand of our 30,000 parks, including town parks, are of national or local heritage merit. One hundred million park visits are made each year in London. Parks are a huge national asset and they improve the life of the people, and it is right that we should consider what can be done with them.

Why do we want parks, and what is their purpose? Hon. Members have referred to a variety of purposes, but they have skipped over some. Until the second world war, a large part of our population lived in the countryside and had plenty of experience of nature and wildlife. Our way of life is increasingly urban or suburban. Parks are more important than ever in terms of contact with nature and wildlife. There are more red foxes in London than in my North Wiltshire constituency. Red foxes, badgers and deer are plentiful in London.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): That is because we have not hunted them.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that that is because we have not hunted them. Red foxes are knocked down by cars in London or are covered with mange and are suffering from unspeakable diseases because their central London population is grossly large. We like to keep it under control in Wiltshire through that activity.

Providing contact with nature and wildlife is an extraordinarily important role for parks. That is true not only in London but in Chippenham, which is in the centre of the countryside. People in Chippenham use John Coles park, which was donated in the last century to the town by a Conservative mayor, as their main contact with fresh air, the countryside and plants. It is extremely important, especially for people with limited mobility. Disabled people probably enjoy our parks more than anyone else.

Never one to shy away from controversy, I might go further and say that making our parks attractive places to go and use as I have described is vastly more important than opening up acres of countryside, as is proposed in the right to roam Bill shortly to be put before Parliament. Even people in places such as Chippenham like to walk for about a mile in a circular route from their house, as they can through John Coles park. Unless they are radical and extreme ramblers—a few are around—they do not want access across the beautiful countryside surrounding the town. The right to roam addresses a need that is not there; it is a licence to trespass rather than a benefit to people.

We seem determined to concrete over our nation; the more green areas and biodiversity we can have in our parks, the better. In its evidence, Bristol city council used the good metaphor of parks as the lungs of the city. It said that

> parks contribute to the ecological health of the city.

That might seem paradoxical, but it is important to think in that way.

I was less convinced by what the report refers to as "biophilia", which links environmental quality to social behaviour. It suggests that

> close contact with nature, on a regular or casual basis reduces stress, anxiety and aggression.

I am sure that that is right, but not about the neologism "biophillia". If the removal of my stress this week by a stroll across Green park was "biophilia", I am glad that I enjoyed it.

Hon. Members have referred to the community spirit and civic pride that comes from the use of parks. The Wootton Bassett in bloom competition, in which I had the honour to be a judge and to present a prize last year, meant that people worked hard in their gardens and parks, but developed a keen interest in each other's as well. That engendered civic pride.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) contrasted what she saw as a sharp reduction in sports facilities under the previous Government with an increase under the present Government. That is not true. Sport England has produced figures to demonstrate that the sale of sports pitches under the present Government has been catastrophic, and faster in percentage terms than under the previous Government. Leaving that aside, all sensible Members of Parliament would agree that we should find ways to preserve and increase the number of sports pitches. About 500 children currently play football in Chippenham on a Saturday on a waterlogged pitch. No amount of lobbying of the Liberal Democrat-controlled district council will persuade it to provide a worthwhile sports pitch, even though the Conservative-controlled Wiltshire county council is happy to provide the land. Perhaps a copy of today's *Hansard* will spur the council on.

A more worrying problem surrounds a large area of land in Corsham in my constituency, which the Ministry of Defence is selling to developers to build 590 houses. That is a controversial decision, especially because in the centre of the land are a large sports field, changing rooms and car parking. The MOD has in the past allowed the children of Corsham to use it, which is sensible. One can imagine the horror of Corsham people when they were told, a year ago, that the whole sports pitch would be built on, because the MOD wanted to maximise the return on the sale of the ground. After much pressure from councillors and from me, the MOD has agreed to keep the sports pitch and the cinder running track around it, but it is none the less continuing with the plan to build on all the associated land, including the children's sports pitches and play area, the car park and changing rooms. They will all be bulldozed in favour of houses because it is said that the Ministry of Defence needs the money in the post-strategic defence review era.

I have written to Ministers about this matter. Government hypocrisy is highlighted when they claim to believe in the value of children's play areas but decided to build houses on the Corsham sports pitch because they do not have enough money for the Army's rifles. If the Government want to be seen as sports pitch-friendly, I challenge them to announce immediately that they have rethought the question of selling the sports pitches in Corsham. Sport is an important aspect of our parks.

Several hon. Members have commented on the decline of our parks. They are dreary and covered in litter. They are overgrown, with poor plants and rusty railings. They attract vandals. I do not know why people drive cars to places and set them on fire; it seems a bizarre way of life, but people do it. Parks have declined significantly and we must do something about it—but how?

The first point to be made is that the task will be enormously expensive. Recently, it was decided to repair the iron railings of Vincent square—a wonderful square near here owned by Westminster school. The cost was in tens of thousands of pounds, if not in six figures. After much debate and in a joint venture between the school and Westminster city council a way was found to do it, but the cost was gigantic. To turn around 100 years of decline of the parks will take an awful lot of money.

I welcome the tone of the report which does not, as an old Labour report would have done, conclude that the Government must spend more money. We want somebody elsewhere to spend money. The report moves towards concluding that there is more than one way to skin this cat. Green spaces can cover their own costs through cafeteria franchises and charging for car parking and for all kinds of things—including, in some places, for access. The Royal Horticultural Society gardens at Wisley have not received a single penny from local or national government, but because of an intelligent admission policy of charging some people and giving the deserving and others free admission, and by making use of first-class cafeteria facilities—some good, some bad, some indifferent—and garden shops, the society has raised more than enough money to provide the best gardens that I have seen. One would expect nothing else.

PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that the parks have a value of about £5 billion per annum, and that tourist expenditure in parks is now about £300 million per annum. If decent parks, like the RHS garden at Wisley, were to be found throughout the country, that income could be maximised and plenty of ways found to regenerate parks that are now less attractive to the tourist. Finding a way to move money from one to the other would be an intelligent and useful thing to do. Many ways can be found to shift money towards them without necessarily seeking massive Government or local authority grants.

In that context, like the hon. Member for Leeds, Central, I pay tribute to the work of the Groundwork Trust. It makes the best possible use of volunteers, and it gets people out doing things to improve our parks, which is to be applauded.

I welcome most of the report's proposals. However, like the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), I found the Government's response deeply disappointing. The Government pay lip service to most of the Committee's proposals, but rarely do they say that they disagree with a report. They usually say, "Yes, we entirely endorse the report. We must find ways of doing it. We shall examine it, we shall look into it." I listened recently to a road safety announcement; it contained no proposals, but lots of words—"We will commission a report; we will set up a committee; we will look into; we will think about it." A journalist said to me today that it contained not one proposal to improve road safety. Having read the Government's response to this report, I cannot imagine that parks will get any better. It contains no proposals that might achieve any of the things called for in the report.

I am glad that the Under-Secretary is spending the afternoon listening to the debate; I know that she will think carefully about the matter. It is important that in this time of economic prosperity the Government should not take the easy option and shelter behind fine words, launches and reports. The Under-Secretary should tell us what the Government will do to turn round the decline in parks that hon. Members have described this afternoon. Our parks are in a disgraceful state, yet they are a huge national asset. It is time that the Government did something about it.

3.47 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I was a member of the Select Committee when it started its investigations; unfortunately, I am no longer a member. However, I remember that, when the Chairman announced that the Committee would be undertaking an investigation of parks, I was a little bemused because of my knowledge of the parks in my constituency. The hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) spoke of the many fine parks in his constituency. Southampton, too, has many parks—indeed, I am sure that we have enjoyed each other's parks—but the tradition of parks in our part of the world is not shared by many other parts of the country.

Southampton has 660-odd hectares of parkland. Of that, 134 hectares forms Southampton common, which leads into the city centre. More recently—this will encourage those who believe that there are no new parks—another 197 hectares of greenways have been created. That is mainly the result of the city council's efforts to join together the green spaces next to the streams that run through the hilly areas of Southampton, and to give access to those greenways from the public parks in the city centre.

Southampton has a tradition of substantial parks. It also has a deep civic consciousness of how important those parks are to the city. Southampton common has existed as land in common ownership since early medieval times. It is interesting to reflect on the use of the common and the pride that local residents take in its status as a site of special scientific interest in the middle of the city. Southampton common is home to one of the few remaining colonies of the greater crested newt, which is the Ronseal of the amphibian world—it does exactly what it says it does, being larger than the average newt and having a crest. The fact that there is an SSSI in the middle of the city is a source of price to city dwellers, but the common is also used for many events, and has been since medieval times. Indeed, looking at the roster of events in Southampton parks over a three-month

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

period, I see about 41 major events were held, including a big bug tour, a daisy dip fun day, a fair, a common conservation walk and a model car club fun day. A whole range of activities take place in the parks, which are used regularly by the city's residents.

An organisation called Southampton Parks and Commons Protection Society defends Southampton common with the tenacity of a lion defending her cubs. Some time ago, a substantial dispute took place about whether a post should be located inside the common, which would give the people who live in a house on the edge of the common access to their garage. Although one might regard that as a trivial point, the fact that city residents were prepared voluntarily to undertake activity in defence of parks and open spaces is good for the health and future of those parks.

A combination of civic pride, on-going public support, action by voluntary organisations to protect the parks and investment in parks are the ingredients for ensuring that parks in towns and cities remain healthy and vibrant. Recently, Southampton city council obtained a heritage lottery fund grant of £3 million to restore the central parks to their state in Victorian times. In Southampton, it is true to say that any politician who stood up in a public place and suggested that anything untoward should be done to a park would quickly disappear from the local political scene, because parks are an important part of Southampton's public life, and long may they remain so.

Mr. Bennett: It is rare for a politician to suggest that anything should be done to destroy a park; the problem is neglect. I listened with sympathy to what my hon. Friend said about Southampton parks. Indeed, Southampton seems to have done much better than most places, but then he reminded us that the central park needed lottery money for regeneration, which demonstrates that, even in Southampton, quiet neglect has done more damage than would be done by a council leader's suggestion that a park should be closed or abandoned.

Dr. Whitehead: That is a strong point. I was about to mention the other side of the coin, namely what happens when parks are not loved and cherished, money is not forthcoming for maintenance and the other ingredients are not present. The ambitious scheme to restore Southampton centre parks to their Victorian form has been made possible only by the grant. The city council tried hard, but several features of the Victorian period were impossible to replace.

I wish to move on to my experience of taking part in the inquiry, which radically changed my views about parks. Before proceeding, I should explain that my name is absent from the list of visitors in the annexe to the general report. I am not sure whether members of the Committee airbrushed my name out in their rage at my resignation, like the disappearance of Bukharin from pictures of the Soviet Central Committee after he fell out with Stalin. I can assure hon. Members that I was present and that I distinctly remember being there when our chairman took photographs, juxtaposing the best and the worst in parks. On the outside cover of the document I recognise a picture of Stockport's Burntwood park and the inside cover has a picture of its Hollywood park. One park was revived; the other remains in a very sad state.

The Committee presciently highlighted aspects of what we would all want for the future development of parks in the UK. It is extraordinary that we have no knowledge at a national level of exactly where parks are, what they do, who runs them, what condition they are in, and so forth. The difficulties encountered by the Committee in attempting to acquire information speak volumes about the national consciousness of the heritage of our parks. It is also worrying that no one speaks on behalf of parks to Government. They are too often regarded as open spaces in which things happen, but no one really knows much about them—perhaps they are the resort of old ladies and kids on skateboards. In most parks, nothing much of an organised nature takes place, which causes them to fade from public view—at least in relation to policy options.

Some time before the Select Committee visit, I read a report by Commedia entitled "Parklife", which pointed out how well used parks were, even though that often appeared not to be the case. Commedia counted people coming in and out of parks and found that, although use was overwhelmingly informal, it was astonishingly heavy by any standards. The idea that parks are empty spaces with grass that no one uses or cares for is mistaken. Unfortunately, that mistaken impression is often in the heads of those who consider what should be done with parks. Gaining a clearer picture at national level of exactly what happens in our parks would be a step forward. It is important to raise consciousness of the debate among our national policy makers.

I am disappointed that the Government have not accepted the Select Committee's suggestion that an urban parks and green space agency could usefully formulate opinion on parks, but there are more positive aspects to the Government's response to the report, which offer some mitigation.

Another issue connected with parks is often neglected. I recall that the Committee took evidence from someone who had worked on the development of Central park in New York and he pointed out that a neglected park can spread blight around its boundaries and become a severe negative factor for an entire neighbourhood. Conversely, a vibrant park's influence spreads well beyond its boundaries. People want to live nearby, things happen in that park, people are drawn to it and the neighbourhood benefits from more than the park itself.

I was encouraged by the consideration given to the best value scheme in the Government's response to the Committee report. Having listened to the evidence put before the Committee and visited parks to discover their condition and how they are managed outside Southampton, I think that the compulsory competitive tendering regime, to which local government was subjected for such a long time, had at least a hand in the decline of our parks.

During a previous debate, I mentioned the, possibly apocryphal, story of the Barnet ducks. The local authority put its parks out to tender under the leisure management provisions of the CCT regime. Everything was measured for the tender, but in the winter after the parks came under the management of the organisation

that won the tender, the ducks on the pond died. The reason was that the park keeper had previously fed the ducks, but no one had measured the park keeper doing so and, therefore, the ducks were not fed after the contract had gone out to tender.

The best value scheme should bring together in a positive way several of the issues that I have mentioned. Some the performance indicators used in the scheme will be relevant to parks. Community plans, which local authorities will be required to draft under the best value regime, will undoubtedly take into account local authorities' proposals on parks and show how improvements can be monitored regularly as the regime develops.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman implies that CCT had a role in the decline in parks, but that is not stated in the report. Equally, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) went to some lengths to say that there was no evidence of that and that it was not the reality of the process. None the less, the hon. Gentleman has given an example of park keepers working out how long it takes to feed ducks. Is he suggesting that, under the best value regime, people will know how much it costs a local authority to employ someone to feed the ducks? How will ducks' lives be saved under the best value regime when they were not saved under CCT?

Dr. Whitehead: With respect, the hon. Gentleman has misinterpreted what I have said. If everything is put out to tender on the basis of a document in a brown envelope and a job, such as the park keeper's informal feeding of the ducks, is not measured, the contractor that successfully bids for the tender will not do it.

A good park depends on many factors, including a partnership between the local authority and the local population.The authority has to do what is necessary to make the park work well, and local people have to have pride in it, playing a positive role, perhaps as friends of the park. All sorts of organisations come together to make parks vibrant. Several of those ingredients were effectively discouraged under CCT. Although I do not lay all the blame for the decline in our parks at the door of CCT, it had a hand in ensuring that people may have decided to put in ground cover rather than plant flowers because doing so was cheaper and easier, whatever the wishes of those who lived around and used the park may have been.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is most generous to give way to me twice. Even if that were the case, why would it be different under best value? Best value also specifies what the contractor will do. If the specification is incorrect, the job will not be done. His point that under CCT the ducks were not fed and that under best value they will be is fundamentally flawed. What is the logic of that statement?

Dr. Whitehead: I am about to tell the hon. Gentleman the circumstances in which best value will be better. It is at least intimated in the Government's response to the Committee report. It is because one is not subject to a rigid system of measuring everything, putting it into a document, opening a brown envelope and then being stuck with that way of doing things for a number of years.

The point about best value is that a range of possible service options is considered. It is possible to put something out to tender; it is possible to develop a partnership between local authorities to run a service; it is possible to run a service in a partnership between the local authority and the voluntary sector, or between the local authority and the private sector; it is possible to develop a long-term partnership in any of those models so that the basis of the partnership and the judgment of what is the best value for that particular park is based on the best overall outcome, not on a single narrow definition of how a particular service can be run in pure accountancy terms. The best value regime, which encourages those partnerships, can develop and change the way a park service is maintained and developed over a period of time, in conjunction with local people and the development of the community plan.

That gives me considerable encouragement, but overall—certain parts of the country notwithstanding—our parks are still declining. That should be a proper concern of all hon. Members. On that point, I wholly agree with the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). As we continue with the process of urbanisation, parks become more and more vital as green lungs. On the edge of our towns and cities, country parks become important as bridges between the city and the countryside surrounding it. We neglect our parks at our peril. The Committee has done sterling work, not least in drawing this to the attention of the House and the public, and I congratulate it.

4.8 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I add my congratulations to all those who served on the Committee—half of whom seem to have gone on to greater and better things since producing the report—and in particular to the Chairman. I congratulate them not just because the report addresses an important subject and produces arresting evidence and conclusions, but on the felicity of its literary style. One is always encouraged by a report that starts with a quotation from Ruskin. The rest of the report did not lose in the comparison. It was a much better read than many Select Committee reports.

To continue the theme from Ruskin, one of the things that comes out of the pages of the report is the tribute to the idealism of many city fathers in the Victorian and Edwardian eras who felt both a sense of service and a self-confidence about the future of their towns and cities, of which the parks were such a great symbol. In many ways, the report is suffused with some of that spirit of idealism. Apart from that spirit which shone out of it, I was struck by the degree of suppressed anger at things that had gone wrong in too many country and urban parks. Most important of all is the report's sense of urgency. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) clearly stated that action is urgently required as the problem cannot go on without harm resulting. By contrast, he said that the Government's response to the report was disappointing. I am aware that, in this Chamber, we are not required to be as robust as we might be in the other Chamber, so I shall confine myself to describing the Government's response as inadequate, but I would use a lengthier and more robust description elsewhere.

[Mr. Damian Green]

It is important to put the report and the Government response in context. One of the most interesting points mady by the hon. Gentleman was his assertion that, despite a common background of problems, there is huge variation in the state of parks in different parts of the country. Indeed, that variation is represented on the cover of the report, which shows the stark difference between the best and the worst of our parks. That points to the conclusion that decline and neglect are not inevitable, whatever the system of local government funding and however local government performance is measured by national Government.

Broadly speaking, good local authorities will continue to provide good park services and bad local authorities will not. I hope that local authorities throughout the country will draw on that lesson. In our debate, hon. Members have spoken about good and bad things in parks in their constituencies. There are good and bad parks in my own constituency, but all could probably be better.

The general conclusion to be drawn from the report is that good local authorities provide better parks. Our discussion about the effect of best value has been interesting. I accept the assertion of the hon. Gentleman that the existence of CCT was not the primary cause of problems and that a change in the process created resistance from some local authorities. I am afraid that hon. Members who say that everything will be better under best value will be proved wrong.

Any transition will cause problems. Indeed, councillors in my constituency and elsewhere say that the great problem with best value is the bureaucracy that it creates. One councillor told me that one has a choice. Either one fills in all the forms or one provides the services, but there are not enough hours in the day to do both. That problem will affect park services and other vital local authority services if the best value regime continues. The hon. Gentleman was being polite when he said that he was not encouraged by the best value regime in that context. I was struck by the harsh criticism of English Heritage's performance. I hope that it will take that as a warning shot. The Select Committee will return to the subject later, but has identified serious problems.

Various hon. Members have taken us on tours of their local parks. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) made a powerful point about the problems caused by travellers in and around parks which will resonate with hon. Members around the country. To my surprise, I agreed with virtually every word of the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn). He identified the need for park keepers to stop damage to trees in parks and hoped that, because we all own them, we should all feel a sense of responsibility for them. Unfortunately, when everyone owns something, no one feels a responsibility for it, which is why capitalism works and socialism does not, but I shall not go any further down that route. I am sure that we all admired the passion of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), both for the parks in his constituency and for the various London parks that he often visits at lunchtime every day. That is obviously why he keeps so fit, despite his evidently heavy lunching programme.

The report contained some shocking facts. It is unthinkable that we have no reliable figures on the number of parks in this country, estimates varying from 30,000 to 5,000. I note that, by the end of the reporting process, 5,000 seemed to have been accepted as the realistic figure. It is equally extraordinary that, despite the Select Committee's best efforts, there were no reliable figures on how much local authority expenditure on parks has changed over the years. Most noteworthy of all is the fact that the Committee itself was shocked by the evidence that it found. Indeed, that is more or less what the report says. That identifies the chronic and acute problems evident in so many parks. The Chairman of the Committee said that he was disappointed with the Government's response, so it would be useful if the Minister addressed in her reply the most disappointing aspects of the Government's response.

The first disappointing aspect is the lack of a proper review, which the Government have not so much rejected as brushed aside. I draw the Minister's attention to the successful royal parks review, which took place a few years ago. If I remember my history, I recall consulting people at the time. The Department was not keen on the review then, partly because it was wary of a recommendation for an agency structure. However, during the course of the review, the sheer weight of the evidence convinced the Department that a new regime was necessary—and it was subsequently implemented. The review was properly resourced and had a proper secretariat; it was genuinely independent of the Government, who listened to what was said. It produced an overwhelming case, which Ministers acknowledged, and they implemented many of the recommendations. Will the Minister acknowledge the force of my analogy between that review and the potential review of our urban and country parks?

Another disappointing element is the Government's delayed reaction to the Rogers report. Parks are only part—but, we would all agree, an important part—of his many recommendations for promoting urban revival across the country. The Government's delay in responding to that report has caused problems. I know that no White Paper will be produced until after the comprehensive spending review. That review is, of course, important, but the fact that the Government seem paralysed by it for months, sometimes years on end, cannot be good for governance. I hope that the Minister will deal with that too.

The Minister should also enlighten us about the provision of lottery money. It is clear from both the report and what hon. Members said that much of the good work done in parks in recent years has been funded by lottery money, but the Minister will be aware of the different ways in which lottery money is now distributed. Those have been fragmented in recent years by the Government's own acts. They wanted to set up new forms of lottery giving, and my fear is that such fragmentation will cause new cracks, into which the needs of parks will fall.

I know that the Minister's Department is not responsible for the lottery. That is a symptom of a wider problem that affects parks: they can look to her Department, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Local Government Association or the local authorities to take responsibility for them. All those

bodies play a role, but it seems that none of them seems to feel that it has the prime responsibility for them. That calls to mind an analogy with trees in the parks. The Minister's presence suggests that her Department regards itself as principally responsible for preserving and enhancing our parks, so perhaps she should tell the Chamber whether she agrees that what I have described is a genuine and significant problem.

Local government is a vital player because local authorities have the hands-on, day-to-day responsibility for running parks. Can the Minister explain the LGA's role in that? The Committee resisted the temptation to propose new statutory duties for local authorities or statutory protection for parks and I am sure that that was right, because placing new central burdens on local authorities would be a move in the wrong direction. If we accept that point—as the Committee rightly did—we should also accept that central bodies, such as the LGA, should provide advice and help. Does the Minister consider that a legitimate role for the LGA, or should her Department fulfil that function?

Inevitably, many hon. Members have identified money as one solution to the problems. Parks are vulnerable when local authorities are, as they see it, under-resourced, because there is no statutory duty on them. Similarly, parks are vulnerable when there is no national voice for them, like the Arts Council or the Sports Council. It has already been said that the existence of matched funding for institutions such as museums means not only that those bodies can receive money from various sources, but that the temptation for local authorities to cut budgets in those areas is reduced, because they would lose the matched funds and entire institutions would disappear. Where should local authorities place parks in the hierarchy of their duties? It is clear, not least from today's debate, that well-run parks are as good and visible a symbol as there can be of a well-run local authority, so it is surprising that too many authorities seem to regard them as a relatively low priority.

That brings me to the Committee's central recommendation: the setting up of a new urban parks and green spaces agency. Many people's instinct, including mine, is to be wary of setting up another quango. I congratulate the Committee on the argument that it advanced for doing so and on the thoroughness of the appendix setting out how such a body would work. It is important not to leave those things hanging and to have a stab at saying what would actually happen. However, doing so gives rise to legitimate qualms in that the appendix suggests that the budget would be about £30 million to £50 million, which is a significant sum. When Select Committees advocate setting up a new quango, they should perhaps have a moral duty to recommend at least one other quango to be abolished in order to retain the balance in public life.

Whatever our views about the merits of creating a new agency, the matter deserves more analysis and argument than the Government have given in their response. It is clearly a serious suggestion based on evidence taken from a wide range of people. The rather bland and simple dismissal of the suggestion in the Government's response is regrettable, and I hope that the Minister will discuss the matter. The Government did not even promise a review. Perhaps the most powerful argument for the agency is that parks do not have a national voice, which puts them at a disadvantage. I am wary of the suggestion, but it should not be rejected out of hand, as it is in the Government's response.

The report is passionate and focused on genuine problems. In contrast, the Government's response is a classic piece of Sir Humphrey drafting: it drizzles indifference over the subject and tries to put a blanket over the suggestions. I hope that the Minster will give a fuller explanation, not least because, as the debate has made clear, parks have mattered to millions of people for decades and centuries. Many political reforms that cause enormous day-to-day controversy are fleeting and evanescent. If the Minister can put parks on a more stable footing, she will deserve thanks from millions of people for generations to come, and I hope that she will reassure us that her thoughts are moving in that direction.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) on having initiated the debate. It is extremely difficult for me to address you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to acknowledge those of my hon. Friends who are behind me. I hope that they will forgive me if I do not turn around very often.

I thank the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs for its thorough and thoughtful consideration of the wide range of evidence that it collected and for having produced a report that is so timely in relation to our objectives for parks and open spaces. I am pleased that we have debated the subject, because I share the views that hon. Members have expressed about the importance of parks and open spaces, as do my colleagues, especially my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The debate gives me an opportunity to explain the Government's position.

Our position contrasts starkly with the record of the previous Government, who presided over the decline that the report has illuminated. I have some sympathy for the hon. Members for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for Ashford (Mr. Green), who have been wrong-footed. Their protestations inevitably have a hollow ring, because for the long period during which the Conservative party could have introduced measures to protect or enhance parks and gardens, it did the reverse.

Mr. Gray: The Minister echoes what her colleagues say for almost any aspect of policy—the Conservative party is to blame; it is the natural party of government and has been in power for 75 or 80 per cent. of the time in the past century, which is correct. However, to say that all the nation's ills must be blamed on the Conservative party because it is the natural party of government seems to be an abdication of the Government's responsibilities. We want to hear, not an easy jab at the Conservative Government for allowing parks to decline, but clear and positive factual information about how her Government will correct that decline.

Ms Hughes: I said not that the Conservative party is the natural party of government, but quite the reverse.

[Ms Hughes]

For various reasons, it happened to have control of central Government for the 18 years following 1979. In saying that his party cannot accept responsibility for what its Government did during that time to parks and gardens, the hon. Gentleman lays bare the dismissive attitude to such matters that the Conservatives displayed when they were in power.

By contrast, the Labour Government are committed to making our towns and cities attractive and vibrant places in which people can live and work. That has been a central theme developed by the Government and my Department for some time. We want to create more socially inclusive and economically competitive communities in our cities. We recognise, even if the Conservative party did not, that parks and open spaces improve the quality of life in our urban environment and will be important in bringing about the urban renaissance that we are determined to effect.

Enormous benefits can be gained from well designed and managed parks and open spaces. They are a vital recreational resource, as many hon. Members have said. Although the evidence might be insubstantial, we believe that parks can improve the health and social well-being of people and enhance their enjoyment of local environments. They make a valuable contribution to biodiversity in cities, and provide an important wildlife and educational resource for many children, especially in urban areas. The Government need no convincing that open spaces and parks play a vital role in enhancing the quality of people's lives, which is the remit of my Department.

The Environment Sub-Committee suggested that several parts of park provision and management should be improved, and hon. Members have touched on some of those during the debate. Our response to its report, which I do not accept was inadequate, contained proposals to deal with those recommendations.

The Sub-Committee expressed concern about the lack of adequate information on the quantity and quality of our parks and the way in which they are used. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) and agree with him that the fact that no data were available is shocking, and is testimony to the previous Government's lack of concern. Unlike us, they did not even want to know where or in what state the parks were, or how many of them there were. Information of good quality is a foundation without which nothing can be done to improve parks, and is essential to inform other decisions that we shall make as a Government to achieve the urban renaissance.

That is why we started to fill the information deficit outlined in the report. My Department, the heritage lottery fund and English Heritage are jointly funding the needs assessment survey of publicly owned parks, which I hope will remedy our lack of knowledge about their condition and use. I hope that it will also help to identify aspects of park management on which we might need to do further research. In answer to a question asked by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), we expect the research to be collected by the end of April. The early responses are encouraging: we have already received more than 200 from local authorities about the parks and their condition, and we hope to have a substantial database by the end of next month.

Mr. Bennett: I was going to press the Minister on when we would get that information and I am pleased that that is now on the record. I hope that she will urge local authorities to produce rather more accurate information than that which they gave the Committee. Many of them were uncertain about that information—yet they have been sending back figures to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy for years and years, on the basis of the figures that they had put in for parks the preceding year. I hope that she insists that they check how much park area they have and are maintaining.

Ms Hughes: Information is useful only to the extent that it is accurate. We are pressing local authorities to check before telling us what parks they have and what state they are in. I am therefore confident that we will get a much clearer picture.

Secondly, the Sub-Committee felt that there was a need to redefine best value in park services. We have had considerable debate about the potential role of best value in improving parks and park services. The Sub-Committee recommended that local authorities develop masterplans for parks and open spaces, setting out clearly how they would be managed. Under best value, local authorities will be encouraged to develop local cultural strategies in which they can express their cultural vision and priorities, taking into account the needs of local communities. We expect those strategies to cover parks and open spaces and will check that they do.

I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish who thinks that there is a lack of clear information about best value; how it works is to him a fuzzy concept. Most local authorities would probably not share that view. If they have a complaint about best value, it is that there is too much for them to do in establishing it. It is nearly 1 April, when best value comes into formal operation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test alluded to the partnership aspect of best value, but the performance element of best value will enable better assessment of how local authorities manage and maintain their parks. That drive for performance is the foundation of best value, which, unlike CCT, will deliver in relation to services in general, and parks in particular, because it will place much greater priority on improving the quality of services provided.

The performance indicators that we have produced alongside the best value regime will be reviewed each year and we will look closely at how effectively they achieve that continual drive in performance. In our response to the Sub-Committee's report, we gave a commitment to consider, with other interested groups, whether the next round of performance indicators should be more specific about parks. If the current indicators are not working as well as they might, we will revise them. We believe that best value will provide local authorities with the opportunity to make specific improvements across the services they provide, including parks and open space provision.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of funding. The Sub-Committee advised that the funding of park services has declined as a result of resources having been

spread very thinly. I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Southampton, Test and for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) that that was largely a consequence of the previous Government's CCT regime. It is interesting that both my hon. Friends were, like me, council leaders and had first-hand experience of operating CCT. I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish that it was a consequence of the process itself. Under the previous Government's regime, there is no doubt that in its drive to keep down costs, and in its narrow interpretation of value for money, CCT contributed to a dramatic decline, not only in funding, but in the quality of staffing and maintenance of our parks. We have much lost ground to make up.

I mentioned the improvements that I expect best value to make in the quality of parks management and in helping to reverse some of those consequences. I confirm that we are also reviewing expenditure on parks and environmental services as part of the current spending review, about which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked. We are pursuing the issue and we shall announce the outcome of the review later in the year. In addition, we have committed extra capital funds for park improvements through the two major lottery progammes to which hon. Members have referred.

Net expenditure by local authorities on parks is beginning to rise. The increase is slow, but expenditure rose to £513 million in 1995–96 and to £538 million in 1997–98—the last year for which we have figures. The money put into parks does not come only from the revenue support grants given by the Government to local authorities, or from the annual capital guidelines, which include an element relating to parks and environmental services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Riverside said, other investment is being made where environmental improvement can be delivered for parks.

Such funds can come from the single regeneration budget, European funding and from the Groundwork Trust. I have visited a number of its projects throughout the country and seen the work being done to revitalise parks. Community forests are another valuable type of scheme: I launched a community forest recently in the north-west and saw the enormous impact that such projects can have on park facilities. The environmental task force of the new deal is also channelling Government money into projects with an environmental impact, which often involve work in parks. The environmental action fund, which supports the green flag award, is another source of investment. Indeed, the Government are discussing ways in which we can better promote and develop that award. The Government are, therefore, supporting local authorities in refurbishing their parks through a wide range of initiatives and sources of targeted funding as well as through mainstream revenue support grant funding.

Mr. Green: At the start of that list of funding, the Under-Secretary made an interesting statement. She said that the Government have added to capital spending through lottery funding. Can I confirm that she has destroyed the myth that lottery grants are independent? Are we to take it that lottery money is now central Government funding? That would be an interesting constitutional development.

Ms Hughes: The hon. Gentleman cannot see the wood for the trees. I confirm what he well knows: lottery organisations allocate money independently of the Government and extra capital funding has passed through that mechanism into parks—[*Interruption.*] Does the hon. Member for North Wiltshire wish to intervene?

Mr. Gray: I was speaking to myself, but as the Under-Secretary has so kindly given way, I shall speak aloud. The fact that money has been invested from lottery funds has nothing to do with the Government. The only Government who have anything to do with that are the previous Government, who invented the lottery.

Ms Hughes: The hon. Gentlemen seem unable to grasp the point. Money is invested through lottery funding as well as through a wide variety of Government mechanisms providing targeted funding for particular areas. Taken in the round—I could add in money invested by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on tourism—the amount going into refurbishment of parks is much greater than the figure often considered, which is the revenue support grant to individual local authorities.

The report recommended that a number of other aspects of parks management be addressed. One of the most important recommendations was the establishment of a national parks and green spaces agency. A new agency is one way to tackle the more fundamental issue of how we ensure that nationally and locally we keep our eye on the ball. We need to know what is happening to parks. We cannot allow the situation of the past 18 years to continue, when no one had their eye on the ball.

Local authorities, working in partnership with their local communities, are best placed to decide how to deliver local economic, educational, health and environmental services. In that context, the responsibility for making decisions about parks and open spaces should remain with local authorities. It would not be right for such decisions to be in the hands of a new quango, as the hon. Member for Ashford called it, that is not locally elected and therefore not locally accountable. We would be concerned about the possible overlap between the activities of the agency and the actions and decisions that are rightly matters for local authorities. I think local authorities woud agree. It is one reason why we are not persuaded that a new agency would be the best way to tackle the Committee's concerns.

Mr. Bennett: Surely that argument would apply to the Sports Council, the Arts Council and similar bodies. We were suggesting not that parks should be taken away from local authorities, but that there should be support for local authorities to get across the messages of best practice, to help with training and to campaign for parks. That is not taking management responsibilities away from local authorities. Does my hon. Friend not

[Mr. Bennett]

recognise that the Countryside Commission did a huge job in getting country parks established, even though the work was carried out by local authorities?

Ms Hughes: In a sense, I can answer yes to part of my hon. Friend's question. We are giving careful consideration to the Committee's arguments for a champion for parks. Had the Committee's report argued for that, without prescribing the method of achieving it, the Government might have been more enthusiastic.

Mr. Bennett: That is the usual device of Ministers. If a Select Committee puts forward a vague idea, it is attacked for not giving the detail. It would be great to hear my hon. Friend announce that she is considering a proposal to do the same thing. We are not saying that we have devised the right way to proceed, but at least we took the trouble to include some detail for discussion. If she wants to produce a different way of achieving the same thing, the Committee would not be too upset. What we want is someone to champion parks effectively.

Ms Hughes: I agree with some of the Committee's arguments about the need to have a champion for parks, because there should be a mechanism to focus on what is happening in parks, but I do not think that my hon. Friend has proposed the best mechanism for that. He said that the Committee had to be specific in the report or the proposal would have been put to one side. The report went into great detail: it outlined what the agency would do, and costed it to the tune of between £30 million and £50 million. The Committee proposed a specific solution to the issues that the report raised. We are not convinced that that is the best or only mechanism by which to achieve the broader objectives with which we agree.

Hon. Members should appreciate that several other bodies might be able to take on the role described by my hon. Friend. Local authorities cannot be airbrushed—the word used by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test—from the equation. We wish to discuss the Committee's proposals with the Local Government Association, English Heritage, the Countryside Agency, the Arts Commission and several other interested bodies.

I assure my hon. Friend of our commitment to the issue. That brings me to one of the most important points, which was made tangentially in the report and, more clearly, in the debate: the importance of parks and open spaces to regeneration. My hon. Friends the Members for Riverside and for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) spoke clearly about the importance of parks and open spaces for wider regeneration objectives, particularly in relation to their cities, but also in relation to other towns. That is an essential Government objective. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Riverside that recognition of the importance of parks and open spaces is belated. However, the Government made regeneration a primary objective as soon as they had the opportunity to do so. The Rogers report made the link between parks and open spaces and regeneration, and our work in the urban White Paper will build on that. Those points have been well made and are congruent with our vision in the White Paper.

The White Paper will set out our vision for achieving more inclusive, sustainable communities. It will consider a wide range of issues, including the centrality of parks, and show how those cross-cutting issues relate to each other. In preparing the White Paper, we have taken the initiative to bring people together to consider specifically what we call management of the public realm. Through our focus on that concept and on the quality of the fabric of the urban environment, including the green elements in our environment, we will spell out the importance of parks and open spaces in towns.

Mr. Brake: On the Government's commitment to parks and open spaces, the Under-Secretary said earlier that information is the foundation. I agree with her on that, and the parks database is very welcome. However, the Government will also need to analyse the content of the database and act on the results of that analysis. Will the Under-Secretary give an undertaking to provide solutions to the problems identified by the parks database?

Ms Hughes: That is a rather redundant question. We are collecting a database as an essential prerequisite to understanding where our parks stand, what state they are in and what has happened to them. We will use that information as the basis of discussions with interested parties, including local authorities and the Local Government Association, on how the results of the survey should be taken further. The urban White Paper is one of the mechanisms through which we will engage in that debate.

Through the White Paper, we are carefully considering ways to raise the profile of and provide information about our parks and open spaces; to develop and disseminate good practice in the design, management and care of parks and open spaces, and promote higher quality standards; and to encourage the development of the skills needed to improve the management of our parks and their safety and cleanliness—an important matter that some hon. Members mentioned. We are considering ways to develop more effective partnerships that are capable of identifying and co-ordinating new sources of funding for parks and open spaces, and new ways of managing them that could involve local people, as some hon. Members suggested. We are considering also how to promote the effective implementation of best value, to help local authorities begin to deal with some of the adverse effects of CCT, and to encourage the active involvement of local communities and businesses in caring for and championing the cause of local parks and open spaces.

That is not an exhaustive list, but I assure the Committee that we are considering it actively. We are doing so not because the Select Committee told us to, but because it is part and parcel of our understanding of the wide range of issues that are central to achieving sustainable regeneration in many of our towns and cities. We certainly did not need to be prompted to say that parks and open spaces are central to that agenda. When the White Paper is published, we shall establish constructive dialogue with other Departments and with a wide range of interested parties.

Mr. Gray: I have been listening carefully to the Under-Secretary's proposals for making parks better places. She spoke of filling the information deficit and of promoting local cultural strategies; she is going to drive through performance on the basis of best value; she is going to review expenditure; she is going to think about the urban White Paper; she is going to engage in dialogue with various people. Does she really think that words and aspirations such as those are a reasonable substitute for action called for in the Select Committee report?

Ms Hughes: I have talked about a series of actions.

Mr. Gray: Like what? The lottery?

Ms Hughes: Perhaps, because of the previous Government's record, the hon. Gentleman cannot recognise an action when he sees one.

I have outlined our strong commitment to parks and open spaces. We are undertaking a range of activities and measures, which we shall pursue further. We shall put our commitment into practice. As I said, we do not need to be told about the importance of parks and open spaces. Many of us represent constituencies in major cities that have an industrial past. We can see for ourselves what parks used to be like, and what they could be like, and what they should be for our communities. The Government recognised that of their own volition. It is part and parcel of our approach to regeneration—a central theme, not only in the White Paper but in all the regeneration activities that we are undertaking.

I hope that I have been able to reassure at least those hon. Members who have understood what I said that we have taken the Select Committee's report seriously. We have considered all its recommendations and have responded constructively to the vast majority of them. Our work is not finished; the White Paper will take it forward with several further large strides. I thank the Committee for its contribution to the debate, and for the part that it has played in championing and highlighting the importance of parks and open spaces, particularly those in our towns and cities.

4.59 pm

Mr. Bennett: With your leave, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that it is the custom that the Chairman of the Select Committee is allowed to say a few words at the close of the debate.

I thank the Under-Secretary for her response and all those who participated in this useful debate. I stress that Select Committees have a function to undertake reports, but the process must be on-going. I would not want people to feel that we had finished. I hope that the Under-Secretary will understand that we shall consider returning to the issue, possibly through the White Paper on urban regeneration.

I welcome the database and the fact that it will be in place quickly. I hope that there will be a relationship between the database and local authority resources. I do not disagree with the Under-Secretary's view that CCT did much damage. The money saved on the maintenance of one bit of park was not spent on the other parts. That use of money was most devastating, although much time and effort were wasted on it. I shall judge best value by how soon my constituents can look at a park, such as North Reddish park, say how much money Stockport council is spending on it and compare it with sums spent elsewhere.

I hope that we can have a dialogue with the agency so that we can quickly get the urgently needed champion for parks. When considering the way forward, I was pleased to hear the Under-Secretary talk about the management of the public realm, which is fundamental.

Statues, including those in tribute to people who had fought on behalf of others, were provided by public subscription in previous centuries. It would be nice to think that there might be a statue to the Under-Secretary in Longford or Gorse park, reminding everybody that she pushed the Government into taking urban parks seriously again.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am pleased to have allowed the debate to end consensually and pleasantly.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 March 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Haemophiliacs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

10 am

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): I am delighted to have the chance to address you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on this important subject. I have had a long wait to obtain such a debate. As I do not often appear on the health scene in the House, I should explain why I want to discuss haemophiliacs. When I became a Member of Parliament in 1974, my constituency contained Lord Mayor Treloar college, a school for physically disabled children. At the time, the college was the primary specialist treatment location for haemophiliacs in the south-east. I became involved with it as the tragedy of contaminated blood began. I saw the children there; 80 of them were infected by contaminated blood, and 50 of them, alas, are now dead. Since then, I have been involved in the matter for almost all of my time in Parliament.

Towards the end of the 1970s, I met the now chairman of the Haemophilia Society, Mr. Chris Hodgson. He is a constituent of mine, which is a further reason for my continuing interest and concern. He suffers as a result of receiving a contaminated blood product as treatment for haemophilia, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done on behalf of all who suffer from this dreadful disease.

I want to draw attention to the cause of people with haemophilia who have been infected with hepatitis C through the use of contaminated blood products used in their national health service treatment. Those of us who have been campaigning for many years on behalf of such people hope to hear from the Government a new commitment to take action to help. People with haemophilia are a small but vulnerable patient group comprising no more than 5,000 people in the United Kingdom, 500 to 600 of whom live in Scotland. They suffer from a rare, lifelong genetic condition that is passed on through families and for which there is no cure. As a result of their genetic disorder, people with haemophilia lack essential clotting factors in their blood, which means that, without treatment, painful and disabling internal bleeding occurs, affecting joints or organs. Modern treatment involves injection of the missing blood clotting factors to prevent this internal bleeding. From the 1970s, that treatment became available using clotting factor replacement products manufactured from human blood. Tragically, it was through that route that some 1,200 patients with haemophilia were infected with the HIV virus and more than 4,000 were infected with the hepatitis C virus in the 1970s and early 1980s through their national health service treatments.

Contaminated blood had been used to produce the treatment products, and the haemophilia population had paid a heavy price. In 1985 in England—and 1978 in Scotland—procedures were introduced into the manufacturing process to eliminate blood-borne viruses. However, their introduction came too late for the majority of the patient group, who had been treated and were already infected. More than half the people infected with HIV have now died—a total of more than 700 deaths. Of those infected with hepatitis C—a number of whom were co-infected with HIV—figures collected by the UK haemophilia doctors organisation show that some 113 have died through liver disease and liver cancer, both of which are related to the end stages of hepatitis C. However, because no official statistics have been published on the hepatitis C-infected haemophilia population, the number of hepatitis C-related deaths might be much higher.

The progress of hepatitis C is slower than that of HIV. It can take 20 to 30 years, but when it becomes active, it is extremely damaging. Hepatitis C attacks the liver. Within the hepatitis C-infected haemophilia population, many of whom have been infected by the virus for more than 20 years, the toll is becoming apparent. Current medical opinion is that up to 80 per cent. of people infected with hepatitis C will develop chronic liver disease and that up to 25 per cent. might develop cirrhosis of the liver, which might progress to liver cancer.

I am keen to avoid, as far as possible, making party points. The saga has lasted through the Labour Administration of the 1970s and the successive Conservative Administrations of the 1980s and 1990s; now, the problem is again in the hands of a Labour Government. I was astonished and moved recently to be told by a sufferer of the debilitating illness that no Minister, Labour or Conservative, has ever said sorry that such a thing could have happened in our national health service; there have been repeated expressions of sympathy for sufferers, but no one has felt able to say that they are sorry. I am told that just to hear those words from a Minister would be a great comfort, not only to sufferers but to the relatives of those who have died. I hope that the Minister will take that on board; all right-thinking people would warmly applaud him, were he to use those words.

Unfortunately, there is as yet no fully effective treatment for the virus. Progress is being made with combination therapy involving interferon and ribavirin, which was licensed last year, but it does not succeed for all. The treatment has been shown to clear the virus in 30 per cent. of cases. People with haemophilia might be less responsive to the treatment than the general population. The treatment often carries unpleasant and, for some, intolerable side effects. To compound the anxiety and distress suffered by the community, health authorities in many parts of the country are refusing to fund the combination therapy, thereby denying the only hope of a cure to those willing to undertake the onerous treatment. I hope that the Minister will address the matter immediately.

I wish to read one sentence from a letter from Baroness Hayman, then Under-Secretary of State for Health, dated 23 July, to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath (Mr. Godsiff). She writes:

> With regard to the funding of treatment for people with haemophilia infected with hepatitis C, we have made it clear to Health Authorities that care is to be provided for all clinical conditions on the basis of clinical need and effectiveness.

[Mr. Michael Mates]

That could hardly be clearer. I have a further letter, dated 3 December 1999, from the Under-Secretary of State for Health, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath. He wrote to Lord Morris of Manchester, who continues to take an active interest in the matter:

> In the meantime, we will follow up cases where there are local difficulties and where, despite the clinical evidence of benefit, people with haemophilia and hepatitis C are not receiving the therapy.

That, too, could hardly be clearer.

I shall briefly quote a third letter, from the Secretary of State for Health. The last sentence reads:

> In the meantime, we are following up all the cases where people with haemophilia and hepatitis C are not receiving this treatment, when prescribed by their doctors.

Yet today—on 7 March—eight, three and two months after the letters that I have quoted were written, patients are still being denied the treatment on the ground of cost. West Hertfordshire, Sunderland and Avon are among the health authorities that say that they cannot afford to provide it, although in two recent and exceptional cases it has been allowed in Avon. Is it not a scandal that a Minister's promise is openly defied by some health authorities? Will the Department stop wringing its hands over this important issue and ensure that it runs the authorities that it is supposed to control? The defiance is unacceptable.

As a last resort, a liver transplant is the only treatment, but it does not eliminate the virus and, in due course, the new liver becomes infected. I understand that there are no official figures, but at least 20 sufferers from hepatitis C have had liver transplants and several have had more than one. The cost of a drug surely bears no comparison with the cost of repeated liver transplants. Transplants postpone but do not permanently stop the progress of the virus. Waiting lists and delays are common for liver transplants. Those living with hepatitis C therefore endure great uncertainty. Doctors are unable to predict how the virus will affect an individual's health and how soon or seriously he or she may become ill. That creates great stress and anxiety, especially for people with family responsibilities.

I was astounded to find that there are no counselling facilities for people with hepatitis C or for the dependants and families of those who have died from the infection. The Government should at least offer that, and ensure that health authorities provide for those unfortunate people. Research by the Haemophilia Society illustrates the disastrous impact of the infection on the lives of families who were already fighting to overcome a lifelong health problem. Many have had to do less work or give it up because of the effects of the virus, which has led to hardship and loss of income. Serious problems have been caused for people wanting mortgages or life insurance, once they have been diagnosed with hepatitis C. Fear of passing on the virus within families has created terrible stress on relationships between parents and children and husbands and wives. Social stigma is another result and there is evidence of people being shunned by neighbours, friends and colleagues because of the virus.

All this has come about because contaminated products were used to treat people within our national health service. The infection of people with haemophilia with these deadly viruses has been described as one of the worst treatment disasters in the history of the NHS and even now there is little peace of mind for the patient group as there is also a threat of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Experts are agreed that there is no way of guaranteeing that blood products still used for the treatment of haemophilia are free of CJD infection. The Department of Health describes the risk as theoretical, but how must it feel for the patient or the parent of a young patient to know that the treatment relied on daily might carry CJD?

Those of us campaigning to highlight the plight of this patient group want action from the Government. The previous Government accepted that they had a moral responsibility to help those who had been infected with HIV through NHS treatment and, with all-party support in 1987, the Government established a financial assistance scheme. The Macfarlane trust was set up in 1998 to administer it and some £90 million has been made available in across-the-board payments and hardship grants. However, nothing has been done for those affected at the same time in exactly the same way with hepatitis C. The Government must correct that injustice.

In July 1998, the then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), turned down the Haemophilia Society's appeal. His justification was that the harm done was inadvertent and that therefore no financial assistance was due. The same point could have been made about HIV infection. There, too the harm was inadvertent, but the previous Government accepted that they had a moral responsibility to help. We ask the Government urgently to reconsider their decision.

This is not a debate about medical negligence because the previous Government made financial help available on an ex gratia basis without any admission of liability. The same step should, in conscience, be taken for hepatitis C. In contrast with 1987, the mechanism exists, in the shape of the Macfarlane trust, to administer the hardship fund for those who suffer the consequences of receiving contaminated blood products. It would be straightforward for the Government to extend the remit of the Macfarlane trust to enable it to help for those who are affected by HIV and hepatitis C. The trust has earned the respect of all concerned by the way in which it has acted as the Government's agent for HIV infection. There would be no need to reinvent that particular wheel. It would require only a simple amendment to the trust deed and the funding to allow the Macfarlane trust to continue to act efficiently. I am sure that that would command all-party support and be welcomed as a fair and just conclusion to the inequity.

It is a shocking irony, given the family inheritance of haemophilia, that a dividing line must be drawn between brothers and cousins in the same family who have been infected by contaminated blood products at the same time. Those who were infected with HIV and hepatitis C viruses together are entitled to financial help, but that is not necessarily the case for those who contracted hepatitis C alone. For some, the infection—through no fault of their own—is a life sentence; for others, it is a death sentence. Can we tolerate such a lottery in the 21st century? I understand that other colleagues want to talk about the additional problem of haemophiliacs who have been doubly infected by HIV and hepatitis C in greater detail.

The issues are too important to let rest. The Haemophilia Society has called for a public inquiry so that all the facts about how the infection occurred and its impact on those who were infected are brought into the open. That is the least that is due to haemophiliacs who will live with the consequences of contracting HIV and hepatitis C infections from contaminated blood for the rest of their lives. Most important, in the interests of protecting public health, we need a full inquiry to ensure that lessons are learned so that such tragedies do not occur in future.

Governments in other countries have not shirked their responsibilities. In Canada, a full Government investigation was held and, in Ireland, the Government established a tribunal inquiry, which is authorising compensation payments. Closer to home, in September, the Scottish Minister for Health and Community Care, Susan Deacon, initiated an inquiry into the infection of Scottish haemophilia patients. Ministers have taken the line that Scottish cases are different. The detail may be different—heat treatment for blood products happened later in Scotland and there is the question of what information was given to Scottish patients—but the principle is the same. I trust that the Minister will agree that it would be unacceptable for a devolved Scottish Parliament to compensate victims of hepatitis C contamination in Scotland if victims in England and Wales were not compensated. That would be another unexpected consequence of the Government's hasty devolution legislation, and it would turn English and Welsh patients into second-class citizens.

I know that Ministers are sympathetic to the cause, and I hope that what I am about to say will not embarrass them too much. I have before me an early-day motion, tabled in 1995, which called on the Government to give similar financial assistance to those infected with hepatitis C as was given to those infected with HIV. It was signed by the Minister and his boss, the Secretary of State. I do not believe that they have changed their principles in four years, so their duty must be clear. I know that there are constraints in government that are not there in opposition. Nevertheless, this is a wonderful opportunity for them to be consistent in their demands for fair play for those victims.

It would do much for those who cynically believe that the Government do not care, if a reply were made to the appeal delivered to No. 10 Downing street on 23 November last year by a cross-party delegation led by Lord Morris, in which several hon. Members present today and I took part. I was saddened to hear yesterday that the appeal has not even been acknowledged, which would cost only the price of a postage stamp.

Justice requires that the Government should set up an independent inquiry into the matter, as has been done in Scotland. There, evidence has been taken from the blood transfusion service, doctors and patients with haemophilia and hepatitis C, which is being investigated by the Scottish Health and Community Care Committee. Surely, we should demand no less for victims who live in England. I should not like to have to hear the Minister justify the fact that, although the findings of the Scottish inquiry were being implemented, he was not prepared to do the same south of the border. I urge the Minister to give a commitment today to have the whole sorry affair independently examined, not just because compensation might be awarded as a result, although the justice of that would seem to be unquestionable, but to ensure that such an unfortunate and tragic accident can never happen again and that never again will national health service patients be damaged by such a terrible mistake.

10.21 am

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I was one of those Members of Parliament who accompanied 15 representatives of the Haemophilia Society to No. 10 Downing street last November when we laid 113 white lilies on the steps, one for every person in the United Kingdom who has died from hepatitis C, contracted through contaminated blood—a very moving occasion it was too.

I joined that delegation because of one of my constituents, Mr. Tom Cole of Lowestoft. Mr. Cole suffered from mild haemophilia and, many years ago, he was given a clotting agent after two wisdom teeth were extracted. That was when his troubles began because the clotting agent was derived from donated blood, which was subsequently discovered to have come from a batch that was unscreened. That batch of blood was contaminated, so my constituent contracted hepatitis C. Mr. Cole is now 62 years old and he is a very different person from the person he used to be. Many years of suffering as a result of that damaging incident have taken their toll. Before the incident, he had a good job as a helicopter control officer on an offshore rig, but his liver was seriously damaged and his whole system was poisoned. That affected his brain so that he became confused and disoriented and, no doubt, he was also affected by the worry and trauma.

First, drug treatments, with very unpleasant side effects, were tried, but they failed to work. Eventually, it was decided that he needed a liver transplant to survive at all. He had his first liver transplant in December 1995, but unfortunately it was unsuccessful, so he underwent a second liver transplant operation in August 1996. One such operation is difficult, but two is a trial indeed.

I first discovered his case in 1996 while Mr. Cole was at Addenbrooke's, which is about 90 miles from Lowestoft. At that time, I met Mrs. Cole, who was ill herself from chronic worry about her husband's ill health and the way in which he had contracted hepatitis C, as well as from worry about how they would make ends meet because they incurred considerable costs in getting to and from Addenbrooke's. In addition, their family life was greatly disrupted. As a result of what had happened to Tom, that family suffered not only inconvenience but financial penalties. Not only did he suffer the financial loss of two thirds of his income when he had to give up his job, but his pension was affected. He had been looking forward to retirement with a good pension.

Mr. Cole does not blame the national health service or the medical profession for what has happened to him. He realises that it was no one's fault. He knows that it was unfortunate that those blood products were not tested at the time. However, he feels that it is wrong that he should suffer financially for so many years—he will continue to suffer financially into his retirement—for something for which he was not responsible.

The nub of the argument is that people such as Mr. Cole have a moral case. He is not asking for a huge litigation-style compensation payment that

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

acknowledges fault. He wants people in a similar position to receive some modest support that will enable them to receive the regular treatment that they need, and that will help with the cost of travelling to hospital and of the prescriptions that they often need.

The question is simple: cannot the Government perform an act of good will? Despite the fact that they have no legal liability, cannot they widen the remit of the Macfarlane trust to cover people suffering from hepatitis C? To do so would be medically and morally justified. I suspect that the Government have taken the same position as the previous Government because they have been given the same legal advice. When two Governments take the same position, one usually suspects that that is the reason.

This is a time for compassion. We want compassion to find a way through the legal tangle, so that people such as Tom Cole can receive the help that they deserve.

10.27 am

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on having the good fortune to win the debate lottery. I thank him also for the generous way in which he put his case. He did not attempt to score political points. He put the case that successive Governments have been involved. However, for most of those who listened to the hon. Gentleman's speech on radio or television, the question of reasonableness will far outweigh any legal ramifications or responsibilities that the present or previous Governments might have faced.

The British people who listened to the hon. Gentleman's speech will have had an insight into what those people affected and their families have faced. They would say that now is the time—albeit, long overdue—for the Government to recognise that the nation has a responsibility to them. That wrong should be righted sooner rather than later. An inquiry cannot possibly be justified, laudable though the sentiment is, because all the evidence is available. People went for treatment and, through no fault of their own, left hospital in a far worse state. The way in which the treatment was given, and the reasons why contamination took place are now irrelevant. Most of those who receive national health service treatment expect to benefit from it, not to see their lives and those of their families and loved ones systematically destroyed.

We heard of one such incident from the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard). Two friends of mine suffered from this. One, a journalist living in this country, is now dead. Sadly, he died not long after he was infected; he contracted hepatitis C and, as a result, other infections that subsequently killed him. I am sure that medically it could be argued that his haemophilia might have led to his death at that stage anyway, but his family are convinced that his death in his early forties was due to the infection via contaminated products.

Another friend, a French politician whom I met while I was leader of Hampshire county council, also suffers from haemophilia and he was infected with hepatitis C in France. The difference is that he is still alive and has received substantial compensation for what happened to him. At no stage was there any doubt about the sort of treatment that he would receive. He did not suffer from the lottery whereby the part of the country in which he lived determined whether he received the right treatment. He and his family also received substantial sums in compensation. Nothing can ever truly compensate individuals and their families, and, sadly, for many of them any compensation would be too late. As we have heard, people and young children have died. Those lives have been needlessly lost. The nation owes sufferers some justice today. It would be wicked to allow the situation to continue. The wrong would simply be compounded. That cannot be right.

I am grateful to the Haemophilia Society for its latest briefing, which lists eight of the major problems faced by sufferers and their families. The hon. Member for East Hampshire touched on a few of those, but it is worth mentioning them again, and perhaps the Minister will let us have his ideas on possible remedies. There is the difficulty in obtaining life assurance, the reduced income through having to cut working hours or give up work altogether, and the increased costs due to special dietary requirements and medicine charges. The education of many young people with haemophilia and hepatitis C has been adversely affected and job and life opportunities have been lost. People suffer from discrimination and ostracism at work or school and in society in general. That may be difficult to believe, but one need only ask some of the sufferers and their families. They will give chapter and verse of many such incidents. They fear for their future health and leaving their dependants without financial support. With young children and heavy commitments, and an illness that has already resulted in the early deaths of many others, how does one contemplate the future financial support of a family without life insurance?

There is a lack of support and counselling services for hepatitis C sufferers. How can it be that, after 20 years, individuals and their families are still suffering from such problems? If any of us, heaven forbid, were to witness a fatal accident outside this building, we would insist on receiving trauma counselling and advice. Why do sufferers not receive what most of us now assume is available for everyone? Why are those people, through no fault of their own, unable to receive life insurance, something basic which almost everyone takes for granted? Why can we plan for our children's lives after we have gone, while they are nagged with constant worries about the future of their families? It is enough that they have to worry about their families, seeing them suffer while they are alive, yet they also know that their families will have to fight the issue after they have gone.

Other hon. Members will have an opportunity to go into further detail about effects that such individuals have had to take in their stride. The numbers are not large, but we are talking about human beings with a significant problem. As the hon. Member for East Hampshire said, the Minister and his Secretary of State signed an early-day motion. With hindsight, one could say that perhaps neither of them expected to be confronted with the same difficulties or legal advice as their predecessors were. When they signed it, perhaps they thought that changes would be easy to make when they came to office. We wish that that had been the case.

Whatever the difficulties, they cannot be as bad as those that the individuals face. They and their families are crying out for justice. Why have successive

Governments simply not got to grips with the problem and given those people the justice that they deserve? Those of us who have had the privilege of meeting them and their families have been told that they do not want huge financial payments, although I believe that they should. They want continuity of care so that there is no uncertainty about which drugs they can have, no matter where they live. Why can they not be assured today that there will be equal care, with no drugs or treatments denied and no opportunity to give them a better life not taken?

Why can we not make ex gratia payments available to them as we did to those infected with HIV? The mechanism is there. There is no encumbrance on the Government preventing them from doing the right thing. The legal opinion may be that a minefield of other issues will be created, but nothing could be worse than what those people and their families have lived with for nearly two decades. It would be a disgrace if the matter were still unresolved a year from now. At the end of the debate, I hope that the Minister will give everyone concerned the hope of seeing long-overdue justice in a matter of months. Anything short of that would be a disgrace to the nation, let alone our political system.

10.38 am

Mr. Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath): I want to take a couple of minutes to add my support to what has been said. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) for being late and missing the start of his speech.

Like all Members of Parliament, I am frequently brought cases and causes, and I have never come across a greater injustice to a group of people during my eight years in the House. Haemophiliacs have a diminished life style. The fault is not their own; the disease that they have no choice but to live with is inherited. The 5,000 people who suffer from haemophilia put their faith in the national health service for blood transfusions. Sadly, 1,200 were given blood infected with hepatitis C, and, of those, I regret that 700 have already died.

I realise that the Department of Health sympathises with those people, just as it did with people with HIV. I pay tribute to the former Prime Minister, who insisted that the problem of HIV be dealt with. That was done through the Macfarlane trust, into which £98 million was paid, which was subsequently topped up with an additional £3 million. At the time, I spoke to the then Secretary of State, who said that the advice from his Department was, "Don't do it. You will set a precedent. Don't give way." However, the previous Prime Minister felt a moral obligation to deal with the people involved, and insisted that action be taken, and the then Secretary of State created the Macfarlane trust. I pay tribute to him for doing so, because it was the correct decision to deal with a group of people who suffered from a life-threatening disease.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I confirm what the hon. Gentleman says, having been part of the delegation that initiated discussions with the then Secretary of State and having assured him that there would be no question of people taking advantage of an ex gratia payment paid into a charitable trust. That assurance has been honoured, and I am surprised that such a procedure cannot be followed again.

Mr. Godsiff: As my right hon. Friend says, HIV sufferers have honoured that agreement. Those who, through no fault of their own, have been given contaminated blood ask not to become mega rich through massive legal claims, but merely to have, especially for their families, the same sort of provision. As hon. Members have said, once a haemophiliac contracts hepatitis C he knows that he will die sooner rather than later. Those people's anxiety relates not to their anger about having contracted the infection but to their hope for provision to be made for their families when they die.

I am sure that the Minister will show copious sympathy for those people. I do not want to remind him of the fact that he and the Secretary of State signed an early-day motion calling for justice for them. I believe that the Minister would like to help them, but I know the bureaucratic response that the Department will give, because I received it in 1998 from the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancreas (Mr. Dobson), who said:

> The Government has proceeded on the basis that compensation or other financial help to particular patients or groups of patients is only paid out where the NHS or individuals working in it have been at fault. The needs of people whose condition results from inadvertent harm is met from benefits available to the population in general. I am sorry to have to tell you that after considering all aspects of this matter we have decided that we should not make an exception to the general rule in the case of haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C.

He went on to say:

> You have also argued that as the Government provides financial help to haemophiliacs infected with HIV this scheme should be extended to cover people with hepatitis C,

but that the Government took the view that those circumstances were different.

That was in 1998. The then Secretary of State is now entering a new life. It will be interesting to see what position he takes as the potential new mayor of London when addressing the needs of haemophiliacs. It will be interesting to see what he has to say to them and what his feelings are now on the subject.

This is a matter of justice. Haemophiliacs are not asking for the earth; they are not asking for revenge; they are not asking for mega bucks; they want only to be treated in the same way as the HIV sufferers who were infected with contaminated blood. They have done nothing wrong. They put their faith in the national health service and have no option but to continue to put their faith in it. They do not wish to have the national health service held up to ridicule. They want only justice and I hope that, when the Minister responds, he can offer that to them.

10.45 am

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on securing this debate.

The infection of haemophiliacs with hepatitis C is something I feel strongly about since, in my medical career, I may well have been responsible for some of

[Dr. Peter Brand]

them contracting this dreadful disease. When I first qualified, the treatment of haemophiliacs was largely conservative, with the use of ice packs, immobility and treatment to prevent arthritis and joint damage, which are so often a consequence of such a difficult disease. There was then a positive change in medical policy with the availability of factor 8 and other blood products to treat even minor bleeds. I am not sure whether we adequately evaluated the risks of such treatment in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath (Mr. Godsiff) rightly pointed out that we are dealing with blameless victims. Those people took medical advice; they put their trust in Government policy on the treatment of their disease, expecting to lead a more active life and become less of a burden on the state than if they had accepted the conservative treatment that might have resulted in disabilities.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) made a generous speech in which he spoke of a no-fault situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) felt there was no need for an inquiry. Clearly, there is no need for an inquiry if the Government accept responsibility for those who contracted hepatitis C as a result of Government policy on the treatment of haemophiliacs. The mechanisms are there to help those people in the plight that has been so well described by right hon. and hon. Members.

If the Government do not accept responsibility, the only alternative is to call for a public inquiry, because I am not clear how long the Government were aware of the risk of using potentially contaminated products—especially where they were imported—or how long a delay there was in the identification of that risk before those products were properly treated. The Government must either accept that they have a moral as well as a legal responsibility towards those people and use the sensible mechanisms available to them through the Macfarlane trust, or accept responsibility for making all the facts clear about the change between the use of potentially infected products and the heated products. They do not have an alternative.

In the meantime, it is vital that the Government do more than write letters to right hon. and hon. Members saying that treatment and support should be available throughout the country. It should be an instruction. It is not acceptable for people to be treated according to their postcode, nor is it a matter for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The facts about the treatment are well established and I should not want further to overburden NICE. Apparently it can cope only with 30 investigations a year, so it would be a long time before it came up with any answers.

Sadly, the liability to support victims of therapeutically acquired hepatitis C is limited. They are dying slowly and, in some cases, quickly. We are not asking the Government for an open-ended commitment that cannot be evaluated. We know how many people are affected and we can evaluate what support they might need. It behoves the Government of a civilised country to look at their responsibility and admit that they have a role. They should then cost it, evaluate it, seek the support of the House, which I am sure will be overwhelming, and do something for that so far ignored group of people.

10.51 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on securing this Adjournment debate. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) may have been doing him an injustice by saying that he had been fortunate in the lottery. The first debate on Tuesday mornings is selected by Madam Speaker on the merits of the subject and I am delighted that she chose the subject that we are discussing. No one would doubt that there is overwhelming sympathy for haemophiliacs. Such people are already stricken with a disabling condition and over the past 20 or so years the great majority have been stricken again either by HIV or by hepatitis C or, in all too many cases, by both. We share an instinctive horror at the thought that the very process of providing medical treatment can itself be harmful, and most would readily acknowledge that that is one of the worst treatment disasters in the national health service history.

I have a personal interest in the subject because, many years ago, fresh from university, my first job was in a company that was involved in the importation and sale to the NHS of anti-haemophiliac factors. Although I was a junior and insignificant member of the team, I knew eminent doctors, scientists and pharmacists who were undertaking such work when there was great excitement about the possibility of producing products artificially that would eliminate the risk in their manufacture from national blood products. At the time, the risks and conditions of HIV and hepatitis C were unknown and the fears that we are now experiencing were not felt.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) asked whether sufficient investigation had taken place before the use of anti-haemophiliac factors within the NHS. He did not acknowledge the significant improvement in the quality of life for those who had previously been encouraged to adopt immobility as a routine response to their disease. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that something went terribly wrong, but at the time—as I remember from having been on the sidelines—it was seen as a great victory and advance in the treatment of people unfortunate enough to have the condition.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said that no one in the Government has ever said sorry for what happened to haemophiliacs. If that is the case, it is astonishing. From my observation of the scientists and doctors involved, whom I knew at the time and with whom I have stayed in touch over the years, I know that they were good people who believed that they were helping those patients. Later, with the benefit of hindsight, they realised that what they had been doing had systematically, albeit inadvertently, poisoned those people. That discovery has been a shattering blow to many of them. They are truly sorry for what has happened, although they genuinely did not realise the consequences at the time.

My hon. Friend made the case for compensation of the people affected. He said that when the Minister was

in opposition, he had signed an early-day motion calling for that. I shall not make party political points because it is clear that a groundswell of sympathy for them exists across the political divide. However, both the previous and the present Administration came to the conclusion, after careful review, that the principle that no-fault compensation should not be paid where there has been no negligence must remain as a general rule in a national health service that delivers health care free at the point of need.

There are significant problems with a no-fault compensation system. Causality would still need to be established and it may inhibit clinical practice, which is based on the best current knowledge at any given time, and may blur the line between negligence and innocent action, leading to a less accountable culture in medicine. Last, but not least, it would involve a cost to the budget. It has been said many times that any compensation should be paid from a contingency reserve, but if no-fault compensation were accepted for medical accidents in general, beyond the specific matter of haemophiliacs with hepatitis C, there would be significant budgetary implications that could not be ignored.

The main argument advanced for compensation for this group is the unusual position of haemophiliacs infected with HIV. They were treated as a special case because it was felt that HIV was a unique condition in terms of its high mortality rate and the tremendous stigma attaching, certainly in the early days, to the disease.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: On that point, an assurance was given that, if money were paid into the Macfarlane trust, there would be no question of legal action being taken and that has been honoured.

Mr. Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. It would be a great shame if an act of good will towards a suffering group of people who have a terrible disease became the benchmark by which other groups who have suffered as a result of medical accidents felt that they had been unjustly treated. I acknowledge the problem of deciding where, in the spectrum of medical accidents, one should draw the line, but I readily understand the apparent injustice of two haemophiliacs who had acquired similar viral diseases from transfusions of contaminated blood products being treated differently.

The general principle should be to resist no-fault compensation for medical accidents in the NHS. That was the previous Government's conclusion, and it has also been this Government's conclusion, unless the Minister is about to announce a major change today. However, I shall qualify what I have said in two specific ways. First, it is, of course, relevant only where there is no negligence. If negligence were established, for example where information—either on the risk of infection or on the seriousness of the consequences of infection—that might reasonably have been used in decisions to change the treatment of at least some patients had been available was withheld, that would be a different matter. If it were clear that such negligence had occurred, the Government would have to move swiftly, without requiring individuals to enter into protracted legal action.

In the light of the inquiry that has been instituted in Scotland, is the Minister satisfied that conditions in Scotland are different from those in England and Wales? Does he think that, to confirm the absence of negligence, it was necessary to accede to the request for an inquiry? That is a separate issue from the question whether compensation should be paid in cases where there has been no negligence.

It is timely, in the current climate of concern about new variant CJD, that we should be discussing this issue. Is the Minister satisfied that all the lessons from the experience of the haemophilia, HIV and hepatitis C issues have been learned, even if there is no evidence of negligence in his Department? Has he identified and eliminated any systemic or bureaucratic failures in the Department of Health or the national health service? All will agree that in 20 years' time we must not be debating the case of people who have been contaminated by new variant CJD in the course of medical treatment administered in the early years of the millennium.

Secondly, there is a strong case for dealing with all medical accidents—especially those involving identifiable groups, rather than just one-off cases—on their merits. We should ensure that the response is appropriate and does not always, or only, take the form of financial compensation; it could be the provision of effective treatment and support. Although I agree, reluctanly, that automatic no-fault compensation is not the right answer for the national health service, I urge the Government to examine the mechanisms for dealing with particular hardship in individual medical accident cases, not just as it affects haemophiliacs but across the spectrum—especially, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) said, where hardship has resulted from treatment to alleviate the condition.

The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), rejected the idea of special payments on 28 July 1998. He went on to say:

> The needs of people whose condition results from inadvertent harm are met from benefits available to the population in general.—[*Official Report*, 28 July 1998; Vol. 317, c.179WA.]

Most people would agree, on a moment's reflection, that that is a rather harsh judgment and that people suffering particular hardship, as a result of medical accidents, are not always properly catered for by the general benefits system. I urge the Minister to consider the possibility of having a middle way that, although falling short of no-fault compensation for medical accidents, goes beyond what the general benefit system provides to the public at large and offers proper support to those who have suffered from medical accidents that occur within the national health service.

Many of the problems that face haemophiliacs with hepatitis C also face the other 250,000 to 500,000 hepatitis C sufferers. That range is broad because nobody knows how many people out there in the community may carry the disease undiagnosed. Hepatitis C has been described as the real millennium bug and a ticking time bomb, because hundreds of thousands of people in this country may carry the disease without being aware of it. Some medical authorities have suggested that it has the potential to be a greater killer in the long term than AIDS. We need to consider the regime of treatment and support that is in place to deal with the disease generally, as well as in the particular case of people who have acquired it through contaminated blood products.

[Mr. Hammond]

My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire mentioned the apparent problem of transmitting the Government's intentions down to health authority level. The mechanism that the Government have used for that is the national service framework, which creates a clear structure and definition of what is to be expected from the NHS in a given case for a given condition. There is no national service framework for hepatitis C. Can the Minister tell us what strategy his Department has for co-ordinating prevention, diagnosis, treatment, care and support in cases of hepatitis C, to ensure that we have a national approach to this major problem?

As other hon. Members have said, standards of treatment for hepatitis C across the United Kingdom are variable. The interferon-ribavirin combination therapy is denied to patients in many health authority areas because of funding problems. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight said that that therapy should not be referred to NICE for a report. Does the Minister concur with the hon. Gentleman's analysis, or will the Government seek to refer that treatment to NICE for a report? If there is to be no compensation for people affected by medical accidents, the least that we need do to restore confidence in national health service treatment is to ensure that the best corrective or palliative treatment is available.

All hepatitis C sufferers are entitled to ask what the Government are doing to control the disease and to support those who suffer from it. This matter was debated in the other place, where the noble Lord Winston, whose name might not normally have come to my attention but who has recently been prominent in our health debates, said:

> although the Government came to power with a promise to abolish the internal market, it is a lottery as to whether these patients are treated by the NHS.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 June 1998; Vol. 590, c. 673.]

He went on to put, more eloquently than I could, the case for additional support for haemophiliac patients with hepatitis C.

Faced with the tragedy of a relatively small group of people suffering from a chronic and, in many cases, grave illness as a direct result of NHS treatment, the instinct or the knee-jerk reaction of all hon. Members would be to compensate. Ministers in the previous Government wrestled with their consciences over the question, and balanced the instinct to compensate with their wider responsibilities, and with the principle that compensation is usually paid only when negligence has been evident. It is impossible not to feel sympathy with the agonising plight of haemophiliac victims of hepatitis C, but the decision not to venture into the realms of general no-fault compensation is the right one, albeit a difficult one to make in the circumstances.

Mr. Mates: My hon. Friend has been talking for some minutes about a general principle with which few hon. Members would argue. We are discussing a specific problem, closely related to another which was treated by the Government—rightly in my view and that of my hon. Friend—as so exceptional that ex gratia payments should be made, despite its being no one's fault. I want to progress not from the particular to the general, just from one area of the particular to another similar instance affecting people with the same genetic disease, haemophilia. People find it incredible that some should be compensated and some should not. We want to remove the lottery aspect of the matter.

Mr. Hammond: I understand my hon. Friend's eloquently put view, but the problem is where to draw the line when we begin to compensate for the effects of medical accidents. I would prefer cases to be considered individually, and would also like a review of the mechanisms for dealing with hardship arising from medical accidents.

It must be right, in any case, for the NHS to provide every available treatment for people whose condition has been exacerbated by NHS treatment and to provide appropriate support and counselling. I expect that all hon. Members would advocate that as a general principle. It is not inconsistent with that general principle that the Minister should tell health authorities to give the highest priority to treating hepatitis C haemophiliacs. What practical steps is the Department of Health taking, and what practical guidance has the Minister given to health authorities, to support this defined and unfortunate group of patients and ensure that treatment is properly available throughout the country? It is not acceptable for any patient to have to wait months or years to see a hepatologist, especially in the circumstances that we have heard about this morning.

I reluctantly support the conclusion reached by the previous and present Governments that no-fault compensation must generally be resisted in the national health service—I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire by taking that view—but I hope that the Minister will reassure us, and, more importantly, the thousands of victims of this terrible tragedy, by promising to examine the mechanisms for dealing with cases of hardship arising from medical accidents and by announcing improvements in access to treatment and counselling for the people affected by the accident that we are considering today. I hope that there will also be a step change in the pace of the battle against the spread of hepatitis C.

11.13 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on raising this matter, and on doing it so effectively. There is much support and sympathy in and out of Parliament for the people with haemophilia who received infected blood products before technology could remove the infection. In the time available I hope to deal with many of the issues raised in the debate and, although I will not be able to satisfy hon. Members on all points, to show that we are more than sympathetic and have practical action in hand.

We want the people concerned to be increasingly well cared for in the NHS, to be supported in their communities and to be better informed about how to look after their health. I recognise the role of the Haemophilia Society, which has led to a forceful and moving campaign for special recognition for people with haemophilia and hepatitis C. We have worked

closely with the organisation and will continue to do so. As has been said, people with haemophilia were more severely affected before blood products were developed. Apart from the distress of the condition, they faced deformed joints and general incapacity, and children suffering from the disease typically attended special schools.

Blood products were developed from the late 1960s onwards and were a huge step forward. They were easy to use and people could treat themselves at home rather than go to hospital. They were also transportable, and people could take them with them if they went away. They improved the quality of people's lives at the time, and sufferers' longevity increased to nearly that of the general population. The ill effects of haemophilia were beginning to recede. I understand that the existence of a different sort of hepatitis virus was known in the early days of blood product manufacture. It did not have a specific name until 1989 and there was no test for it until the late 1980s. Experts advised that there was no reliable test until the early 1990s.

It was suggested that nobody had said sorry, but I was not aware that that was the case. I wonder how anybody, including Ministers, could not be sorry about the sequence of events set out today. But, as has been generally agreed, it would be wrong to confuse regret with fault or blame. If I have time, I shall trace some of the history of how blood products were treated, but I would rather concentrate initially on the substantive issues raised concerning the action that we should now take.

The outlook for the treatment of hepatitis C has progressed. The first treatment, an anti-viral therapy, became available in 1995. Work was also beginning then on the combination of interferon with other anti-viral agents such as ribavirin. I understand that the success rate of the first therapy was modest and that about 20 per cent. of patients cleared the virus. However, the second generation therapy using interferon with ribavirin has been shown to be more successful.

Interferon with ribavirin—more easily referred to as the combination therapy—was licensed last summer. Hon. Members have asked about NICE. We have referred combination therapy to NICE, which is assessing it as a matter of urgency. It has recently written to the interested organisations to seek their input, and we look forward to receiving its recommendations in a few months' time. As has been said elsewhere, NICE is a key mechanism for giving authoritative guidance to the national health service on the clinical and cost effectiveness of a range of treatments. It will be a key tool in tackling the unacceptable variations of access to treatment and care that currently apply in respect of a number of different procedures and treatments.

Dr. Brand: May we have an assurance that, if the matter has been referred to NICE, it will not invoke the affordability criteria and the decision will be taken by Ministers?

Mr. Denham: As it does on all other procedures, NICE will consider the clinical and cost effectiveness of the treatment. That is set out in the rules according to which NICE operates. The fact that NICE is considering combination therapy is not a barrier to its prescription and provision. In response to concerns expressed by a number of hon. Members, the Government have followed up with a number of health authorities when a moratorium was imposed or about to be imposed. Referral to NICE is a key move forward in resolving combination therapy treatment issues. I understand that liver transplantation following hepatitis C, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for East Hampshire, will be taken into account by NICE as part of the process of considering the provision of combination therapy.

As I have mentioned, we place great value on the work of the Haemophilia Society, with which we shall continue to work. A key issue is the campaign that the society has run with others for a special payment scheme for haemophilia and hepatitis C infections. Several right hon. and hon. Members, including myself, signed an early-day motion in 1995 requesting that financial assistance be considered. That causes me no embarrassment because, especially in opposition, hon. Members often raise issues of concern so as to put them at the top of the agenda and require Ministers to consider them. Indeed, when the Government took office, meetings were held with the Haemophilia Society and the issue was carefully considered. Every consideration was given to the possibility of a special payment scheme for those with haemophilia and hepatitis C. During that time, we continued to work with the society on several other issues, such as our requirement that health authorities should provide recombinant synthetic factor 8 to children under 16 with haemophilia and new patients. We concluded that haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C should not receive special payments, and some of the arguments for that were rehearsed earlier in the debate. As my right hon. Friend the then Secretary of State informed the House,

> Government policy is that compensation or other financial help to particular patients or groups of patients is paid out only where the NHS or individuals working in it have been at fault. The needs of people whose condition results from inadvertent harm is met from benefits available to the population in general.—[*Official Report*, 28 July 1998; Vol. 317, c. 179WA.]

On that basis, we decided not to make an exception to the general rule in the case of haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C.

Mr. Hammond: Does that mean that the Minister is quite certain that all the necessary investigations have already taken place to rule out the possibility that there was negligence on the part of the Department of Health or NHS in the matter?

Mr. Denham: In preparation for the debate and in discussion with my colleagues, I have seen no evidence that would persuade me of the need for a public inquiry or further examination of the history of the matter. Although it is outside my responsibility, I understand that the Scottish inquiry relates to a specific issue. Officials within the Scottish Executive Health and Community Care Department have been asked to examine the circumstances surrounding the introduction of heat treatment with factor 8 in Scotland in the mid-1980s, with specific reference to an alleged discrepancy between England and Scotland. It is not a general inquiry into the history of the matter but an

[Mr. Denham]

inquiry into a specific issue of the timing and sequence of events. The Scottish Executive await the outcome of those findings.

Mr. Mates: Yes, there was a difference, but some of the blood product that was processed in Scotland was given to patients in England because it was issued throughout the United Kingdom. What will the Minister do if the Scottish Parliament decides to compensate Scottish hepatitis C sufferers? Will he maintain his present position? That would be intolerable.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman, not unreasonably, strings together a sequence of hypotheses. Clearly, any information that becomes available as a result of the Scottish inquiry would need to be carefully considered if it were relevant to the responsibilities of English Ministers, but it is not helpful to speculate on the possible outcome of the inquiry.

I want to consider some other important issues that were raised in the debate. We have referred the new licensed combination therapy to NICE.

Mr. Hancock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Denham: I should like to make progress because many other important issues have been raised, including counselling.

We are working closely with the Haemophilia Society, through a grant towards its administration. During the past two years we have supported the society's project to develop and produce information on hepatitis C for young people, their families and teachers. The material is sensible, informative and lively. We are also funding a seminar later this year for professionals on co-infection with HIV and hepatitis C. We shall continue to build on our work with the society. My ministerial colleagues have met its representatives and found the exchanges helpful.

We must take the work forward in several ways. An external group—the haemophiliac alliance—will provide additional pressure on Government. My colleague Baroness Hayman, the then Minister, wrote to welcome its formation. It is bringing together the professional groups dealing with haemophilia care, for which it is drawing up a service specification. When completed, the specification will be a significant tool for those commissioning haemophilia services, acting as an outline of the key components of a high-quality service. The alliance has asked the NHS executive to circulate information about its service specification work via the national networks, and that is being done. Haemophilia services appropriate for specialist commissioning have been identified and three regional specialised commissioning groups—in London, the west midlands, and the south-east—are studying them.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) asked about the way in which we were developing and supporting guidance for the service. That is one way in which we are doing that. We have also funded a group from the Royal College of Physicians, the British Society of Gastroenterology and the British Association for the Study of the Liver to draw up evidence-based clinical guidelines for the management of patients with hepatitis C, which should be available later this year.

We have also asked the UK Haemophilia Centre directors to ensure that counselling is available and accessible to haemophiliacs with hepatitis C. Several hon. Members have raised that issue. We must ensure that the facilities at the 22 comprehensive care centres are extended to the 100 or so smaller haemophilia centres. We are also working with the directors on collecting better data on the number of people with haemophilia who are infected with hepatitis C. As the hon. Member for East Hampshire said in his opening remarks, the Haemophilia Society and others are keen to have the information.

We are always open to new ideas about the way in which we might improve the lives of people with haemophilia and hepatitis C. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) raised the issue of insurance cover. My colleague the noble Lord Hunt is writing to the Association of British Insurers on easing the barriers to insurance cover. I would not wish anyone to feel that our agenda on such issues was closed. I invite hon. Members to contact us with other issues that they think that the Government should be advancing.

I acknowledge the point of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge that we must consider hepatitis C in a wider context. It is a significant public health issue, and it is important that we increase knowledge about its natural history, prevalence, transmission and treatment, so that the NHS might be equipped to deliver services based on the best scientific and medical evidence available.

We have commissioned research worth about £1 million, and we are investing a further £500,000 of research moneys specifically in research into hepatitis C and injecting drug misuse, which is responsible for most new cases. The research will investigate ways of reducing the incidence, spread and progression of the disease.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Minister give a final assurance that combination therapy will be available throughout the regions of the UK for which he is responsible to any haemophiliac suffering from hepatitis C?

Mr. Denham: If NICE is to be effective, we must await its guidance and not seek to pre-empt it. NICE has been created because, in too many areas, the national health service has lacked authoritative guidance on the clinical effectiveness and the cost effectiveness of treatments. Its creation enables us to refer therapies that have spread more slowly than expected, and treatments where there are concerns about effectiveness. Once a referral is made to it, it is important for Ministers to await its independent judgment. When that guidance is received—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order.

Punjabi Community

11.30 am

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Two years ago, I introduced an Adjournment debate on the Irish community in Britain, partly because of my Irish background and partly because of the large number of my constituents who were of Irish origin. Surprisingly, that was the first debate on that subject in Parliament. The second-largest ethnic minority in my constituency are members of the Asian community who derive their origin from the Punjab. This is the first time that a British Parliament has specifically addressed the Punjabi community in Britain. Not only do I represent a constituency with more than 15,000 community members whose origins lie in the Punjab, but I am the founding chair of the all-party group on the Punjabi community. Some of its members may want to make brief contributions to the debate.

Language can be important, especially when dealing with Britain's colonial past, so let me first clarify an issue of pronunciation. Many of my Punjabi friends and colleagues advise me that the terms "Punjab" and "Punjabi" are colonial mispronunciations of the more exact pronunciations "Panjab" and "Panjabi". To remedy that historical error—apart from trying to learn Punjabi at a local school—I shall pronounce Punjab as "Panjab".

The Punjab means the land of the five rivers. It has a history that flows from the ancient civilisation of the Indus valley in approximately 2000 BC, through a series of empires and Mogul dynasties, to the founding of Sikhism in the 15th century. It is important to note that Sikhism is neither sectarian nor communal. Although it gave the Punjab a unique culture, its gift was secular tolerance in government and public life. The Punjab came under British rule in the 19th century and, on independence in 1947, the region was split between India and Pakistan, leaving a much smaller state of Punjab.

The relationship between Britain and the people of the Punjab in the colonial era formed the basis on which Punjabis migrated to this country in the latter half of the last century. The pattern of migration followed the pattern of settlement by my Irish community. In my area of west London, the first Punjabis often came to Britain to work in hard, low-paid jobs that found it hard to attract labour. They sometimes found work in medicine, where there were shortages of trained and skilled professionals. Before long, families were sent for and the process of permanent settlement was under way. Punjabi migration came not only from the Punjab, but from the Punjabi diaspora, which extended across the British empire, especially east Africa.

After nearly 50 years, we can celebrate a thriving Punjabi community in Britain. The industrious and talented first generation is giving way to self-confident and increasingly successful second and third generations. It is time to take stock of how the community is faring within our society and what issues the Government should be addressing in relation to it. But it has been difficult to find precise information on the Punjabi community in Britian. As with the Irish, there has been no specific question the British census to identify Punjabi speakers or Sikhs. The Government, in particular the Minister, should be congratulated on producing the breakthrough that allows the Irish and Gaelic languages, and Sikhism as a religion, to be included in the 2001 census. However, regret has been expressed that the progressive approach has not been applied to Punjabi speakers in the form of a question on the Punjabi language. I urge reconsideration of this issue even at this late stage. The fact that members of the Punjabi-speaking community will not be counted in an identifiable form in the next census increases their fear that they do not count in the eyes of policy makers. That issue should be addressed.

It was estimated from the figures in the 1991 census that the British population included 840,000 people from India, of whom it was suggested 51 per cent. were Sikh, and 477,000 people from Pakistan, of whom 48,000 had Punjabi as their main language. In fact, Punjabi is the most common language among British Asians and has become the second language in Britain, used by an estimated 1.3 million people—including me, in a very stilted form at this stage. That is reflected in the fact that the number of entrants for GSCE and A-level examinations in Punjabi outstrips those for all other Asian languages. If central and local government bodies are to plan the provision and development of policies and services in an effective and culturally sensitive way, information is required on this subtantial section of our community, and that information can come only from the census.

Based on what we already know about the Punjabi community in Britain, we are able to celebrate an incredibly successful community. Without wishing to fall into using stereotypes of Punjabis, I believe that there are numerous examples where the dedication, talent and industriousness of members of the Punjabi community have put them at the forefront of life in the public, private and community sectors. In virtually every walk of life, members of the Punjabi community are prominent. In celebrating this success, we must also address the outstanding concerns of the Punjabi community and create an agenda of policy proposals to tackle them.

First, we need to look at the way in which we fail in many instances to support family life in the Punjabi community. In the eyes of many in that community, the visa system is still discriminatory; too often, families are split at key moments of celebration—births and weddings—and at times of sadness—sickness and funerals. Too many hon. Members have experienced the problems and the vagaries of the visa system. I applaud the Government for restoring the appeal mechanism; however, there are many miles to go to improve that system.

Many people feel that the proposal to introduce bonds is a retrograde step. First, they feel that it is discriminatory because it applies only to the Indian sub-continent. Secondly, there are concerns that it discriminates on grounds of wealth because the bond is set to high that people from low-income families will not be able to pay it. In our view, many organisations would want to fund the bond—for example, Gurdwaras in their charitable role.

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford West): Does my hon. Friend accept in part that the demand for the bond system originated in those ethnic minority communities

[Mr. Marsha Singh]

who saw a guarantee system as an effective way of gaining the admittance of a relative who had previously been refused entry?

Mr. McDonnell: I agree. The demand for the bond system arose largely from the Asian community itself; therefore it is important that we ensure that this reform is carried out correctly and that, when we introduce the bond system, it is done in such a way that it does not discriminate and is of practical assistance. It must not be a fob to avoid reform of the system overall and the eradication of what is often seen as racism.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Does my hon. Friend also accept that many in constituencies such as mine and his are very poor and that the bond system will discriminate against the poorest and prevent them having family reunions because they will be unable to put up the appropriate bond or find anyone to do so?

Mr. McDonnell: That is why many have expressed concern. It has been proposed that the bond be on a sliding scale, related to the wealth of the individual or family, and that organisations such as Gurdwaras should be allowed to support individual families on a charitable basis. In addition, there are many concerns about the process of applying for a visa within the Punjab, especially about the long journeys that must be undertaken to Delhi and elsewhere. For that reason, we welcome the Government's initiative in establishing a temporary consulate in Chandigah, which will be a breakthrough for the Punjabi community here and in India.

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. A couple of weeks ago, I visited India as part of a delegation. Some of the delegation had business in Delhi and undertook the 16-hour train journey from the Punjab. My hon. Friend may be aware that the extra travelling time for those of my constituents who have to travel from the west of Punjab is an obstacle for those who may wish to apply quickly for a visa—for instance, to attend a relative's funeral.

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend demonstrates the need for a more creative approach. We need to balance security and accurate decision making with the needs of the local community—particularly of those who are not not able to afford or endure a long journey, and especially people such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend who are in a state of distress.

The other problem, which has been raised in my community and in Southall, is of visas for Gurdwara priests travelling from India. The Gurdwaras and temples have a limited number of priests. Many of them were trained in the United Kingdom, but priests sometimes travel from India. Unfortunately, restrictions are placed on the number of priests allowed to practise in our Gurdwaras, even for limited periods, and that is a problem. The number of priests in Gurdwaras in my constituency is disproportionately lower than the number of priests in Catholic churches.

Mr. Singh: Have ministers of religion in my hon. Friend's constituency been asked for work permits, as they have been in my constituency, where it has caused tremendous problems?

Mr. McDonnell: That problem was drawn to our attention only the weekend before last. At least 15,000 practitioners attend the Ravi Guru Dass Gurdwara each week, but there are only two priests; yet our local Catholic church has five priests for a similar-sized congregation. The demand for work visas needs to be reviewed.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): My hon. Friend is generous in allowing interventions from those hon. Members whose constituencies include a significant Punjabi community. My constituency has an additional problem; because the Gurdwara is used as the central focus for the community, the facilities are now inadequate. Would my hon. Friend take this opportunity to join me in congratulating my local Sikh community on the work that it has done to raise the money to build a new Gurdwara—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. This is an Adjournment debate. Time is limited and interjections should be very brief.

Mr. McDonnell: You can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, how much interest the Chamber has in this subject.

We should congratulate the Sikh community on the role of the Gurdwaras, in respect of not only their religious practices but their social support of the community, which goes beyond religious practice. That social support was first recognised, dare I say it, by the Greater London council; the first grant to a Sikh Gurdwara in London was presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) in his former capacity. Funding is needed for community organisations in the Punjabi community in recognition of the social and institutional role of the Gurdwaras.

I move on to the question of long-standing asylum claims. The Government are now wrestling with the problem, and I welcome their proposal to give greater resources to the immigration and nationality directorate of the Home Office to tackle those long-standing cases. However, many of those claims relate to the troubles in Punjab in the 1980s and early 1990s, and a large number of asylum seekers have now settled here. They should be quickly informed that they will be allowed to stay because of their continued fear of repatriation. Their position should now be regularised.

We want many other matters of policy to be addressed by the Government. For example, for the first time, the British Government have provided financial support for the Guru Nanak college, a voluntary-aided Sikh school in my constituency. I congratulate the head teacher and my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards on their work during the past two years to ensure that the college is properly funded; it is now

flourishing. We will now receive demands for support from across the country; for example for language tuition in state schools, and for additional cultural and educational support through section 11 and other measures in those schools, to help with the growing community of first, second and third-generation Punjabis.

We are concerned that discrimination in employment continues.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I thank my hon. Friend. Is he aware that a significant section of the Punjab falls within Pakistan? Has he, like other hon. Members, been lobbied on the decision of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to declassify Basmati rice, which significantly affects trade in that part of the Punjab and Pakistan?

Mr. McDonnell: The community has raised the issue of the need to maintain links between this country and the Punjab, and Britain's role in assisting the economic development of what members of the community consider their original homeland. Issues such as that mentioned by my hon. Friend undermine that relationship and much of the aid assistance that we provide. We need to come back to that in a later debate.

There is a requirement for closer ethnic monitoring in employment. The census will give us that information and all public bodies must use it to ensure that discrimination does not occur in employment matters. I welcome the appointment of Gurbux Singh as chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality. He is a talented and dedicated professional, as I know from my experience in local government. I encourage him, through the Minister, to undertake a CRE study of the Punjabi community in Britain, similar to the CRE study of the Irish community in Britain which revealed levels of discrimination and, more important, set out proposals for tackling that discrimination in, for example, employment.

On employment, it is important to mention the military, which is now denied to many Sikhs as a career because of the helmet issue. Sikhs have a proud military history, and throughout their employment by the British Army were allowed to wear the turban. That has now become an issue of conflict that has also been raised in regard to European regulations on safety helmets in construction.

Mr. Singh: Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Sikh community on the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa?

Mr. McDonnell: I will come to that. I shall not take any more interventions.

On health policy, the census should give us the information for targeted health campaigns. Several local authorities are undertaking campaigns on morbidity in the Asian community. The Government could give that more central funding and give it a fresh stimulus. The Punjabi community is demanding the elimination of the PHAB—physically handicapped and able-bodied—test, which prevents many doctors who were trained on the Indian sub-continent from working in Britain.

On culture and sport, I indeed congratulate the massive success of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa in the Khalsa Panth last year. I congratulate all those who came together to celebrate Baisakhi last year, through music, modern dance and the traditional assemblies of different organisations in the Royal Albert hall. I also congratulate the Victoria and Albert museum and Susan Strong on their contribution through the wonderful exhibition that they organised, which was supported by translations from one of my constituents, Mr. Rayat.

The Government should look at how we fund Punjabi community culture in this country. I draw particular attention to the applications made by various radio station groups—Appna Sangeet Radio, Punjabi FM and Saffron FM—which we could support, not only to disseminate information through the Punjabi community but to support its culture.

The Punjabi community is still attacked by the scourge of racism. I welcome the Government's measure to tackle that and the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill, which recognises institutional racism. Anyone who heard PC Kash Singh this morning on the BBC knows how far we have to go. We must first support the Black Police Association. We also need to support organisations such as the Southall monitoring group. We need to make it clear that racial harassment and abuse, attacks on neighbours and school bullying will not be accepted in the society that we want to create.

That brings me on to the issue of human rights in the Punjab itself. The all-party group has received evidence of the extent of the abuses in the 1980s and 1990s and about those who disappeared, the torturing that took place and the attacks on innocent Punjabis by police and other agents.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I am sure that he is aware that this is a timed debate and that those in the Chamber will want to hear the Minister's reply.

Mr. McDonnell: I shall conclude my remarks in 30 seconds. The Government now have a role to liaise with the Indian Government to ensure, for example, the admittance of the UN human rights rapporteur to the Punjab to exert pressure, so that compensation and assistance are given to those families who have suffered. We have a vibrant and resourceful Punjabi community in this country of which we are proud. The Government support it and, for that reason, I welcome the opportunity to introduce the debate this morning.

11.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I, too, welcome the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) on securing it and on being elected as founding chairman of the all-party Punjabi group. I note his use of the word "Punjabi" and I shall certainly ensure that it is used in documents. I congratulate the Punjabi community, in particular the Sikh community from the Punjab, on the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa. I have attended several celebrations of the anniversary, including some in my constituency. They were important to the whole community and were enjoyed not only by the Sikh community, but by many others who attended them.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

There are many Punjabis in Britain, some of whom are Hindus, some of whom, are Muslim, although the majority are from the Sikh community. Each community makes an enormous contribution to our country. As a Minister, may I, on behalf of the Government, publicly thank the Punjabi community for their contribution to Britain? We are a multicultural society and we are stronger because of that. Our culture is more diverse and more enjoyable. Our trade links are more varied; our ability to take a wider cultural perspective is enhanced greatly by the economic and social potential which comes from the Punjabi community. That is why cultural diversity is not just about having the right moral perspective on issues relating to multiculturalism; it is also good business for Britain. It is about getting right the sort of society that we can become.

Last year, I spoke at the Sikh Forum dinner, at which many business people were represented. They energise our business, reinforce our economy and create jobs for our people. One only has to look at last year's publication by *Eastern Eye* of "Britain Richest 200 Asians". It makes impressive reading and it is heartening to see so many young people and so many women on that list of successful people. It includes manufacturers, importers, exporters, retailers, wholesalers, industrialists, financiers, media moguls and leaders in the pharmaceutical industry and in information technology. People from the Punjabi community make an enormous contribution to our universities. Also on the list of 200 richest Asians is my noble friend Lord Paul, who came originally from the Punjab.

We have to address many problems in a multicultural society. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington said, when considering the issues that present themselves to Britain as a multicultural society, it is right to highlight the success of communities such as the Punjabi community and its people, who are examples to everyone of how our nation's diversity is prospering and flourishing as we enter the millennium. Too often, ethnic minorities are portrayed as victims of discrimination and poverty. It is important that we deal with their concerns. The Asian culture is not a culture of victims; it is go-getting, vibrant and dynamic, and contributes a staggering £5 billion a year to the British economy. Many of our Asians claim their heritage from the Punjab. Some are from families that came here via east Africa in the 1970s, although most of them were born here but still cherish their Punjabi heritage. Long may they do so.

Many people work in factories and businesses set up by Punjabis in places such as Leicester and Coventry. Punjabis have helped to create jobs in my and other areas, and have often done so where there had been few jobs previously. They have created prosperity out of unemployment, and we thank them for that.

I should like to respond to the call for consulate facilities in the Punjab made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington. The Government are aware of suggestions that there should be more visa offices in the sub-continent to facilitate easier and faster processing of visas. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), recently visited the sub-continent, and has commissioned feasibility studies to establish how best we can extend services there. Studies are being carried out in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and we shall consider opening offices in Chandigarh, Ahmedabad, Sylhet and Lahore. We are reviewing information already received from those posts, and my hon. Friend suggested that he wanted to consider the reports in due course. I hope that we shall have some news about how we intend to proceed during the year.

We think that appeals should be reinstated, so I welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington about them. There has been some confusion about bonds, so I shall clarify the subject. Bonds were introduced at the request of many people from the Asian community. People have come to my surgeries to ask whether they can put a sum down as a bond because a visa has been refused. The bonds will be raised only when the entry clearance officer is otherwise "minded to refuse" a visa. Families will not be denied the possibility of being reunited, as my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) suggested. More families will be reunited than were before. Bonds will be used only when people are not given visas. Some people have deliberately given a lot of information that makes clarification of that issue necessary.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I am glad that the Minister has clarified the issue, as there is confusion in the community about it. Does the scheme apply only to south Asia?

Mr. O'Brien: The aim is to pilot the scheme for one year. The Asian community has requested that we pilot it in south Asia. That is why we have considered and are still considering how best we can do so in the light of the community's recent comments. We wanted to help, and some people have misinterpreted what we presented and sought to portray it as something other than it was.

Ministers of religion are needed and we want to ensure that all members of the Punjabi community can practise their religion. The concession about ministers of religion has been abused, so we must ensure that it is properly applied. Perhaps proper training of priests in the United Kingdom would be a solution. After all, Sikhism is now a British religion, as many people born in Britain are Sikhs. We must ensure that British Sikhs can practise their religion as they choose. The Home Office gives ethnic minority grants, so perhaps we can help. I should have liked to discuss some of the wide-ranging changes that we want to make to the national curriculum, and radio licences—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Arundel Bypass

12 noon

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): It is rather a suitable day to discuss the Arundel bypass, which is not untypical of projects in other parts of the south-east. We shall hear later about the hundreds of thousands of new houses to be built in the south-east without properly considering whether the infrastructure is in place to service them. Road infrastructure is crucial, but other aspects of the infrastructure, too, do not have adequate facilities to accommodate the increases anticipated for the next six years.

I initiated the debate in order to express the extreme frustration—nay outrage—of my constituents, the county council and Arun district council that a sensible proposal that dates back to 1985 has been kicked into the long grass. The strongest cross-party, cross-community support exists to solve the problem, whether it is referred to as congestion, a bottleneck or a pinch point.

As the Minister will be aware, a two-mile stretch of the A27 going through Arundel is dual carriageway both from Worthing and to Chichester. That stretch experiences appalling congestion in both directions, especially in summer. The roads programme for the bypass started in 1985 and, following substantial public consultation in 1987, in 1989 the Department sharpened up the proposal. In 1993, broad agreement was reached among the Department, the community, the environmental lobby, the county council and the district council for what is known as the pink-blue route, following a 10-volume environmental study and substantial local discussion. The pink-blue route would result in minimum damage to the environment.

In December 1996, the proposals was elevated to the main roads programme, to be implemented as soon as funding was available. Regrettably, as a result of the 1998 roads review, it was shelved. Since May 1997, I have handled more than 4 in of correspondence with constituents and the Department. At the end of last year, a private finance initiative was proposed to break the deadlock, but was dismissed without adequate consideration. The proposal is for a bypass of 6.6 km which, as projected in 1997, would cost £23.1 million.

The roads review of July 1998 remitted discussion of the scheme to a study of the scheme to be carried out at some time in the future—it used the words "expected in 2000–01", which probably means beyond that—and an environmental study of the area from Folkestone to Southampton, with its mandate worded in brave new world terms rather than dealing with the specific immediate problems of congestion. I am not commenting on the transport needs from Dover to Bournemouth, although there may be a sound case to be made for a motorway along the crucial east-west corridor. Any recommendations that may come out of that study, presumably in four or five years' time, will need to be considered by the South East England regional assembly—SEERA—and the Secretary of State. Yet again, that means further delay while the new regional development agency structure has its finger in the pie.

The local community's impression is that the Government have negated all the previous work, and ignored the urgent and growing needs of the community. Indeed, land is being designated adjacent to the A27 for most of the housing in the southern part of West Sussex. The study deals with congestion, safety and environmental problems on the south coast route between Folkestone and Southampton. Although "congestion" is referred to, the study really misses the point that there is an urgent economic need to relieve serious pinch point congestion spots. The July 1998 White Paper referred to that problem.

The issue of needing further environmental consideration was not entirely genuine, given that the environmental issues were analysed in great depth—in 10 volumes—earlier in that decade. I requested clarification on whether the bypass had been relegated to tranche 2 of the study programme, although I am not quite clear what "tranche 2" means in that context. I was told in correspondence with the Department that the Government were not convinced that the Arundel bypass scheme offered the most appropriate or sustainable solution to the problem. I would like to know how the Government feel the problem of acute congestion can be solved, other than by a bypass.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): My hon. Friend will be aware of the similar problems that we face next door to him in Worthing, where a bypass has been on the cards for the past 30 years. Is he aware that one can travel from Newcastle to Portsmouth entirely on motorway or dual carriageway until one arrives at Worthing, or coming the other way, until one arrives at Arundel? Is it not absurd that, on the day the Government are confirming the building of thousands of new homes in the county of West Sussex, there is no infrastructure to take them and no road plans have been made to take those new residents and their cars?

Mr. Flight: I thank my hon. Friend for making that fundamental point. I stress that it is not thousands of new homes, but hundreds of thousands. That will affect this piece of road because the area is used extensively by people for holidays. Given the Government's proposals to turn the downs into a national park, the volume of tourists will increase dramatically.

Locally, it is regarded as a disgrace that the matter has dragged on for 15 years, wasting a fortune in terms of inquiries and mere paperwork. The problems are simple. Residents have to cross a highly dangerous road. Arundel is situated either side of it. The number of accidents is substantial. The proposed new site for the doctor's surgery is on the road that needs to be bypassed. The junction with the road from Burpham is dangerous, and there have been many serious accidents there. Inconvenience is caused to hundreds of thousands of local citizens and summer visitors. Moreover, the absence of a bypass is causing an environmental problem, because it inevitably causes back-up congestion on rural roads. Problems are also caused when people attempt to avoid congestion in summer by cutting through such roads.

In that part of the world, people typically cannot work where they live. Thousands work at Gatwick. There is no great degree of employment in Arundel or

[Mr. Flight]

along the south coast, and it is unrealistic to suggest that all residents can deal with their transport needs through trains and some magic integrated transport system which does not exist.

Four years ago, the Department of Transport acknowledged that there was a major problem with the embankment to the bridge over the railway on the existing route. A study as to what would be required to render that safe was promised, and was completed in July 1997. For some extraordinary reason, the study was not permitted to be made public. I cannot see what it could have contained that was not appropriate for public consumption unless there was something of concern. Three years later, I am not aware that anything has been done to make the embankment safer. If the bridge were out of action and rebuilding had occurred for a considerable time, the congestion would be completely impossible. The only practical suggestion would be to build the bypass and make the bridge hold up as long as possible, but revolution would be on our hands if it were repaired in the meantime. Looking through my files, it struck me that the administration over the past 16 years of inquiries into the matter must have cost as much in obstructing and obfuscating the bypass as the £23 million cost of building it in the first place.

As we are all aware, shortly before Christmas, the Government announced additional expenditure for rural bypasses. The chief executive of West Sussex county council received a nine-page letter from the Government on the south-east—much of which was not especially relevant to West Sussex—which failed to mention the issue. Eight rural bypasses and two urban bypasses were announced. I inspected some of those rural bypass areas, and I must say with absolute integrity that their problems are considerably less severe than those of Arundel.

The 1998 White Paper specifically referred on page 17 to the objective to tackle pinch points in transport networks that lead to major congestion. I was also perturbed to receive the following comment in a letter from the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in December 1998:

> We should not presume that any scheme coming out of the study would have the same aims as the previous bypass scheme nor that its routes would be similar.

What are the aims of such a scheme if they are not to release the pinch point and the congestion? The possible routes have been discussed to many times that there is no merit in raising the issue again. My advice to the Minister would be not to presume at all.

We have spent 12 years agreeing the optimum route. What have the Government unearthed that they believe is sufficiently environmentally damaging to cause them to tear up the proposals? My constituents and I are fed up with the bureaucratic obfuscation and the money that has been wasted. This is a simple issue of dealing with a problem which can be solved because the work has been done to solve it.

I close by reading a letter sent to me three years ago by a constituent, who wrote:

> I am writing from my office at Arundel station as I view the police helicopter, fire and emergency services extricating another poor victim from an accident on the section of the A27 from Arundel to Crossbush—that is the part that needs to be bypassed—
>
> The radio reports another 12-mile tailback of traffic and those coming to see me are lost in a traffic jam a few miles away. The slightest breakdown or hitch on this wholly inadequate section of road causes massive disruption to everyone. It is high time the new route was completed.

I ask the Minister to reconsider the Government's answer in the light of the number of people who will be moving into the area in the next six years. This is a serious problem; it is dangerous and it causes chaos and inconvenience to hundreds of thousands of people who are going about their everyday lives.

12.17 pm

The Minister of State for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I thank the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) for raising the topic. Few can deny that the volume of traffic that passes through Arundel daily has an impact on the quality of life both of residents and of those who must use this section of A27 for their journey. Some 25,000 vehicles a day travel along this section of road, bringing with them congestion, noise and pollution. The mixture of local and through-traffic brings with it a conflict that impacts on the local environment and compromises the safety of road users and residents alike. The A27 forms part of the south coast route between the M27 and Folkestone, which provides an important link in the stragegic road network. Therefore, it is important that the route performs efficiently and effectively as part of the trunk road network.

The hon. Gentleman asked why the Government did not address the issue of the A27 in their December announcement of the local government capital finance settlement for 2000–01. The A27 is a trunk road, and investment decisions relating to specific schemes are not announced as part of the local authority capital settlement. That is why there was no reference to the road. However, that settlement represented a determination to take forward the work that local government does on highways, and to make sure that it has the appropriate funding to do it.

The Government have placed the issues that concern the residents of Arundel and the users of the A27 high on their transport agenda. In publishing the transport White Paper, we emphasised that we would seek to deliver an integrated transport system that was safe, efficient, clean and fair. The White Paper set out a policy framework that will help to extend choice in transport and secure mobility in a way that supports sustainable development. Trunk roads are a vital part of the nation's strategic transport infrastructure and must play a full part in an integrated transport system. Shortly after the publication of the transport White Paper, the Government published their stategic review of the

national roads programme against criteria of accessibility, safety, economy, environment and integration.

Mr. Loughton: Given the great emphasis that the Minister rightly places on trunk roads, why was one of the Government's first acts the dropping of every trunk road improvement scheme in West Sussex?

Ms Armstrong: I am here to answer about issues concerning the A27 in Arundel and shall carry on doing that.

The review was informed by wide consultation. In the south-east, that took the form of seminars, involving representatives of local authorities, business, transport providers and environmental interest groups, to consider problems affecting the region's trunk roads and priorities for action. In several instances, although it was accepted that a transport problem existed and needed a solution, the need for a road-based solution was not considered to have been proved. In addition, schemes were not considered for inclusion in the targeted programme of improvements if they were not sufficiently developed. The A27 Arundel bypass was one such scheme.

The roads review identified the need for a study of the south coast corridor from Southampton to Folkestone, to include the M27, A27 and A259 and rail and other public transport. That aimed at improving access to and between the regeneration areas and other areas of economic activity along the south coast. The review also announced that the future of the A27 Arundel bypass would be considered as part of the study.

The Government understand and appreciate the disappointment that many local people may feel at the decision to remit the bypass to a study. Proposals for the A27 Arundel bypass have twice been the subject of detailed public consultation. That has highlighted many residents' and road users' concerns about traffic conditions on the A27 in Arundel. Congestion brings added cost in the form of delay, pollution and accidents. To date, the debate on a solution has focused on a bypass, but that would mean costs to the environment—notably in the visual impact of the scheme as it crossed the River Arun flood plain and the effect on Tortington common and Binsted wood.

The roads review set a new strategic aim and objectives for the Highways Agency as a network operator, with a higher priority to be given to improving the use of existing roads and greater emphasis placed on environmental and safety objectives. In that context, investment decisions affecting the development of the trunk road network need to be consistent with the Government's integrated transport policy. It is therefore important for decisions that directly affect the relevant section of the A27 south coast trunk road corridor to be taken not just in a wider strategic context but after consideration of how the demand for travel could be satisfied by widening choice in transport. That cannot be done without considering how the demand for travel will change as the policy framework set out in the White Paper is implemented.

The Southampton to Folkestone multi-modal study provides the opportunity to examine all those issues in a considered and balanced manner. It is intended to deal with congestion, safety and environmental problems along the south coast route between Southampton and Folkestone. In addition to the A27 Arundel bypass, the study will consider the future of the Selmeston bypass, Wilmington bypass and the Southerham to Beddington improvement scheme. The study will also provide a forum in which to consider any strategic issues relating to the A27 south coast corridor that are identified as part of the access to Hastings multi-modal study and the M27 south Hampshire and A27 Worthing-Lancing integrated transport studies that are now under way.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said that the area was one of the pinch points identified in the White Paper, and although it might be identified as a pinch point in the network, it is important that any investment proposals that address that issue are considered in the wider strategic context that reflects the role of the A27 south coast corridor.

The Government are aware of the importance to the local community of completing the study at the earliest opportunity. The Minister for Transport announced in March last year that the Southampton to Folkestone study would be included in the second tranche of multi-modal studies, and work on the study is anticipated to commence during the next financial year. Given the scale and complexity of the study, it is anticipated that it will take approximately 18 to 24 months to complete. Any recommendations made will need to be considered by the regional planning body, which will, in turn, make recommendations to the Secretary of State on the future of the Arundel bypass.

The Government acknowledge the importance of the A27 south coast corridor and the very real concerns of the residents of Arundel and road users. The multi-modal study provides the opportunity to address those concerns in a positive way as part of a wider strategy, which will seek to realise the potential to widen travel choice and reduce dependency on the private car. In the meantime, the Highways Agency will continue to focus its efforts on making the best possible use of the existing A27 corridor. A study has recently been completed on the junction of the A27 with Burpham road to the east of Arundel. That study examined safety concerns raised by the local community and identified a potential solution, which must now be considered further.

The structural condition of the bridge that carries the A27 over the Arun valley railway line has been the subject of some concern. A potential scheme to refurbish the structure has been developed and is being considered further.

I understand that the decision to remit the Arundel bypass will be seen by some as delaying a much-needed scheme. The truth is that even in the most favourable circumstances, the need to complete the due statutory procedures would preclude the delivery of a completed scheme within probably the next seven years. Such a time scale makes it all the more important that the Highways Agency should work closely with West Sussex county council, Arun district council, Arundel town council and other interested parties to identify and tackle many of the issues associated with the A27 through Arundel in order to limit and minimise the extent of its impact on the local community.

The Government also appreciate that economic growth and regeneration could bring further pressure to bear on both the A27 corridor and adjoining local

[Ms Armstrong]

roads. In there transport White Paper, the Government emphasised the need to integrate transportation planning with land use planning and with policies on education, health and wealth creation. I am sure that all stakeholders with an interest in achieving a more sustainable pattern of development will look to maximise the opportunity for that development to contribute positively to the development of the transport system in the area.

The Government are actively seeking to address the need to provide an efficient and effective trunk road network as part of a wider integrated transport system. To that end, they seek to ensure that the issues and concerns associated with the A27 trunk road that passes through Arundel are addressed at the earliest possible opportunity.

Bentwood Ltd. (Chorley and Bury)

12.30 pm

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I did not wish to have to speak about job losses in Chorley, but unfortunately I must because a company called Bentwood Ltd., based in Chorley and Bury, has decided to close two factories with the loss of 300 jobs. The future for those jobs over the next 90 days is worrying. The Chorley and Bury sites specialise in ladies' outerwear. One hundred and eighty-nine people work at Chorley; the remainder work at Bury. The firm's contract is with Marks and Spencer.

The workers have skilled jobs, which pay well above the minimum wage. There has been continual investment in modern machinery and other equipment since the early 1980s, when the new factory was built. The workers are highly skilled, undoubtedly because Marks and Spencer requires quality garments. Pressure has been put on the work force to ensure that quality goods are checked and supplied. That has happened without hiccup for many years.

The situation has resulted from Marks and Spencer's decision not to renew its contracts for outerwear. The arrangement ends on 21 April; Bentwood Ltd. is in the 90-day consultation period. Bentwood's press statement says that it will be restructuring the business, refocusing the product range on lingerie and underwear and away from ladies outerwear. I understand why it will not comment on Marks and Spencer—its contracts are continuing and it is part of the Stirling group, which has 3,000 workers. However, the people losing their jobs at Chorley and Bury are not being helped.

Bentwood's managing director refused to meet me, the chief executive of Chorley's local authority or the leader of the council. His decision was not sensible and did nothing for British industry. If an issue affecting people's jobs arises, companies should debate it because others may be able to help, to persuade and to pursue the matter, to the benefit of those losing their jobs, who are uppermost in my thoughts.

However, let us put that behind us. The firm must have recognised its mistakes because, out of the blue, came a meeting on Friday involving a divisional director, me and the work force's union representatives. The meeting was constructive. We should give hope—I got an assurance from the director that he would return to look at the group's activities to consider whether anything could be put into the Chorley site. In fairness to Chorley borough council, it has also played a role for many years in assisting the company—it helped to clear the site and ensured that there was an easy passage for the building of the new modern factory. It has always had good relationships with industry in the town.

We should return to my original point about Marks and Spencer and the way in which it pushes costs down. Suppliers are forced to provide goods at a lower cost; most come from abroad. Marks and Spencer used to perpetuate the myth that 95 per cent. of its goods were produced in the UK; that is no longer the case. The firm should recognise that its short-term gain is a worrying long-term loss to the British textile industry. The pound is strong and there are great pressures on the company, but 75 per cent. of the money passing through the tills comes from people who have been loyal to the business.

We are asking the firm to replicate the loyalty of its customers by continuing to support the United Kingdom textile industry and Bentwood of Chorley in particular. Will it consider how it can help and give to Chorley and Bury any contracts that it can afford to award us? I am asking Marks and Spencer to ensure that we do not lose our work force, who have been loyal not only to Bentwood but to Marks and Spencer. I plead with it to reconsider its decisions and to look to its order books to find work to ensure that jobs continue. My worry is that once a factory has been broken up and closed, it cannot be put back together.

The time has come for clear labelling on garments, informing us of their country of origin and telling us how they have been produced. If people know that a garment has come from Morocco or wherever else around the world, they will know that it is not British. Many people believe that, because something is sold by Marks and Spencer, it must be British made. That is no longer the case, and I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister to introduce clear labelling. Proper labelling is being introduced for food, and such labelling would inform people buying clothes of the country of origin, tell them what they are buying and at least allow them to know how they are spending their money.

I am speaking about a modern factory with modern equipment and about the 189 people who are losing their jobs in Chorley. I have appealed to the company to consider downsizing rather than complete closure if the worst comes to the worst. If a factory is downsized but a market upturn subsequently occurs, it can re-expand and growth can be put back into the operation. However, if it is completely closed, that is the end. There is no way forward and no means of putting together what is no longer there. Bentwood has a high-quality, determined work force. Whenever they have been called on, they have always served the company well. I plead with Bentwood: consider downsizing rather than complete closure at this stage.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for being present and for giving up her valuable time. I am sure that, when I plead to her, she will take on board the aspirations of the good people of Bentwood who are losing their jobs. Will you consider what the Government can do and how they can help the employers? Will you talk to other Departments to try to give an advantage to the north-west and consider, for instance, a reduction in council tax or the provision of soft loans for the company in these troubled times? If you could help to find alternative contracts—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. I have no problem with supporting the north-west, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It is, however, the Minister whom he is addressing.

Mr. Hoyle: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that you are a staunch supporter of the north-west, of its industry and of the people who are losing manufacturing jobs there.

Obviously, we must consider how the industry can be given proper support and how contracts can be found. I make an appeal throughout the United Kingdom, Europe and the world: if anybody wants finished outerwear garments, please contact Bentwood. It will supply quality goods at a fair price. If anybody listening has work, please talk to Bentwood and consider Chorley and Bury. Try to place work in our factories and save these jobs, and do not let this destruction occur.

I recognise that we have problems and that the strength of the pound is causing difficulties in the textile and other manufacturing industries, but I hope that the problem will balance out. Everything comes round, and when there is a market upturn and a new demand for British textile products, Britain must be able to respond. That is why I plead once again: even if all the jobs cannot be kept, please consider downsizing, which will preserve the factory's ability to compete when contracts return. In deciding to source outside the United Kingdom, Marks and Spencer has taken a retrograde step. There is pressure from its shareholders to deliver, but short-term gain is not good for long-term manufacturing in the UK. Body blows were delivered to our manufacturing sector throughout the 1980s. We do not want the new century to continue in the same way. Manufacturing is important, especially in Chorley and to the loyal workers who are on 90 days' notice. I plead with my hon. Friend the Minister to do whatever she can. I know that she will take that on board, and her help will be most welcome.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. Member have the Minister's permission to intervene?

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): Yes.

12.40 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) for securing the debate, which gives us the opportunity to raise our constituents' concerns about the two Bentwood factories. He outlined the general situation well, and I shall concentrate on how it relates to Bury.

The Bentwood factory in Bury was established about 60 years ago and moved to its present site 15 years ago. It has a loyal and stable work force and has been a major employer in the town. I have a special interest because both factories were located within 300 yds of where I was born and brought up. However, I am here not for sentimental reasons but to represent the concerns of the 100 or so workers at the Bury factory who face redundancy in 90 days.

The background is interesting. Although we are under no illusions about what might be achieved at this stage, the problem raises important issues that involve the process of redundancy announcements and regional policy. Last year, Bentwood's parent company, Stirling, announced a significant drop in its half-year profits. As a result of that and its acquisition of a new company called Tamarind—an international outsourcing company which is based in Hong Kong—the alarm bells started to ring in the Bentwood factories and the Stirling factories in the north-west.

At the end of November, the divisional director of Bentwood addressed the work force in Bury to explain that the longstanding contract with Marks and Spencer for ladies outerwear was ending because, as my hon.

[Mr. David Chaytor]

Friend the Member for Chorley said, it was transferring its sourcing overseas, but that there was a £62 million contract for lingerie. The work force were told that another announcement would be made in two or three weeks' time, but nothing happened until 24 February when the company said that the factory would close. No reference was made to the £62 million lingerie contract. That announcement came as a bolt from the blue to my constituents who expected, with good reason, to share in the new lingerie contract, although they realised that it would involve retooling the factory and retraining to upgrade their skills.

As a result of a meeting with the divisional director and trade union representatives last Friday, I understand that Bentwood intends to recruit new workers at its factory in south Wales. If Bentwood is going to recruit 70 new workers to fulfil the new lingerie contract, would it not be simpler to retain the existing work force in Bury and invest the cost that would be incurred in recruiting new workers in retraining?

It is interesting—I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to confirm this if she is able to do so—that the other Bentwood factory is in the west Wales and the valleys objective 1 area. We suspect that the company is simply relocating from an area that does not have a high level of regional assistance to one with a significant level of regional assistance and European funding, particularly for retraining. Last Friday, we were told that the cost of retraining the work force in Bury was about £250,000. Last year, although there was a drop in profits for the parent company, Bentwood itself made a net profit of £4 million. It is allocating about £4.5 million for restructuring costs; in that context, a cost of £250,000 for retraining is not excessive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley and I met representatives of the work force and the divisional director last Friday and asked what consideration Bentwood had given to retraining the work force and keeping production in Bury. The answer was that that had been ruled out because of the cost. We asked them whether they had discussed this with the local authority and the local training and enterprise council in regard to what assistance might be available; they had not. I suggested that they do that quickly. I understand that there will be discussions this week and that there is the possibility of a package of assistance, albeit small scale, for the company. We also asked when Bentwood would finally announce its intentions; that question is open-ended. It is encouraging that further meetings are being held with the work force, yesterday and later this week.

I have to say the work force have behaved in a most creditable fashion. They have made it clear that they are unhappy with the company's decision, and that they were disappointed with the lack of information at the early stage. They mounted a demonstration outside Marks and Spencer in Bury last Saturday, attracting 1,000 signatures protesting against Marks and Spencer's policy of outsourcing more of its goods abroad. They have also been in touch with local small businesses which largely earn their living from the work force at the factory and are worried about the knock-on effect, and a petition is circulating among them.

Three major issues arise out of this sad process. First of all, there is the position of the British textile industry in the global market and the impact on it of lower labour costs in many countries comparable with the United Kingdom. Many think globalisation and the deregulated free market are the solutions to all our ills. However, it does not seem to be very sensible to shift textile production abroad to achieve a minor reduction in shop prices when the consequence is higher unemployment in the United Kingdom.

Secondly, there is the process of notification of the work force. We have described the imperfections in this matter and the intransigence of the managing director of Bentwood in refusing to meet my hon. Friend and me—although the company has now arranged for the divisional director to meet us. It seems to me that there are imperfections in the current system and that the loyal work force of Bentwood deserve better.

Thirdly, there is the question of regional policy. Our hon. Members in Wales have fought long and hard, as have our Government, for the designation of objective 1 status in west Wales and the valleys. There is no question but that that area is a part of the United Kingdom that is very much in need of help, and I would be the last person to deny it that assistance. Fortunately, unemployment in Bury is traditionally slightly lower than the national average. However, it seems worthy of investigation. We should know whether British companies are choosing to close factories in those parts of the United Kingdom where regional assistance is not available simply to move to areas with objective 1 status. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to comment specifically on that point.

12.48 pm

The Minister for Small Businesses and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on securing the debate. I congratulate also my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on their sterling efforts on behalf of their constituents in seeking a meeting with the directors of Bentwood Ltd., and in seeking to find a better way forward for the company and its work force.

My constituency forms part of a city that is dominated by the textiles and footwear trade, so I am well aware of the enormous difficulties faced by the industry and of the huge anxieties that they cause employees, who are affected not only by the intense global competition in that industry but by the difficulties experienced by most high street retailers, including Marks and Spencer. As the Minister with responsibility for small businesses—I am the textiles Minister—I work closely with the industry to ensure that the Government take the steps necessary to help the industry maintain and improve its competitiveness in these difficult global conditions.

I should tell those who are affected by the decisions being made at Bentwood how very much I and the Government regret the proposed closure of Bentwood Ltd., at Chorley and Bury, and the possible loss of 300 jobs. The decisions about product lines and location must be a matter for the company's commercial judgment. It is not possible, nor would it be desirable, for Ministers and officials to try to second-guess the

commercial decisions of Bentwood, Marks and Spencer or the thousands of other companies that operate in the United Kingdom. It is our responsibility to try to create a favourable environment in which those businesses can expand and in which employment can increase.

I shall not digress into commenting on our overall economic policy, or the real success that we are having. Instead, I shall say a little more about the work that we are undertaking with the textiles industry, and about some of the difficulties that my hon. Friends referred to. The Government have set up a textiles and clothing strategy group, which, for the first time, brings together employers, employer associations, trade unions, the Government and certain other key people, including some of the academics who are at the leading edge of research in new processes in the textiles sector. That group has been working extremely hard during the past year, and it has produced an excellent draft report. I am sure that my hon. Friends will have had the chance to read it, and I commend it to them and their constituents.

The draft report is now out for consultation. The Government will make decisions on those recommendations once we have the final report. However, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I recently met the strategy group to discuss its conclusions. A fortnight ago, I met the general secretary of the main trade union, the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades to discuss the work that that group has undertaken. The General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union and the Transport and General Workers Union are members of that group. Even in advance of that, however, my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry are supporting 25 projects, all of which are designed to strengthen our textile and clothing industry. For instance, they include helping companies, many of them small, to open new export markets, with the backing of British Trade International and using the new medium of the internet. Although the relative strengths of sterling and the euro make exporting to other European countries difficult, that is not the case with the USA, because the exchange rate between sterling and the dollar has been stable for the past four years, or with Japan—or with the far east in general, with which the exchange rate has also been quite stable; indeed, at one point, the yen was falling against the pound.

By taking steps to open up export markets and strengthen the capacity of firms in the sector to market at home as well as abroad, by investing in the skills base and by helping firms, where appropriate, to move into the new, fast-growing area of technical textiles, where the United Kingdom has a world-leading position, we can ensure that, in the future, the industry as a whole is at least as healthy and successful as it has been in the past.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley raised the issue of labelling. Under the European Union's single market rules, it is not possible to have a compulsory country of origin labelling scheme. Marks and Spencer labels its clothing according to country of origin, as part of the company's ethical trading system, and its customers know the origin of the goods that they are buying. It is perfectly possible for the industry to promote a voluntary labelling scheme, and there are signs that specialist labelling schemes, such as that for Scottish cashmere, which is increasingly marketed as a generic brand under which individual suppliers can go to market, are very successful. Such schemes are best taken forward through the strategies group and the industry associations and at a regional level. The regional development agencies put in place by the Government represent the best way to ensure that, at a regional level—it is a regionally based industry—we can build more effective clusters and supply chains using our existing strengths, and build further on those strengths to keep up with what is happening in other parts of the European Union and the world.

I return to the subject of the employees of Bentwood. The 90-day consultation period required by law has, of course, been triggered by the company's announcement of the proposed redundancies. In accordance with the law, the Secretary of State has been notified about that decision. That allows local partners to put in place an appropriate support package for any employee who is made redundant after the consultation period and after the company has taken its final decisions.

The training and enterprise council for Lancashire area west—Lawtec—is already working with Chorley district council and the Employment Service on a package of support for any staff made redundant. A similar process is under way in Bury. I have made specific inquiries about the success rates of similar support packages. It is not always easy to track individuals through the process and gather accurate information. The measures taken in Bury and by Lawtec for individuals affected by large-scale redundancies in the last two or three years have shown success rates of between 70 and over 90 per cent. In the case of Littlewoods, the interventions in Bolton and Bury last year resulted in about two thirds of the employees finding employment, so far as can be tracked. Those facing redundancy should not feel that there is no support and no hope. When redundancies happen—and they are always regrettable—one of the most important things that Government and regional partners and agencies can do is to get effective support in place for employees.

I welcome the fact that both my hon. Friends have referred not only to the meetings that they have had with the company, but to the meetings with the work force now taking place. The employees' representatives must get enough information from Bentwood to take part in the process of consultation that has now begun. The company is under a statutory duty to disclose information about its plans in writing and make it available to the trade union. In doing so, the employer must disclose to the employees and their unions the reasons for the proposal, the number of employees—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

It being One o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 March 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Exchange Rate

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I asked for this debate today, which I am delighted to have got, as I want to draw attention to the fact that the pound is grossly over-valued, especially against European currencies. Given that the euro has been falling, I want to argue that the pound's over-valuation is having a deeply damaging effect on our manufacturing industry. It is also damaging our regions, especially the north and the midlands.

I want to argue also that manufacturing is certain to lose jobs and to shrink as a result of policies that have been pursued for six years now. That is how long the pound has been over-valued, and it is only now reaching what might be hoped to be its peak. Unless the Government act, investment decisions will be taken that will shift investment away from this country. Jobs will be lost, and the capacity that is closed will never be opened again.

The Government must not wring their hands, as they have done for two and half years. They have been saying that nothing can be done, but now they must do something. That is the burden of my song today, Sir Alan.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. "Mr. Deputy Speaker" is the correct form of address.

Mr. Mitchell: I apologise for starting on a bum note, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, that should not undermine the brilliance of the song, nor the beauty of the words.

The pound is undoubtedly at an excessively high level. In the European exchange rate mechanism, a pound was worth DM2.95. That very high level had disastrous consequences for British industry, but the pound has been as high as DM3.27. It is now slightly lower, although the euro fell again yesterday, so the pound's level against the deutschmark may have risen slightly.

By any account, sterling's over-valuation will damage manufacturing. Estimates of its over-valuation vary, but I put it at about 30 per cent., or perhaps a little more. The Institute of Directors puts it at 15 per cent., but that was before the pound went over DM3. The Confederation of British Industry also agrees that the pounds is over-valued.

Why is that over-valuation happening? The Bank of England does not appear to know, and changes its opinion fairly regularly. However, the pound is over-valued because Britain is becoming—or has become—a rentier nation. We have invested massively overseas, just as the rest of the world has invested in this country. The problem is that the return on our investment overseas is about £15 billion a year greater than the return for foreign investors on their investments in Britain. We do better with our investments overseas than do people from overseas who invest in this country. The dividends and profits come to this country, get translated into sterling and thereby keep the pound's value high. The same thing happened at the end of the 19th century, when we were on the gold standard.

The second factor is that the euro has fallen in value. I believe that it has been managed down as part of a competitive devaluation designed to kick-start the European economies. The other possibility is that the euro has fallen because it is a monstrous, unlikely beast that was never going to work anyway. However, I leave that for the nation to judge—it is not part of my song today. I honestly do not know what the answer is, although I suspect that it is being managed down. Those in charge of the euro want the European economies, and especially Germany's, to be more competitive. They therefore need the boost that an undervalued exchange rate gives to the manufacturing economy. They have achieved that, and German industry has benefited greatly.

The third and most important factor is that our interest rates are high, in real terms and in historic real terms. They are nearly double European rates. It is impossible for manufacturing to compete effectively in what is now a single market with very intense competition when we have interest rates double those of our nearest competitors. How on earth can it be expected to compete in a race against very powerful competitors when it has a ball and chain around each ankle—one that is called high interest rates, and the other called over-valuation, which is the consequence of those high interest rates? For some reason, Britain expects the economics of outward bound courses to have a beneficial and stimulating effect on our manufacturing. In contrast, other countries compete more effectively.

Our interest rates are high. The world is awash with growing money flows, due to uncertainties in south-east Asia and about the euro. Inevitably, that money gets parked here because it can earn high rates of interest. It can also profit from the possibility—it has been a probability over the past few years—of an appreciation in the exchange rate. Naturally, therefore, this country is attractive to all the money washing around the world.

We are paying the funny-money manipulators to bring that money here and to keep it here. That is doing us great damage. The City might do well out of it, but the rest of the economy does very badly. When sterling is bought and the funny money is parked here, the pound appreciates.

I believe that the Bank of England is using over-valuation of the exchange rate as its only weapon against inflation. The psychology works as follows: over-valuation makes imports, foreign holidays and everything that is imported cheap, and therefore reduces the cost of living, even though it destroys jobs in this country. The second element to be considered is that, in order to compete in a race while hampered with over-valuation, British producers cut back on costs. When they cannot agree wage increases, they shed jobs and put

[Mr. Mitchell]

the pressure on labour. It is assumed that the result of all that is that inflation will be defeated, albeit at the expense of our long-term industrial survival.

Inflation is no longer the serious problem that it was in the 1970s. The world is awash with excess capacity in manufacturing. The power of labour has been broken. There is an air of insecurity because people are frightened for their jobs, and competition is now more intense than it has ever been. For those reasons, inflation is no longer the problem that it used to be, but we are fighting it with the monetarist weapons of the 1920s. We appear to believe that disciplines must be imposed on British manufacturing that other countries' industries do not have to bear. In essence, we have aimed the monetarist musket right at the heart of British industry.

If the Bank of England wants high interest rates when inflation is low and sterling is high, what will happen to interest rates when sterling comes down in value, as it is bound to do at some stage? The Bank of England will have to push interest rates ever higher in order to maintain sterling's value, because it will fear the inflationary consequences of a fall in that value.

I think that that fear is unrealistic, but the Bank of England's mentality is such that, having sustained rates at high levels during a benign period when inflation has been pretty well dead, it would have no alternative but to increase rates to prevent a fall in sterling's value that it—the Bank—created in the first place. That folly would ruin British manufacturing. The Tory Government acted in the same way between 1979 and 1982, and between 1989 and 1992. Both those periods of deflation were ended only by falls in the exchange rate. Massive recessions followed on both occasions, and the same policy would result in damaging declines now.

The Labour Government need growth to deliver their promises to the people. C. A. Crosland argued that the essence of socialism was economic growth, as that enabled the redistribution of wealth and improved public spending that made society better for working people. However, this Government, who are supposed to share that ideology, are undermining redistribution and destroying growth. The consequences are certain to be the same as in the two previous, and unnecessary deflations, that I mentioned earlier.

The pound's over-valuation hits manufacturing directly. Manufacturing is on the front line of intense international competition on price. Price is the central competitive factor—people say that it might be the improvement of models, but everything has its price. Manufacturing is faced with increased prices through no fault of its own, because of the exchange rate. The exchange rate translates all our costs into foreign currencies when the goods are sold, meaning that our costs are far too high. They have appreciated by more than 30 per cent. over the past six years because of the exchange rate. Manufacturing has done its best to cut costs. It has made itself very efficient and is now extremely productive, but this burden of costs has been imposed on it as a kind of outward bound course mentality.

There is nothing that manufacturing can do about this. It is exhorted to hold wages down. Even if it holds down wages permanently, cuts wages and every cost available, it cannot cut costs by more than perhaps 2 per cent. a year. Yet the costs in foreign exchange terms have been increased by 30 per cent. It is a hurdle that manufacturing cannot jump.

The evidence of the effects of increased costs can be seen all around. It has happened near Grimsby. Fisons is just closing its fertiliser plant in the neighbouring constituency of Cleethorpes, with the loss of 250 jobs. It is concentrating production in Europe because it is cheaper to produce there at this level of over-valuation. Multinationals usually have a choice of having plants in this country, in other European countries or outside Europe. Fertiliser companies are facing difficulties because of the agricultural depression so, given that choice, they will close the plant that is the least competitive and, given our exchange rate, that plant is, ipso facto, inevitably in Britain.

The same is happening to the agricultural and chemical industries. They all tell me that the pound is not hurting them, it is crucifying them. Something must be done about it. The pig protest outside this House is because our costs are so much higher, thanks to the exchange rate. There are other factors as well, but the burdens of agriculture are largely due to the exchange rate.

It is happening in the steel industry. I have a statement that I asked for from the UK Steel Association. It says that 85 per cent. of all the steel produced in the United Kingdom is sold in the European Union single market. Price is key here and affects the UK markets as well as export sales. The UK steel industry exports half of all it produces. More than 70 per cent. of those exports go to mainland Europe. UK steel exports, however, fell 14 per cent. in 1999. The association says:

> In 1999, UK steel companies would have realised an extra £300 million a year or £25 million a month on their exports, to underpin UK jobs, if the Sterling/euro exchange rate had remained stable throughout the year instead of hardening by 12 per cent . . . In the past 20 years, UK steelmakers have improved productivity nearly five-fold. That is 10 per cent. a year, nearly three times better than UK manufacturing as a whole . . . Now, in euro terms, UK wages have increased by one third in the last three years, destroying years of wage restraint, throwing away productivity gains . . . The strong pound is making it cheaper to source from Euroland. Imported components for new cars are now 72 per cent., fully 10 per cent. up on three years ago.

Why? Because sterling is over-valued, and it is cheaper to import components from Europe. The UK Steel Association says that manufacturing investment is now down 17 per cent. on a year ago. It shows that plant is not being renewed and new technologies are not being adopted.

The effect of the exchange rate on steel is echoed by Corus whose chairman, Sir Brian Moffat, warned Members of Parliament when he spoke here:

> Manufacturing industry in the UK is fighting for its very existence and will continue to do so. It is extremely efficient but the impact of the continued strengthening of the pound on its cost base is remorselessly undercutting its competitiveness . . . The facts are that profits are in decline and already well below the levels needed to provide necessary future investment, never mind reward shareholders.

I requested opinions from several organisations. The Engineering Employers Federation says:

> Of particular concern is the impact the strength of sterling is having on confidence and investment plans. The EEF's latest survey shows that investment plans have been cut back for the sixth consecutive quarter and there has been no let up in the rate of decline.

Nissan says:

> The implications of Sterling continuing at its present level against the Euro are being grossly underestimated and are poorly understood. Should the present circumstances continue unchecked, the UK's manufacturing exporters, their export markets and our domestic markets, are at grave risk.

Nissan says that production has been increasing in the UK. It says, however:

> The position of Nissan in Sunderland is particularly vulnerable, exporting as we do, 75 per cent. of our production—mostly into the heartland of our competitors in continental Europe. Ask any of our competitors in France, Germany or Italy what they think of the current Euro/Sterling relationship—they cannot believe their good fortune . . . Nissan currently buys 70 per cent. of its total European component spend from UK suppliers—a policy which adds to the burden of competing profitably overseas. The UK supply base must compete . . .

The implication is that UK suppliers will be cut out and that Nissan will buy its supplies from Europe.

That is the story from a clutch of manufacturers. It is repeated everywhere. Raleigh Bicycles closes production in Nottingham and transfers it to south-east Asia. Ford sheds 5,000 jobs at Dagenham and transfers them to Europe. Marks & Spencer cuts down on its purchases in this country, with devastating damage to textile towns in Lancashire, as all my colleagues representing Lancashire constituencies complain, because it is cheaper to have the same goods produced in Morocco or Sri Lanka and import them here. More is being done overseas; more components are being imported, and jobs in this country are going. Long-term investment decisions are being taken. As Bruce Springsteen sings in the immortal "My Home Town", "The foreman said these jobs are going, boys, and they ain't coming back". Investment decisions taken now will affect employment and production in this country for another decade at least. Those decisions are being taken against this country.

I think that the way in which every piece of sewage that can be mustered is being thrown at Ken Livingstone is an atrocious act on the part of the Labour party, which will alienate public opinion. We are now told that there is a Livingstone effect—that the threat of Ken Livingstone as mayor will stop businesses coming to London. There is already an Eddie George effect, and if I were not such a loyal party member, I would call it a Gordon Brown effect.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman of the way in which we address fellow Members of the House—not directly by name.

Mr. Mitchell: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let us just call it the Eddie George effect—it is much safer that way. It puts investing companies off this country, and the decisions have already been made.

German manufacturers in this country, in particular, say that the solution to our problems is to join the euro. It is not, because we cannot join the euro at this exchange rate or anything like it. That would set it in concrete and make it permanent. The exchange rate operating when we join will have to be that maintained for two years before entry. It is impossible to join the euro at this exchange rate, and people arguing for that are so devoted to Europe that they have lost their sanity or they are Liberal Democrats. Both want euro entry now, which is a folly. When companies say that we should join the euro, they are really saying, "We are not competitive at this exchange rate. Do something about it." That is the real message.

The consequences are that imports are going up and exports are falling, and the balance of trade is turning sour. It is saved only by oil. That trend will affect a dismaying proportion of our gross national product if it continues at this rate, and there is nothing to stop it. We will build up a deficit, and manufacturing and jobs will be hit just as we are in the run-up to an election in May 2001. I had better tell the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), before he slip outs to make preparations, that we are making those preparations for him with this economic policy.

The effects have not hit us before because the most vulnerable firms and industries disappeared in the two previous deflations, and there has been a credit expansion to keep up domestic demand, but it is hitting the fundamentals of production, exports and our position in the world. We have been here before, and it is distressing to hear the same things being said. I hope that the Minister will not say the same again today. We have been having these debates for some time, and Ministers' replies could have been enunciated by Conservative Ministers in the previous two deflations.

We are told that industry is learning to live with the strong pound; well, it is certainly learning to die with the strong pound. It is a truism to say that our existing industry is competitive—the fact that it has survived means that it is competitive. That view makes no allowance for the new industries that are developing or the old industries that we have lost; nor does it deal with the means of survival.

Industry is surviving by exporting; it is hanging on, often without profit, as firms all over the country have told me, just to keep its market share. It is having to cut down on everything—investment, research, design and innovation—just to survive. That formula is uncompetitive in the long term, but it leads to short-term survival. In the drought in the 1970s, people told us that the great trees had survived, and we all marvelled at that feat, but shortly afterwards the trees collapsed one after the other. That is the position of British manufacturing.

We are told that the situation is good discipline for British industry because it will make it competitive, and that is Government policy. We are preaching competitiveness, investment and upgrading skills. All that is desirable, but useless in the face of this over-valuation, because firms cannot cut costs enough to overcome that hurdle. We look fairly silly preaching the need for a cost-cutting, burden-shedding, low-wage economy to European competitors who are now doing well because of their undervaluation while our manufacturing is being crucified by our over-valuation. I cannot understand that approach.

We are told that the pound will come down. The Bank of England clearly does not know what is going to happen. I read from the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee's last meeting:

> Committee members differed in their preferred assumptions for the path of sterling's effective exchange rate . . . Some preferred to assume a constant nominal exchange rate; some others preferred a depreciation in line with interest rate differentials . . . The assumption used in the best collective projections was half way between the two.

[Mr. Mitchell]

It split the difference between the status quo and obvious nonsense—the idea that the exchange rate will decline—to get the projected rate. That is rubbish because the exchange rate has gone up.

The Bank of England does not know what is happening. It sits there in its ivory tower, terrified at the prospect of house price increases in the south-east, where the members of the MPC live, and wage increases in the City, where most of them mix and from where they draw their ideology, and damages the rest of the country by putting up interest rates.

We are intermittently told by Ministers that the pound will come down. I have been told that several times in correspondence. Why does it not come down? When will it come down? What will make it come down? Each time we are told that it will come down, it goes up. That means that the bleeding will continue.

We are told, finally, that there is nothing that we can do, which is an abdication and an obvious nonsense. The pound is a market-clearing mechanism; it must clear markets at a level that allows us to balance our trade in conditions of growth and full employment. It is being deliberately held up to fight inflation even though inflation is no threat. The resources of civilisation are not exhausted; it is no use us just wringing our hands and saying that there is nothing we can do. We can talk the pound down. If the Government and the Bank said that they wanted the pound to come down substantially, that would help to weaken confidence and bring the pound down.

We can reduce interest rates to the European level. Why should they be double those in Europe? We can change the terms of reference of the Bank of England—in my view they were always a folly—because they should certainly take account of employment, and of exchange rates and growth. We could change the targets. We could sell sterling on a scale that will bring it down. Why do we not do that?

We could buy euros. The European Union would regard that as a big favour. That would push up the euro and bring down sterling. Gerry Haltham, the former director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, who now works for Norwich Union, has suggested a scheme whereby we raise £20 billion in public debt. British Government 20-year bonds pay less than 5 per cent., so we should use that £20 billion to buy euros and invest in European public debt.

In France, Italy and Holland, such debt pays a full percentage point more than our public debt, so if we invested £20 billion raised on British public debt, over 20 years we would get £200 million a year for the British taxpayer and the appreciation that will eventually happen when the euro begins to rise, and we would bring down the pound. Why are we not thinking about such sensible methods to solve the problem? I have suggested that to Ministers and the Bank of England.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend sing such high praises for the euro. That needs to be hosannaed around our country. Is he aware that although the Treasury may have had its fingers burned on gold sales and may be a little nervous of Mr. Haltham's idea, Thomas Cook reports that the British people are buying all their holiday money now because they are ahead of policy makers in thinking that in six months, when the summer holiday season starts, the pound will not be worth as much as it is today? He should follow the instincts of the good British people.

Mr. Mitchell: If my hon. Friend heard me singing the praises of the euro, there is something wrong with the acoustics of the Room, which I know are a problem. I would not dream of doing that. I was trying to help the euro in its hour of need by suggesting that we should buy that poor, timid, cowering creature and give it a lifeline to get it up so that we can get down sterling, which is the main problem. My hon. Friend says that people are buying their holiday currency early and that is another argument that the pound will come down, but it is staying up and it will continue to do so with these interest rates.

All the weapons that I have described are available to the Bank of England. It has even considered intervention. Good heavens—what a lot of progress has been made in the two and a half years since the Bank was given its powers. Those weapons are available to the Government. It is easier to intervene to get rates down than to keep them up, as we usually do. Why do not we intervene? It is crucial that we get sterling down to achieve growth.

Since the 1970s, our growth has been 2 per cent. a year, which is pathetic. The rest of the industrial world has had nearly 4 per cent. growth, and that gap is widening. Our manufacturing is weaker, and productivity growth comes only from manufacturing, not from services. The big productivity gains are all made in manufacturing. South Korea has had a cumulative annual growth rate of 14 per cent. because of its expansion in manufacturing. Here, if productivity from services increases at all, it is only by 2 per cent. Yet, we have been shifted from a manufacturing to a service economy, in which growth will be low and the motor of our economy, which provides two thirds of exports, will suffer, reducing the power and capacity to serve the nation, pay our way in the world and attract the necessary investment to sustain such power and capacity.

The only way to achieve higher growth in our economy is to get the exchange rate down to a point where our cost base becomes competitive with the rest of the advanced world. Achieving higher growth is easily done; it requires only a substantial fall in the exchange rate. That is the way to do it, rather than watching the exchange rate go up and up, wringing our hands, saying in the most unsocialist tradition that I know, "There is nothing that we can do against these brute economic forces." There is; and when we do it, we will grow. Unless we do it, we shall be damaged.

I therefore hope that the Government will recognise that something must be done and that there are ways of tackling the problem. I hope that they will get the message from the cries of pain around the country, if not from this crowded Chamber: do something about the problem!

10.1 am

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on obtaining this debate and on a speech

that I know will be read with great sympathy in the steel and other manufacturing and farming communities of our country. Since I shall refer briefly to steel, I should declare at the outset my usual interest in any debate that touches on the industry: a relationship with the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, the main steel trade union, and 25 shares in Corus, the dividend from which, I am afraid, is less than the price of a McDonald's hamburger, but at least keeps me in touch with what the company is up to.

My hon. Friend has raised the issue at an appropriate moment, but we must set the specific problem of the exchange rate in a broader context. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has undertaken remarkably successful management of the economy, with levels of stability, growth and job creation that have not been seen for many years. The key strategic decisions and guidelines have been laid down. I welcome independence for the Monetary Policy Committee, control of Government spending and sensible tax policy, which, while all other centre-left Governments of Europe are cutting taxes, I hope the Chancellor will follow in his Budget.

However, there is growing and real concern about the exchange rate, particularly in the steel industry which is so vital to my constituency. All steel prices are posted in deutschmarks—today, of course, we should say euros—for sale across the European Union and further afield, just as oil prices are posted in dollars. The steel industry in our country cannot long survive if it must export in prices that can no longer compete with producers in Ireland—there are some—and on mainland Europe.

Like a Darth Vader who has not been killed by the forces of light, there is one remaining dark and malicious leftover from the boom-and-bust economy that we associate with the Tories: the over-valuation of sterling, which becomes more acute as oil prices harden at the spectre of sterling again becoming a petro-currency, as it did in the early 1980s, and inflicting yet more damage on manufacturing.

It is surprising that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the former Chancellor, keeps his name as a friend of the euro, since the biggest percentage surge in the pound's value in recent years—from DM2.15 in May 1996 to DM2.70 in May 1997—occurred during the last 12 months of his office. I excuse the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who will speak for the Conservative party in this debate, from such criticism because he wisely resigned just as the pound was about to shoot up. I raised the issue again and again on the Floor of the House, begging the then Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to take some remedial action on sterling, but they did nothing.

The Tory-initiated policy of an over-valued pound has, more than any other factor, distanced the UK from the euro and begun the process of the crunch on exports and manufacturing, which has cost so many jobs and led in the steel industry to great worry about plants and employment.

The over-valuation of sterling against the real weight of the UK economy—this is important—may be as high as 30 per cent., as the International Monetary Fund recently suggested, and is certainly 15 per cent., as most commentators agree. Since 1996, according to analysis done for me by the House of Commons Library, sterling has appreciated by 10 per cent. against the dollar and 30 per cent. against the ecu—now the euro. That is having a major negative impact on the economy in four areas.

Over-valuation is slowing down the rate of exports, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out; it is sucking in imports as demand grows; it is encouraging massive flows of capital overseas, because for every pound that comes into the UK, £2.50 to £3 leaves it in money generated in Britain; and it is hitting disproportionately regions to the north of the M25.

The go-go regions of the UK economy—London, the south-east and what I call M25-land—might generate about 40 per cent. of the UK economy, but they run a major balance of trade deficit. In contrast, Yorkshire, the north-west, the north-east and the midlands run a much smaller part of the UK economy and a balance of trade surplus. Therefore, the north earns Britain's money and the south spends it. There is resentment about that unfairness.

Let us not forget the extent to which the UK has been dragged more and more out of line with our main markets in Europe, where we sell most of what we produce, whether as goods or services. In the eurozone, exchange rate problems have been eliminated and policy makers have been able to focus on much tougher decisions about investment, training and productivity, as well as cutting taxes and undertaking the other reforms called for by the Prime Minister to get their economies going again.

Let us not forget that the UK is ranked 10th in terms of gross domestic product per head in the eurozone. We may be the world's fifth or sixth biggest economy—a statistic often rolled out—but in the world league table of purchasing power parities, we have been stuck at 18th for a quarter of a century, well beneath most of our EU partners. Anyone who represents a constituency in the north, as my hon. Friend does, knows the disparities between poverty, deprivation and social exclusion in such areas and in our European partner countries.

There are other insidious effects of an over-valued pound. First, when the pound buys FF11 or 3,000 lire, there is a kind of national cockiness. A strong pound seems to prove that we have swallowed the Viagra and solved our economic problems. For millions of holiday makers, the high pound does mean cheaper margaritas and paellas than ever before. However, for not just our steelworks and manufacturing but our farmers, who are crippled by it, our tourism industry, which suffers from people staying away except perhaps, from spending their money in the rich hotels in London, and our architects, who are trying to sell their products, services and talents, the future is bleak.

The second insidious effect arises from the dependency on an over-valued sterling controlling inflation and improving productivity. We are, and always have been, a great importing nation. The UK imports nearly a quarter of its GDP—22 per cent. in 1998—compared with just 11 per cent. in the United States, which is why the endless Tory refrain that we should couple ourselves with America cannot make sense. Exchange rate variables are far more important to Britain than to America, so the cheaper that we can buy from overseas, the lower the prices at home and the lower costs that shape inflation.

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

In addition, the first response of firms faced with a high pound is to lay off staff; hence, the scores of thousands of jobs lost in manufacturing—160,000 since 1996, at the last count—and the great worries of the steel and other exporting industries. Technically, if the work force are slashed and output is maintained, productivity improves—that is a mathematical certainty. However, in my judgment, improved productivity should mean more output from the same number of workers, not the same output from fewer workers, which is what currently happens. The pattern we are witnessing is one of cuts in investment in capital stock, because exports stall and better returns on capital are found as the high pound allows profitable investment overseas.

The third insidious effect of a high currency is like that of any drug—the high never lasts. We have a booming pound which might continue to defy the laws of currency gravity for a while longer, but sooner or later the markets, with their usual adulterous infidelity, will fall for another currency; the pound will be spurned and thrown to one side, and its value will start to fall. The key tasks facing policy makers—here I address my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary—is to prepare both public opinion and decision takers for the new thinking that will be needed when the pound trades at a level commensurate with the true weight of the UK economy.

What is certain is that those who make key decisions will always lag behind events. By nature, I am a strong currency man, but a strong currency should be a by-product of a strong economy. The deutschmark and the Swiss franc hardened over the years as the German and Swiss economies gained in strength. A strong currency does not create a strong economy; rather, the reverse is true. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby did not use the word "devaluation", but I got the impression that he was calling for the pound's value to be brought down rather suddenly. My view is that, if there is a decline, it must be managed and gentle.

To any of those hon. Members who are interested in the exchange rate, I recommend a remarkable new book that I obtained from the Library. The book's author is the curator of coins at the Ashmolean museum in Oxford, Mr. Nicholas Mayhew, and its title is "Sterling: the Rise and Fall of a Currency". His book more than supplies the historical perspective that is lacking in our debates: it covers 1,000 years of sterling. I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a man who proudly wears the symbol of sterling on his lapel, will be interested in reading that book.

In the matter of sterling, there is nothing new under the sun. The repeated sterling shocks experienced by the UK, with over-cockiness followed by over-correction, dance over the centuries, and recent experience reflects the same pattern. In the lifetime of most Members of Parliament, sterling has been one of the most rollercoaster currencies of any mature democratic economy.

The Americans have not made our mistake. Since the Plaza accord of the mid-1980s, the dollar has been relatively stable. That has helped to promote American exports: that part of American GDP taken by exports has significantly increased over the past 10 years because dollar trading has been relatively stable, despite significant shocks originating in south-east Asia. The dollar does not have the up-and-down rollercoaster history that the pound sterling has had over the past 20 years.

Mr. Mitchell: Since the 1970s, we have lived in a world of floating exchange rates, in which sterling has been held at unnaturally and uncompetitively high levels by high interest rates in our economy. As a result, since the early 1970s, British manufacturing prices have increased 40 per cent. over those of our competitors. That is the new feature of the debate. The dollar might have been stable in the 1990s, but between 1985 and 1990, it fell by almost 50 per cent.

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend appears to accept my argument. Even in the world of floating currencies that has prevailed since the end of the Bretton Woods era in 1973, it has been possible to maintain stability. After the Plaza and Louvre accords, which brought down the dollar's value, the dollar has been relatively stable whereas sterling has not. In addition, since the era of the exchange rate mechanism and with the introduction of the euro, the main European economies have opted for currency stability against each other, as can be seen in the external exchange rates between France and Germany, Ireland and Spain, the Netherlands and Austria. By contrast, the pound sterling has peaked and troughed with all the stability of a ping-pong ball on a jet of water at a fun fair.

Hansard, alas, does not print charts, graphs or photographs, but the House of Commons Library produced a graph for me that shows sterling against the ecu—now the euro—and the dollar since 1996. In both cases, we see up-and-down movements that are the result of mismanagement or non-management of the exchange rate. Contrary to the belief expressed by some of my friends inside and outside the House that the fault lies entirely with the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee, the evidence is that interest rate movements have not had a direct impact—there is no cause-and-effect link.

There is a problem with the MPC, which is that no member of it has direct experience of manufacturing, or the economy beyond the M25 region, or the ivory towers of Oxbridge and the London school of economics. I urge the Chancellor to ensure that, in future, the membership of the MPC reflects a wider range of experience. I hope that the MPC will listen to our debate and decide this afternoon not to put up interest rates.

I am sure that the Economic Secretary will point out that, thanks to growth in the United States and to the welcome return to growth of the Asian economies, UK manufacturing and exports are recovering, albeit from a very low base. I would answer that, when one falls into a hole, one has to climb upwards to get out, as the graphs show. However, real, sustained and stable growth is not possible with an over-valued currency.

Our first task is to admit that there is a problem; only when we have admitted that can we start to discuss solutions. Therefore, I welcome the discussion that took place at the MPC's most recent meeting. Our need is not so much for an unyielding policy on sterling as for the intellectual and political honesty to admit that we have

a serious problem. We need a new policy mix that is aimed at making our currency correspond to our economy's real strengths and is as supportive of the exporting economy as it is beneficial to the importing economy.

It would be helpful if the myriad organisations representing the industrial and exporting sectors could unite and speak with one voice. There is a low-level, haphazard whine emitted by the Confederation of British Industry, the Engineering Employers Federation, the UK Steel Association and trade bodies representing other exporters, but the sum of their justified complaints about sterling is not the convincing and strong voice that is needed to be influential in the public policy arena. The Institute of Directors, with its obsessive anti-Europeanism, has no locus standi in the matter. Until manufacturers and exporters learn to speak with a united voice, they will not have the clout required to influence policy.

I am close to the trade union movement. Trade unions are quick to protest about sterling's rise, but they need to advance concrete propositions on how to keep down inflation and improve productivity—the two beneficial side effects of a strong currency. The best way to improve productivity so that it is not a zero-sum process is to invest in modernising and renewing capital infrastructure and human skills, and much of the Government's policy on training and life-long learning reflects that fact. Nevertheless, manufacturing investment is falling: today, it is 15 per cent. below its 1990s peak, as manufacturers take what profits they can and invest them elsewhere because the over-valued pound makes exporting less profitable and sucks in cheap imports from Europe that have a 30 per cent. price advantage over equivalents made in Britain.

That problem is made worse by short-sightedness and failure to invest when the money is present. Corus, the former British Steel, is right to complain about loss of profits. However, British Steel was making more than £1 billion profit only three years ago, and last year £800 million was taken from the steel industry pension fund to pay a sweetener to shareholders in the company during the merger with the Dutch Hoogovens company that created Corus. That is £2 billion missing, which was available to British Steel and not used to invest, upgrade and protect against the cyclical rise in sterling that has been on the cards since the irresponsible behaviour of the previous Conservative Government.

Unions must embrace flexibility and partnership and ensure, for example, that there is only one union in each workplace, instead of unions representing different categories of workers, each defending its own pay corner in each company or sector.

Increases in earnings in all three sectors—manufacturing, services and the public sector—are running significantly ahead of inflation. The bonuses paid to City executives in December were so big that they influenced the average earnings data. Those big bonuses push up house prices in the M25 region, to which the MPC responds by raising interest rates, which merely fuels the square mile economy and increases the bonuses, so creating the next round of the vicious circle.

We need a new fiscal and regional policy mix to warm up the cold bits of the economy suffering from the high pound, and to cool down those overheated parts of the economy which fuel the interest rate rises that help to keep the pound over-valued.

In other economies, notably the United States, there are sub-national levels of government that can take fiscal, planning and labour market decisions which allow much more rapid adaptation to the markets and to economic changes. In the UK, the one-size-fits-all policies laid down by Whitehall are not sufficiently flexible to allow South Yorkshire, for example, to set its sails to the winds of the global economy. Instead, we are steered on bearings that suit the directions in which the M25 region, and often simply the City of London, wish to head. I plead for greater fiscal flexibility and planning devolution.

The other inescapable part of the argument, and my final point, concerns Europe. I shall not rehearse the arguments over the euro. I thought that my hon. Friend was extremely restrained in the part of his speech dealing with that issue.

I predict that in 10 years, we will have, in effect, a single transatlantic currency uniting the great democratic market economies of the 21st century. It will be called the dollar over there and the euro over here. The currencies will co-operate and be stable with each other in order not just to promote trade and growth, but to defend the common democratic values that unite Europe and North America, and to defend the identity of the nation states that make up this great region.

The anti-Europeans want the pound to float between the dollar and the euro—up today and down tomorrow. As long as that is the case, there will be no stability, sustainability or security for British manufacturing and British exporters.

I fully support the Government's five economic tests, but, on the key issue of convergence, the performance of the pound sterling is leading us further away day by day from Europe. Perhaps that is what some of those who take the key decisions on interest rates and other matters that determine the pound's value secretly desire. If so, they should join my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and, I think, the right hon. Member for Wells and proclaim their anti-European faith.

I believe, on the contrary, along with the Prime Minister, that a strong and growing Europe needs its single currency, and that it is in Britain's interest for Europe to grow, create jobs and embrace the reform agenda advanced by the Labour Government. To rule out UK participation in the euro as a matter of principle would be to condemn the pound to a life of instability—now strong, now weak, today over-valued, yesterday or tomorrow devalued, always too hot or too cold for Britain's steel and other manufacturing and exporting industries.

For 10 years, the British people have heard only lies about Europe and propaganda against the euro. Now is the time to start telling the truth. We cannot help steel and manufacturing to prosper with a currency that is out of line with the currencies of our main trading partners, whether it is out of line because of devaluation, as in the mid-1990s, or over-valuation, as at present. We cannot have a boom-and-bust pound and expect to do well in the European and world economy.

[Mr. MacShane]

When those who make policy accept that lesson, we will get a currency that serves our nation again. When those who sit in the board rooms and the trade union executives of our land start to raise their voices and heads to tell the truth about Europe and the euro, and face down the lies from the anti-Europeans and from those who say that an over-valued currency does not matter, we can begin to make progress. That way offers some hope for steelworkers in my constituency and in other steel communities of our country who now face a grave period of worry for their jobs and their families.

10.24 am

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Time is fairly short, so I shall try to keep my remarks brief.

The debate deals with serious issues. I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has secured another debate on the subject. It is one to which he returns regularly, almost irrespective of the level of sterling at any given time.

There is significant pressure on manufacturing industry in particular, which is reflected in the balance of trade and is not being addressed by Government. If there is a vacuum in Government economic policy, it is in the area of exchange rate policy above all.

What is the depth of the problem? Both the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) dealt with that at length. In summary, the pound's strength relative to the eurozone is the real story. The yen has fallen against the pound, and the dollar has barely changed over the past few years, but sterling is 15 per cent. higher against the euro than it was when the Government were elected, and 30 per cent. higher than in 1996.

That is directly reflected in the current account balance. The seasonally adjusted current account balance has worsened from a small surplus in May 1997 to a deficit that has got worse month by month since. Total export volumes have been falling since August 1999. The global trade deficit in December was £2.7 billion—the worst on record—and £3.1 billion, excluding oil and erratics. The underlying impact on the economy is far worse.

There is some improvement, as we heard, but it is driven by the Asian and US economies, where the exchange rate issue is not significant. The decline has been almost entirely in the goods sector and in trade with the European Union—in other words, in the most price-sensitive sector, and in relation to the economic zone which is our major goods trading partner and where we have by far the biggest exchange rate problem.

I asked the House of Commons Library to do some research for me. The figures confirm that picture—the widening of the global trade deficit in December to the largest monthly deficit on record, the widening of the deficit in trade excluding oil and erratics, and the deficit in trade and goods up for 1999 as a whole to £26.3 billion from just over £20 billion in 1998.

The non-EU data reveal that the deficit was up in January to £2.4 billion from £2.3 billion, but the underlying deficit, excluding oil and erratic items, fell to £1.9 billion in January from £2 billion. The export volume growth figures show exports picking up significantly in the non-EU zone.

We see two different economies working. What is the explanation for that? The exchange rate problem. The consequences are reported day by day in the press—long-term significant investment decisions to pull out of purchasing and manufacturing in the UK. We see the major car companies clinging on—but only just—to manufacturing bases. We shall see what BMW's long-term investment plans are for Longbridge, over which there is a big question mark, and what the long-term future is for Halewood and Dagenham. There is a major question mark over whether Ford will retain a manufacturing base at Dagenham.

We know that manufacturers are pulling out of the purchase of UK-sourced components on a huge scale. That is happening not only in car manufacturing, but right across the British economy. We are losing the markets, as well as the manufacturing base. The loss of a market might be corrected in a year or two, with a depreciation, but the loss of a manufacturing base cannot be so easily corrected. That is why the Government's policy is so questionable, as is evident from all the figures relating to the manufacturing sector.

Manufacturing shows little or no growth when other parts of the economy are growing fast. For years, not only months or quarters, there has been a steady quarterly decline in manufacturing investments. There is growth in employment in the economy as a whole, but huge job losses in the manufacturing sector. That has a long-term impact on balance of trade and jobs.

If the Government are serious about pursuing a policy that is based on convergence and joining the euro because it is in Britain's interest, there is no conceivable case for joining at the current exchange rate. That view contradicts the claims of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby about Liberal Democrat policy. There is a vacuum at the heart of the Government's policy on joining the euro.

The big unanswered question; the issue that really counts is the rate at which we join. The benefit of membership of the euro is that it provides long-term stability on exchange rates. However, if we join at a rate that is too high at the start, we will experience at least a massive adjustment problem, and arguably, a long-term loss of welcome prosperity for this country. Yet the rate is a criterion that dare not speak its name in Government policy and pronouncement.

We can press the Government for an explanation of what they believe is necessary to achieve the requisite conditions. Liberal Democrats argue that there should be a pro-active policy to achieve them. We believe, like the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, that we need to pursue an exchange rate policy that has been worked through. However, the Government do not even mention the problem, let alone a policy that might be pursued to secure an answer.

A question mark has always existed over the position of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby. I am not sure what exchange rate the hon. Gentleman would believe to be competitive. However, whatever his view, he has not explained how we would maintain stability. For those who believe that it would be in Britain's interest to join the euro under the right terms—the hon. Member

for Rotherham and I agree about that—the answer is that we would have stability in the euro, and that we would thus get rid of the current boom-bust exchange rate fluctuation and its attendant job losses. Temporary fluctuations in the exchange rate cause permanent job losses. That could be resolved by membership of the euro.

If that is not the answer, those who argue against joining the euro must devise a policy for exchange rate stability rather than simply claiming that exchange rates are too high.

Mr. Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman has made a lot of sense until now, but, like my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) at the end of his speech, he is beginning to stray. I do not want us to join the euro; it would be a serious mistake. However, if we join, we must maintain exchange rate stability—preferably at a competitive level—vis-a-vis the euro for two years before we enter. The problem of managing the exchange rate for stability is the hon. Gentleman's problem as well as mine.

Mr. Taylor: I agree that we need a policy for achieving stability. However, the timetable for euro entry means that we will not join tomorrow and there is therefore time to devise a policy. However, the Government should be pro-actively pursuing a policy now. There is a vacuum in the Government's euro policy.

I want to consider what is actually happening, because I do not believe that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby has characterised the position correctly. Interest rates do not help, but the position is not fundamentally driven by interest rates, but by sentiment and people gambling on the exchange rate. That is the problem with exchange rates and the reason that they fluctuate so wildly. It is currently believed that tomorrow the exchange rate will be high and therefore it remains high. It is believed that the rate will decrease in the long run, as long-term interest rates show. The markets assume that there will be a fall and also that we will join the euro. However, they do not believe that it will happen tomorrow. Until they believe that, the fall in the exchange rate will not occur.

The sentiment does not already exist because the Government do not state that such a fall is necessary. The Government should take a clearer position of actively arguing the case for low exchange rates and membership of the euro. That would help to create the necessary circumstances for joining. However, the Government do the opposite.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby tries to put the blame on the Monetary Policy Committee, but our knowledge of the MPC suggests that it believes that the exchange rate should be lower. Eddie George spoke at the most recent meeting of the Treasury Committee. He said that all members of the MPC were worried about the strength of the exchange rate and its impact on specific sectors such as manufacturing, and on some regions. That is the argument that I am presenting.

The MPC pursues an interest rate policy that is not designed to hold up sterling, but assumes that the level of sterling is likely to fall. It does not know when that will happen, therefore it pursues an interest rate policy that assumes that it will happen; its members fall out about the timing. The minority who believes that the level of sterling will remain as it is, argues for a low interest rate policy. Those who believe that it will fall, argue for tightening interest rates to achieve the inflation pressure that they want.

The Government argue that the economy is adjusting. I believe that they are wrong. In the pre-Budget report, the Government argued that there were signs that the economy had nearly completed its adjustment to high sterling values. Nothing could be further from the truth or potentially more damaging to the economy. I hope that the Minister will deal with that when she responds to the debate.

10.37 am

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): We are grateful to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for raising such an important subject. It tempted me into this new Chamber for the first time. I presume that the matey, horseshoe structure is designed to get us to agree. We agree on much about the damage caused to sections of the economy, especially to manufacturers and exporters. I declare an interest as the director of an engineering company that manufactures and sells agricultural machinery. I can therefore testify to the difficulties in that sector. However, we disagree about some of the causes of, and the supposed cures for the exchange rate problem. Nevertheless, the debate is interesting and presents an opportunity to discover the Government's policy on exchange rates. However, I say that more in hope than expectation.

I have examined the deliberations of the Bank of England and the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee. To go back a little further, the Bank of England Act 1998 is important because it establishes the responsibilities and duties of the Bank of England for monetary policy. The operational responsibility for setting interest rates, not general monetary policy, was transferred to the Bank of England. Responsibility for monetary policy remains with the Treasury, which is accountable to the House. We must therefore obtain answers.

Under the Bank of England Act 1998, the Bank must maintain price stability, and, subject to that, support the economic policy of Her Majesty's Government. It is therefore relevant to examine the instructions and illustrations about its policy that the Treasury sent to the Bank.

At that point, I struck a problem. Under section 12 of the 1998 Act, the Treasury has to put those instructions in writing and lay a copy before Parliament, but I am advised that that has not been done. I went to the House of Commons Library yesterday and it was unable to find the directions, which have been filed away in another building. However, I was told that, contrary to the requirements of the Act, they had not been laid before the House. That is a matter of more than merely technical importance. The procedure of laying a document before the House is described in "Erskine May". It has to be given to the Votes and Proceedings Office and becomes a paper of the House that can then be ordered by the House to be printed. It is kept in perpetuity and is available to hon. Members and the public. There is no record of that having been done.

If the Government have broken their own law that is a serious matter, but even if I am mistaken—although the Library was pretty clear—they have certainly broken

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

another provision as they did not produce that paper within seven days of the Act receiving Royal Assent. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what happened to that procedure. I hope that she is statutorily immune from breaking the law—I do not want someone to be sent to the Tower of London over this—but there has certainly been a discourtesy to the House and she needs to tell us a little more about that. She also has the opportunity to tell us what is in the directions. She must know, so perhaps she can tell this Committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. This is not a Committee, but an extension of the House—a sitting in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I apologise. You, sir, are the Deputy Speaker for these purposes, and much deserved.

Even worse, the House has been the subject of discourtesy, or certainly incompetence, by the Treasury. For the purposes of the debate we need to know what directions were given to the Bank. The MPC is concerned about the exchange rate and reference has already been made to the February minutes, which report that

> a number of Committee members were very concerned about the further rise in the exchange rate . . . and the associated imbalances in the economy.

Those were graphically described by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby. Interestingly, the minutes said that it

> was, therefore, desirable to consider whether official policy could do anything to mitigate this.

Even more interestingly, in paragraph 37 it continued:

> The Committee debated whether intervention in the foreign exchange markets could usefully be deployed.

I was not aware that intervention, which means selling or buying the currency, is within the powers and responsibilities of the Bank, but it seems that it is. The Minister could confirm that.

The MPC discussed the possibility of intervening and concluded that it would not be wise to do so on the ground that that might not be effective. It also pointed out that

> sterling's strength mainly reflected euro weakness

and hinted, slightly bizarrely, that the publication of the minutes of the discussion on the exchange rate could have a similar effect on the market as if it had intervened. It was certainly disappointed in that and I gather that when the minutes were published sterling strengthened even further.

The MPC is wise to reject intervention. Last year, the Chancellor sold 75 tonnes of gold, just before it went up in price, and bought euros, just before they went down even more. The Treasury's record is rather bleak in respect of swapping assets for euros so I would not recommend that the Bank go down that path. However, a majority of MPC members concluded that a lower exchange rate and a higher interest rate would have been preferable. It put up interest rates by 0.25 per cent., but that has had the opposite effect on the exchange rate. We know its views and deliberations in some detail, but we also need to know the Treasury's views, particularly as a Treasury representative is present at MPC deliberations. Indeed, we read in this morning's press that the Chancellor is to brief it on the Budget.

I believe that it is unwise and probably impossible to specify an exchange rate. That is largely outside the control of Governments. Attempts to fix exchange rates can work temporarily, but usually have undesirable consequences. We all remember the exchange rate mechanism disaster. It was not caused, as is sometimes alleged, simply because we joined at the wrong rate in 1990. That would not explain why the entire system broke up a year after we left in 1992. It was fundamentally flawed and a shock was caused to it by German reunification, which simply meant that policy requirements in Germany were different from those in the rest of Europe.

Other shocks are developing at present. Some are benign, such as the spread of information technology, but the effects of the oil price rise on our own country—and, therefore, on its policy requirements—are clearly different from those on the continent. I would argue that variable exchange rates are an essential adjustment mechanism, which is one reason why joining the euro would be such folly. We read in today's press that the euro has sunk

> to an all-time low of 95.78 cents.

Conversely, the oil price rise has had a different effect on sterling, which simply shows not necessarily the superiority or inferiority of the British economy, but the difference between its monetary policy requirements and those obtaining in the eurozone.

That is being painfully felt in Ireland, whose inflation rate is the highest in the eurozone and well over twice the average. It is unable to do anything about that. Interest rates are set for it by a committee of bankers in Frankfurt and not according to the requirements of the Irish economy so its inflation rate is 4.4 per cent. The average is only 2 per cent. For all those reasons, aside from the constitutional and political implications of which the Government are so contemptuous, there is a clear economic case against joining the euro. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby said, if we joined we would lock in the over-valuation of sterling against the euro almost permanently.

Mr. MacShane: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Mr. MacShane: I have a one-line question.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I give way.

Mr. MacShane: Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that the United Kingdom should never join the euro?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I wish that I had not given way. The hon. Gentleman knows our policy on the euro perfectly well and I am saying that our reasons are being validated and proved as every day goes by.

The Government can do something to co-ordinate monetary and fiscal policy and therefore address the strength of sterling. They have attacked savings, for

example. The £5 billion a year raid on pension funds was undertaken through the abolition of dividend tax credits and personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts, which were successful mass savings vehicles, were abolished so the savings ratio has fallen. Savings, in macro-economic terms, are an excellent way to remove expenditure from consumption and relieve inflationary pressures without having to raise interest rates, with all the effects that that has on the exchange rate.

I do not believe that exchange rates can be fixed. However, there is an imbalance between sterling and the euro, which is chiefly caused by the euro's decline against the dollar. We have been pretty stable for about eight years. The Government can and should have used fiscal and monetary policy, working together, to address that problem. They eroded the savings culture in this country by lowering the savings ratio, which contributed to inflationary pressures and persuaded the MPC to keep interest rates higher than they otherwise would have been. That was particularly stupid and short-sighted.

10.50 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): It is my pleasure to respond to the debate that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has secured. I shall do my best to deal with the contributions made by other hon. Members, but I have only 10 minutes.

The Government understand very well the concerns of business, especially manufacturers and other exporters, about the level of the pound. Some people have suggested that sterling is high because the Monetary Policy Committee's remit is too narrow. The force of their argument is that the MPC should have not only an inflation target, but an exchange rate target. The Government strongly disagree with that argument. They are determined to avoid the instability that was caused by the ever-changing money targets of the early 1980s, and the dual exchange rate and inflation targets of the late 1980s and early 1990s. I have some sympathy with the points made by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory). The failure of the exchange rate mechanism shows the difficulties of pursuing such a policy. For that reason, the MPC has only one target—the symmetrical inflation target, as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby knows well.

There have also been suggestions that the Government either directly or by putting pressure on the Bank of England should intervene in foreign exchange rate markets to reduce the value of sterling. It is important to note that the sheer size of the funds involved in currency markets severely limits the effectiveness of any such approach, even if it were thought the right course to pursue.

As a number of hon. Members have said, the issue of intervention was discussed at length by the MPC at its last meeting, but it was agreed not to go ahead with such a move. Hon. Members have selectively quoted from Eddie George's contribution in front of the Treasury Select Committee last week. I should like to point out that he argued that intervention

would be ineffective and aggravate upward pressure on the pound.

It is important that we recognise the position of the MPC and the Bank of England.

Does the MPC take sufficient account of regional issues? My hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) may be sceptical about the degree to which the MPC takes account of regional issues. There is one interest rate for the United Kingdom economy as a whole, so the MPC needs to base its decisions on the circumstances and requirements of the UK economy as a whole. However, it takes into account a wide range of regional and sectoral data.

In particular, it closely considers the contribution of the Bank's 13 regional agents, which cover all areas of the UK. The role of the agents is to ask local people how they view economic conditions and prospects. Each year the Bank's agents talk to and visit about 7,000 business contacts, and ensure that regional information is passed to the MPC. I know from discussions with Eddie George that he tries to get out and about the regions.

The Government believe that delivering sound public finances and low inflation is the best contribution that they can make to exchange rate stability, and is consistent with their objective of a stable and competitive pound over the medium term. The Government have done that by putting in place new fiscal and monetary policy frameworks. The frameworks are highly transparent, forward looking and based on clear rules and targets.

A key feature of the Government's macro-economic policy framework is that it delivers effective co-ordination between monetary and fiscal policy. That is particularly relevant, as it has been suggested that sterling is high because fiscal policy has not supported monetary policy. That is not correct.

Fiscal policy should, whenever possible, support monetary policy through the cycle, if that is consistent with meeting the fiscal rules that the Government have introduced. Indeed, that has been happening. In the first two years after the Government took office, they cut borrowing by £30 billion, which significantly eased pressure on interest rates. Official interest rates are higher in the UK than in Europe, but longer-term interest rates are much closer to those in major European economies.

The Government's strategy has helped to lock in economic stability and open the way to steady growth, leaving behind the boom and bust of the past. The short-term outlook for growth is now stronger than previously expected. The Government's economic forecasts will, of course, be updated at Budget time, but the latest forecasts that were released with the pre-Budget report, which the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) mentioned, showed that growth is expected to pick up in 2000 and remain strong in coming years. That outcome in part reflects the proactive and forward-looking nature of the Government's macro-economic policy framework.

I enjoyed the debate between my two hon. Friends on the euro and euro-sterling levels. It is early days for the euro, and it is not appropriate for the Government to comment on it from day to day. I appreciate that it provokes debate, but it is not proper for us to engage in such discussions.

With the platform of stability that is now in place, the Government are delivering high and stable levels of employment. More than 800,000 new jobs have been

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

created since the election, and more people are now in work than ever before. Of the increase in employment in the past year, about 80 per cent. was in full-time work, so they are proper jobs. Unemployment remains on a downward trend. Claimant unemployment at 1.2 million is at its lowest level for two decades. Since the last election, long-term unemployment has been cut by half, and youth unemployment by two thirds.

The strength of business investment in 1999 has exceeded earlier expectations and remains at the level of recent highs. The strength of investment spending in recent years is partly attributable to the clear reduction in macro-economic instability and uncertainty. The UK remains Europe's premier investment location. Inward investors understand the Government's policy of a stable and competitive pound over the medium term. It would not be sensible to implement short-term measures that may put the medium-term position at risk.

There has been substantial investment in the economy. Investment has risen rapidly in recent years, with an annual rate of about 10 per cent. since 1995. Even during 1999, when there was a pause in output growth, business investment remained robust. The latest figures show business investment increased by 1.2 per cent. in the last quarter of 1999. Those investment decisions are reflected in the investment of a number of companies in the UK: Nissan, Jaguar, Peugeot, General Motors, ICL and Microsoft. Indeed, part of the Toyota group chose my hon. Friend's constituency of Rotherham for its European manufacturing plant, which cost £32 million and brought some 400 jobs to the area.

Mr. MacShane: We are pro-European in Rotherham.

Miss Johnson: Those decisions show that the Government's policy is encouraging manufacturing to invest in the UK.

My hon. Friends spoke about the problems of the manufacturing sector in the current substantial downturn in world economic activity. As growth has picked up since the crises that occurred in Europe and Asia, there are encouraging signs that conditions for manufacturers are beginning to improve. Manufacturing output rose by 0.7 per cent. in the last quarter of 1999, and there are continuing signs of a strong recovery. There are also signs that exports are recovering from their recent period of weakness. Export volumes, excluding oil and erratic items, in the three months to December were up 4.8 per cent. on the same three months a year ago.

In addition to delivering greater economic stability, the Government are also helping business in other ways. In particular, they have introduced measures specifically designed to encourage enterprise. They have reduced the main rate of corporation tax, reformed capital gains tax to encourage long-term investment, and worked on improving the way in which regulations affect business. Those and other measures will help firms in all sectors of the economy, including manufacturing.

Telecoms Regulation

11 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Let me say straight away that, whatever the hon. Gentleman may think of me, my title in this place is Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. Cable: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce a debate on this subject. When I put in a bid for it nearly two weeks ago, I envisaged a gentle canter around some of the more esoteric and uncontroversial areas of Government policy—not the kind of thing that one would expect to discuss in the Rat and Parrot—but, in view of what has happened since in at least two respects, the subject has become much more topical, and consequently more politically interesting.

I want to deal with four matters, and to begin with the two controversial ones. First, there is the question of where we now stand in relation to telecommunication regulation following the decisions that were made last week. I know that much of the procedural side of the debate is being dealt with in the Utilities Bill Standing Committee and was touched on yesterday, but I want to tackle the issue in a slightly different way—a more forward-looking way. I want to discuss what will happen now, in the hiatus between the abandoning of the Bill's approach to communications regulation and the adoption of the new integrated approach, and, specifically, what will happen to the telecoms business.

Secondly, there is the question of charging for the internet. The position is moving by the day, if not by the hour. I am not sure that any of us fully understands the implications of developments emanating from the private sector, but I want at least to raise some questions about what those developments may mean, and where they leave Government intervention.

Thirdly, I want to ask about other aspects of access to the internet, which are not simply a question of price; and, finally, I want to deal with the issue of the public sector's use of the internet. It is clear that, as the private sector solves its problems, more and more of the spotlight will be directed at the Government's role in using the system—in other words, online government—and the whole issue of how it is being benchmarked and promoted.

Let me start with the withdrawal of telecommunications from the Utilities Bill. Last week, several of us were party to a slightly histrionic session, with Order Papers being torn up, karate chops on the Dispatch Box and other excitements. Interesting and important issues were raised, however, and I want to raise them again now, in a spirit of questioning rather than of accusation.

The Government's line—which, up to a point, is very plausible—is that they are listening; but whom are they listening to? That point was made effectively last Thursday by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who observed that, while the Government were listening acutely to industry and to the operators, they were not, perhaps, listening to

consumers. Until yesterday, when I talked to consumer groups from the public utilities access forum, I had not appreciated quite how badly consumers had been treated over the past week.

There is a history; I am not sure of the extent to which the Standing Committee went into it. When the Utilities Bill was first presented, the consumer groups were quite enthusiastic, because they, as much as anyone else, had insisted on the strong consumer powers in it. Indeed, I understand that when the Bill was published the press office of the Department of Trade and Industry telephoned the consumer groups, and asked them to issue statements praising the Government for incorporating telecoms—which they did, because they were very pleased. Last week, however, not only were the consumer groups not consulted on the change of policy; they were not even given an explanation. There is clearly a serious imbalance between listening to a perfectly legitimate group of interests represented by the operators—who are acting quite properly—and not listening to the countervailing arguments of the consumer side.

There is a related point of more basic importance. If the producer interests are listened to in such a panic, that begins to undermine the reputation that the Government have built up so carefully—a reputation for impartiality in their dealings with business. I was involved in the Government machine in the 1970s, when we had a rather corporatist approach: certain companies saw themselves as representing Great Britain Ltd, and had partial access to Government. The present Government, certainly in the DTI context, have gone out of their way to create a more transparent process. The rules governing the auctioning of mobile licences strike me as an admirable example of the Government's detachment from special-interest pressure groups, and their creation of a transparent process. However, as a result of their listening to a particular company, or representing a group of companies, their reputation for transparency and objectivity is being gravely undermined, and that has potentially damaging long-term implications.

There is an even more serious question: what were the Government listening to? Until I had an opportunity to read the correspondence in detail at the weekend, I had not realised the extent to which, by acceding to the demands of the operators, the Government were not merely doing what they claimed to be doing—taking a visionary view of convergence—but conceding specific criticisms of the treatment of telecommunications in the Utilities Bill. The operators made it clear that they were wholly opposed to the fine regime, that they were hostile to an independent consumer council, and that they were hostile to many of the proactive consumer provisions in the Bill.

I was sent a letter by the operators' group—I think all hon. Members have received copies—explaining what the operators objected to in the original Bill. It states:

> The prospect of unlimited fines with no full appeal mechanism

—this is the key passage—

> and communications companies being agents of social and environmental policy through vaguely or even undefined measures will severely lessen the UK's attractiveness for investment in communications.

It is important for us to learn from the Minister whether the Government have accepted that criticism, and what the social and environmental objectives that are being jettisoned are. I suspect that the phrase may refer to the preventive approach to health in relation to telecommunications masts, and, perhaps, to access to the system for socially deprived groups. I do not know what it means, but one of the Bill's objectives was clearly to strengthen social and environmental regulation. Given that the operators' criticism has been accepted, to what extent will that objective be diluted?

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate, and apologise for not being able to stay for all of it.

I hope that my question is not too tangential. Is my hon. Friend prepared to comment on the right given to operating companies by the Telecommunications Act 1984, in the form of 25-year licences to disrupt communities, particularly in my constituency? With the arrival of the worldwide network, small country lanes have been disrupted almost continuously for the past four or five years by company after company. The road network is minimal; there has been no compensation and hardly any notice, and the roads are deteriorating seriously.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is becoming a speech rather than an intervention.

Dr. Cable: I understand that the cable companies are digging up Cornwall with the same finesse with which they dug up urban constituencies nearer London a couple of years ago, and I know that that is creating a problem. I think that the point relates to a wider issue—that of local loop competition, with which I shall deal shortly—but I agree that the companies have often been rather crass in the way in which they have opened up the system.

I return to the thread of the argument: telecommunications operators have won a retreat on telecoms regulation under the Utilities Bill. I push the Minister a little further: how far does she accept not merely the process point that they have raised—the desirability of future legislation integrating telecommunications and broadcasting—but the substance of their criticism of the original Bill?

One of the points relates to the social and environmental objectives that the companies appear to have objected to. The other relates specifically to consumer protection. What, within the original proposals for a telecommunications regulatory authority and for an independent consumer council, specifically inhibits the development of e-commerce, as the operators claimed? Does the Minister accept that argument? Is that a factor behind the retiming and restructuring of the legislation?

What will happen in the hiatus between the withdrawal of telecommunications from the Utilities Bill and the introduction of new legislation, which will follow the White Paper and, presumably, arrive in the early years of the next Parliament? In that period, will no action be taken to introduce an independent consumer council, or can it be introduced? I have heard it argued that it could be introduced on a free-standing basis without new legislation, but will the Minister make clear what the position will be? It is an important point in relation to consumer protection.

[Dr. Cable]

In the intervening period, how will the Government deal with those aspects of consumer protection that are not provided simply by the stimulus of competition? I take one concrete example. Clearly, there is enormous consumer benefit from the fierce competition in the mobile telephony sector of telecommunications, but for some time there has been strong pressure on the mobile operators to come up with the information that will make possible comparisons between different mobile systems for consumers.

As we know, there is much obfuscation in the promotional material about price, quality and back-up service. Consumers have found it difficult to obtain the comparative basis for judging the products. How far will consumer protection go to deal with such a problem?

Does the withdrawal of telecommunications from the Utilities Bill imply a different model of regulation from the one that the Government were embarking on until a week ago? Many of us believed that, despite the rapid changes and the competition at the margins, the telecommunications sector merited a utility regulation approach because, after two decades, British Telecom still has about 72 per cent. of the fixed-line revenue. There are still problems such as the enormous volume of disconnections, which have to be dealt with through a regulator. Do the Government still accept that telecommunications requires that form of utility regulation?

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the light of what is happening, particularly in the telecommunications sector, and the rapid changes, there is a case for regulation? However, because of the convergence of technology within the broadcasting industry as well as the telecommunications industry, is there not a case for regulation and a commission that encompasses not just the broad sector of telecommunications, but an even broader sector: broadcasting, where convergence is occurring rapidly?

Dr. Cable: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that there is consensus on that. It is clear that the sector is moving rapidly. Communications and telecommunications are becoming interwoven. An Ofcom dealing with communications regulation in the wider sense is clearly the right way to go. I do not think that there any dispute about that.

The dispute is about why it was necessary to withdraw telecommunications regulation in its strengthened form, with consumer protection, at this stage? Why could not the legislation have proceeded and been built on when Ofcom was eventually introduced? There is no questioning of the basic wisdom of integration and of having a regulatory structure for that. I think that we all accept that.

I move to the second issue: charging. The problem that the Government have had—it is a problem that we all share; it is not specifically a Government problem—is that, in many respects, the UK has lagged behind in terms of access to the internet and internet use. It is an important failure.

One of the most persuasive papers that I have read in the past few days, which I strongly commend to those who have not seen it, is the excellent one by Sushil Wadhwani of the Monetary Policy Committee on the economic consequences of internet use—the enormous advantages in terms of productivity growth and lower inflation with growth. It is compelling, with much detailed industrial and service sector data to back it up.

As the Minister has repeatedly argued—indeed, she has worked for it in the past year or so—it is important to get Britain to the top of that league. We are about 12th, lagging behind not just the United States and Canada, but many European countries, particularly in northern Europe.

The argument has been—there is some consensus about it—that one of the main reasons why we have lagged behind is the charging system: because of metering. Most consumer surveys suggest that use of the internet could multiply three or four times if charging were not metered.

That metering in turn relates to BT's practice—derived from its history—of charging on the basis of voice telephony, rather than of the new internet system, where marginal cost is effectively zero. The question that I ask is partly about what is happening in the market: how far do the developments of the past few days represent a fundamental breakthrough in relation to that problem? Do the Government believe that, as a result of this week's developments, that problem is now effectively cracked?

My sense—I am just reacting to news—is that that probably is not the case. As I understand it, the AltaVista proposal involves the company taking a heavy commercial risk. It will absorb BT's charging in the hope that the rapid growth in e-commerce revenue will compensate it for the risk.

This morning's proposal from BT itself, as I understand it, is a special package. It will not be open to all internet service providers. It will not provide a route to rapid spread of unmetered charging, but I should be grateful for the Minister's assessment of the changes.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): The hon. Gentleman is right. The position this week, I understand, is that there is no unmetered call. AltaVista has taken a hit of £100 million to its bottom line. It explained both to the Office of Telecommunications and to BT that a commercial package could be won, but BT does not want to accept that it has to change. As he has indicated, the problem basically is BT.

Dr. Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. That links directly to the public policy issue. A couple of weeks ago, through the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Government indicated that they were willing to challenge the existing BT monopoly in respect of the local loop. Clearly, the market believed it, because there was a major impact on BT's share price, but now that the dust has settled, the question is: what has changed? As I understand the position and the comments of the Oftel director, Mr. Edmonds, and others, nothing has changed. The date for the breaking of the monopoly—July 2001—has not changed. It remains dependent on a gentleman's agreement, essentially, between BT and Oftel on the technological readiness of the system to cope with an opening.

If nothing has changed and the local loop monopoly structure remains essentially intact, one may well wonder what purpose the Chancellor's intervention was

intended to serve. What has been the result of the intervention? It has created enormous confusion in the industry about who is making telecommunications policy, and it seems to have had minimal effect on the fundamental problem—internet charging.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): This has been a very illuminating debate, and I regret that I shall not be able to stay for all of it. However, I should like to know—simply to act as the devil's advocate—whether the hon. Gentleman is certain that the unlimited flat-rate access model is the most appropriate long-term method. America—which we all bow down to as our example—has used that model for many years, but I have read suggestions that that is more for historical reasons which arose long before the internet had been imagined. Moreover, in economics, the idea of providing a product for which there is no restraint on unlimited use does not necessarily accord with ensuring that that product is used optimally.

Dr. Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The simple answer is that I am not certain about that. Very few of us are certain, as very few of us deeply understand what is happening. There are substantial changes in the economics of the issue, and those of us who were brought up in the old economics world of scarcity and diminishing returns are having to rethink the world. We are not living in a world of diminishing returns. The marginal cost of using a broadband system is zero. There is no reason why there should be metering, and most consumer surveys suggest that metering is a massive deterrent to use of the system.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The implication of unbundling the loop seems to be that there will be an all-gain outcome. However, in its brief, BT says—I think that its case should be heard in this debate—that it should like to emphasise that unbundling the local loop

> will not be a short cut to cheaper internet access for all—on the contrary, cherry-picking of the most lucrative customers and areas will be encouraged.

Does the hon. Gentleman therefore accept that unbundling the loop might not be all it is cracked up to be?

Dr. Cable: I certainly did not wish to imply any criticism of BT as a company. Some years ago, when the Conservative Government were in power, BT accepted the principle of competition from cable companies. BT accepted that—rather than unbundling the loop, which is the United States's approach—that form of competition should take place, and its subsequent strategy has been on predictable assumptions flowing from it. I also accept—I think this was the purpose of the hon. Gentleman's intervention—that unmetered charging is not necessarily exactly the same thing as unbundling the loop. The two are partly disconnected, although there is a relationship between them.

None the less, what I hope will come out of this debate is a clear statement from the Government on two points. First, what is the Government's understanding of the current position on unmetered charging, and what options are open to them in ensuring that it is made universal as quickly as possible? Secondly, where do we stand on the principle—whether it is right or wrong—of unbundling the loop? What is the Government's commitment on that, and what time frame do they envisage as necessary for its implementation?

I should like briefly to touch on two other issues, the first of which is provision of wider access to the internet. Such access is clearly already being provided by means of commercial processes and e-commerce, and that is all very welcome. The Government—with their initiatives on ensuring that students have internet addresses by 2002 and on widespread availability within schools of internet-compatible personal computers—are doing much to ensure that the younger generation has internet access. Much is being done to raise internet awareness at that end of the age scale. I also read, this morning, that jobseekers will be given access to the system. Indeed, developments on access are emerging weekly.

I should like to know, however, the extent to which the Government have thought through the problem of those who are technophobic, particularly the problems of the elderly and those who have physical disabilities, to enable them proactively to counter the possibility of their being excluded from the system.

In my constituency, for example, a new system has been established—entitled "Hampton Online"—that has had 2,000 contacts since being established. It is an attempt to recreate "the old village" in my suburban constituency, and to enable everyone in the village to communicate through the internet. The problem with the system is that the 25 or 30 per cent. of the population who are elderly are wholly isolated from the new system. Unless something is done to help them—the people behind the website are doing something to help them, by making pictures more attractive and the system much less difficult—they will remain isolated from it.

Do the Government have any thoughts on how people in the older age range—who could perhaps derive enormous benefit from that type of system—and those who are less mobile may gain access in the same way as the younger generation? Is adult education considered a vehicle for increasing access, and how might that be provided?

What specific action is being taken to help the visually impaired or those who are deaf? There is, potentially, an enormous problem for them. If mobile telephony becomes the new vehicle for the internet, how will those who cannot hear cope with the new system? I have in my constituency someone named Julia Schofield. She is recognised as the international pioneer of online government, but she is totally blind. I am very concerned and frustrated by the fact that operators are extremely insensitive to the needs of people such as Julia Schofield. What is being done to ensure that the issue of access to new systems for people like her is being addressed?

Mr. Duncan: Given that looking at a computer screen will not be very productive if one is blind, what can be done to ensure access for blind people? I am puzzled about what can be done to help them. It would greatly benefit all of us if we could determine a way in which access could be provided for them.

Dr. Cable: It is possible, using combinations of touch and sound, to deal with lack of vision. Although it is a complex matter, those who are visually impaired know the problems that they face with such systems, and I am assured that there are technical solutions to those problems. Some of the more imaginative people in the sphere are developing software to cope with the problems. However, it is not necessarily the type of project that companies would embark on commercially, and it will probably require either active intervention or persuasion by Government.

The final issue that I should like to raise—I apologise for going a little over the 20 minutes that I had planned to allow myself—is online government. The Government have already set themselves some targets, such as that, by 2002, 25 per cent. of Government business should be done online.

In the past week, my parliamentary colleagues and I have had a bit of fun with Government targets, which seem to come and go and to have a slightly surreal quality—a bit like the Soviet planning system once demonstrated. Targeting is fine, but the much more important issue is to determine how the Government will benchmark their own performance. What criteria will they adopt? To what extent has benchmarking in Government services been developed?

Perhaps a few anecdotes will illustrate the point. A couple of days ago, I saw that an evaluation of the Government's websites has recently been conducted. The sites were said to vary from excellent—such as that operated by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport—to the abysmal, which was the verdict given by users of most of the sites. However, very little attention has been paid to the problem.

To what extent have online processes, such as obtaining a television licence, car licence or passport, been accelerated? One would have thought that obtaining a car licence, for example, could be done fairly easily on the internet. Does online government mean more than simply downloading a form to fill in? Can the process be completed online, and completed quickly and efficiently? I am told by people who have used other systems that countries such as Australia are far ahead of us in developing those systems.

I ask the Minister to go a little beyond the controversies that we have had in the past week and to think a little more into the future, to give us some indication of how far Government have thought ahead—to the next big challenge that they will face, which is not simply chivvying and regulating the private sector, but implementing change themselves.

11.29 am

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) for bringing this debate to the Chamber—on the very morning on which, for the first time, the FTSE 100 valued dot.com companies above some of the older, more traditional industries. I should say that I have a few interests in this sphere, all of which are in the Register of Members' Interests. Although I am not paid for it, I sit on some advisory boards in America and in Great Britain that are involved in the matter.

I think that this debate is about the future and culture of BT. As BT controls so much of the market, unless it changes its culture to be more like that of a dot.com company, it will hold back the rest of Britain.

On Friday, the Liaison Committee met and suggested that the Committee should perhaps have more authority and power. It would be wonderful if, one day, regulators were allowed to speak in this Chamber, so that not only Select Committee members, but all hon. Members could question them. Until we are able to discover what they are doing, we shall not be able to hold them accountable.

Several issues worry me. The first is about IR35, which has been a Treasury concern. One of my constituents, Andrew Crayford, works in the industry and he says that he faces the prospect either of going on the dole and withdrawing all his services or of taking an attractive contract in Germany. That means that the intellectual ability of many people in this sector will be lost. We have had debates on IR35 elsewhere, but I have received three different sets of advice from the Department of Trade and Industry, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office about its impact. That is not helpful.

The performance of BT has been frustrating. I wish to refer to the website edex.co.UK, which is one of the organisations that work between schools and BT. It is an internet service provider. The following news appears on the net today:

> It transpires that the problem was caused . . . by BT running out of capacity at the Wimbledon Exchange to the extent that the 999 services were endangered. I believe they even had to physically enlarge the facility at the exchange to bring in that extra capacity.
>
> At no point did BT publicly acknowledge that the problems schools were experiencing were down to them.

I could go on and on, but the message continues:

> We have also experienced instances where groups of schools in certain parts of the country have lost connectivity (e.g. certain areas of Manchester). This has been traced to problems at the local exchange. Once again, BT did not admit that they had any problems, but their engineers acknowledged that they had exchange problems.

The culture, organisation and ownership are not the only things that worry me about BT. I am also worried about the middle management structure and the transparency of the company. That is a concern, especially as BT's share price went down yesterday.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made one or two speeches about the internet this week, but yesterday he said that he hoped that everyone would have internet access within five years. As I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce knows, five years in internet years is 35 years. Some of us have been in the House for nearly three years, which is 21 internet years—a generation of change to which we have not yet adjusted. Five years is far too long. We cannot continue to say that everyone will have internet access in another five years. I hope therefore that my hon. Friend will tell us what initiatives will enable the Government to achieve their aims.

We have had so many initiatives that I have lost track of where we are. We have had the Prime Minister's speeches this week and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made a speech on the cost of the internet for small and medium-sized enterprises, and also made a speech to BT two weeks ago. Last week, the Department of Trade and Industry talked about the utilities and there have been many e-commerce initiatives. In addition, late last week, the Department for Education and Employment announced its plans for learning direct hubs, and the Cabinet Office has announced other measures.

I have said for some time—it is not necessarily an employment opportunity for me—that we need a Minister for the internet. In the larger companies in America on the Nasdaq index, the third most important person after the chief executive and the finance director is now the internet director. There must be a sea-change in the way in which business and government work in this country. The person responsible for the internet is the third most important person in an organisation.

The problem of blindness was mentioned. There is the most wonderful woman in Richmond—her name escapes me at the moment—and the hon. Member for Twickenham referred to her. She is blind, but that has not stopped her designing the site "Melbourne Public Services On-line". Her problem is that if she asked British Airways to take her dog to Melbourne, it would not be able to return to this country. So she now has a coterie of dogs in Melbourne and in this country to help her, and her website has enabled her to do that. I pay tribute to her. A strong group of people who use Braille online have made presentations to me. What they can do is fantastic, considering that they cannot see.

There are initiatives for computer centres and 1,000 are planned. Two separate parts of government have initiatives for homework clubs, but they could be organised by one body. If we were really serious, the computer centre concept would have been a public-private partnership worth billions of pounds. Not in five years, but overnight we could have found the money—that is the issue—to put hubs and centres into the poorest parts of the country. The divisiveness of internet provision worries me most.

New applications are being made to run the lottery. The trouble with sub-post offices that currently have terminals to sell lottery tickets is that they must guarantee 3,000 sales. If they cannot do that, they cannot have a terminal. Given that a post office—and especially a sub-post office—is so important to a community, would it not be wonderful if the new lottery provision could include a hub connected to the terminal? People would go to a post office not just for a lottery ticket, but perhaps to pick up their e-mails or to check a few things on the net. We could be clever and skilful and make just a few changes to enable post offices to remain open.

The national grid for learning and learning direct initiatives are amazing. We talk about social exclusion and social inclusion. It is estimated that 20 per cent.—or 12 million people—are excluded from access, but how many learning direct hubs are in socially excluded areas? One might be surprised to hear it, but there are none in Kent and that creates a struggle. We must close the social divide, but especially the social divide with respect to the internet.

There are initiatives to open the schools and the libraries and to have network classrooms and terminals in libraries. That is happening, but the trouble is that schools close at 4.30 pm, and libraries, by and large, close at 5 pm and do not open on Sundays, which is just when the children without computers at home or access to the internet need to be able to get into public buildings. A bit of joined-up government would be so important. School initiatives, library initiatives, computer centre initiatives and homework clubs make up four initiatives involving huge sums of money. However, if one person had put them together, he would have not created the jumble or the jungle that we have now.

I am disappointed with the BBC, but I am not sure that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will agree with me. It could have been the public service face of the internet and a multi-media hub. It could have a policy that said, "We will do BBC 1, BBC 2, but we will do BBC hubs and we will take control of computer centres. We will be part of the public-private initiative and develop a public service for the internet beyond anything that we have yet seen." However, the BBC has been quiet about the internet and it has not met its responsibilities as a public service. I am not saying that BBC Online is not good, but it is not exactly what our communities need.

As regards the UK Trust, I am concerned that the Consumers Association is on the trust itself and is bidding for trust status. Will my hon. Friend the Minister comment on that?

In the near future, a key thing would be to use the lottery for the internet's infrastructure. We have seen big projects, such as that for the millennium dome, but many small projects worth £50 million to £100 million have not worked. I could go through them, but I wonder whether the best prize for the 21st century would not have been an internet infrastructure. The lottery provides huge sums of money, so is that not something that we could think about in the future even though the lottery is not part of my hon. Friend's brief? However, for the sake of joined-up writing, I ask the question.

At the end of this year, the satellite systems for Teledesic, the Seattle-based company, will be launched. There will be about 350 low-orbit satellites and they will create a fundamental change to the internet, because they will provide mobility. For once, would it not be great to have initiatives with Teledesic to work out whether, with the appropriate security, we could use those satellites for our social security and pensions systems? What conversations have we had with the company? We argue about land lines and unmetered calls, but they might be old-fashioned analogue arguments. Teledesic will change the whole way we consider the issue.

It would be great to have a debate soon about what gov.com means. People may think that it is about the transfer of services, without fundamentally understanding what the internet does to government. I have been trying to understand it. We may want league tables, but what does the internet fundamentally do to government? The internet changes the way in which we work and play, threatens the concept of the nation state, and is a horizontal not a vertical structure. Most of us have come up in vertical structures and a horizontal structure threatens the civil service system. It creates a completely different working environment, so it means fundamental change.

I read the papers that Sir Richard Wilson gave the Prime Minister before Christmas, which are on the net. The two-day awayday in Sunningdale came up with six changes for a modern civil service, but nothing was said about gov.com. If the civil service have not got there, we will not.

[Mr. Derek Wyatt]

The internet threatens the age-old Government power structure. I was lucky to be in Washington two weeks ago and I saw a bit of McCain and Gore, but the way in which the groups are working on the net in America represents a fundamental change in democracy and power, and we have not got there yet.

11.41 am

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing this timely debate. I intervened to ask whether there was a case for a far wider regulatory framework than that provided by the Utilities Bill, encompassing the totality of broadcasting and telecommunications, and the hon. Gentleman replied that telecommunications should have been retained in the Utilities Bill and built upon. With the great pressures on parliamentary time and the speed at which technology is developing, it is better that it should have been taken out of the Bill and a specific telecommunications Bill introduced quickly.

This is an interesting debate. It is constantly said that BT has 81 or 83 per cent. of the fixed-line network, and that is true. However, we should consider some of the other technologies that are around. Some of the statistics are pretty amazing. For example, mobile penetration in Britain is at about 35 per cent. and is expected to rise to 26.5 million, which is nearly 50 per cent. of the fixed-line market. Those statistics may be wrong, but the growth is huge and will continue rapidly. It is a competitive area which, in many respects, will start to diminish the role of the fixed-line network.

As a nation, we need to ensure that we have in place regulation that will not inhibit or hold back our economic growth. We should bear in mind the fact that BT has to pay close attention to the universal service obligation, which, under the current regulatory framework, is placed upon BT, and BT alone. If that were to be imposed upon other service providers—I am not advocating that it should—we might see some on-going restriction in telecommunications.

I want to consider internet access and some of the existing technologies—I must ensure that I get the terminology spot on—which include digital subscriber technology, wireless application protocol, universal mobile telephone services and digital television. DSL provides an opportunity to enhance the performance of the existing copper line network—local loop unbundling. Part of the debate on that concerns the speed at which BT is introducing its version of that—asymmetric digital subscriber line technology—to support platforms for other internet access providers across the network. There has been an on-going debate about the speed, or some would say the slowness, at which BT is putting the technology in place, but it will be put in place, as it is required to be, and the date that has been referred to is July 2001. However, there is considerable pressure on BT to move faster.

The future of mobile technology is about not just telephone and voice messages, but a plethora of technologies. UMTS, third generation mobile phones, will bring in a system whereby people can send and receive e-mail, draw down digital music, surf the net and even, if they want to, dial people up and hold verbal conversations. The technology is moving apace. It is with us now, but it will soon be out on the street when we will all be able to buy into it. We need to consider that in relation to the fixed-line network. That is why I take the view that the mobile technology is the technology of the future. Whether BT has 60 or 90 per cent. of the fixed-line network begins to be pretty irrelevant.

BT made an announcement this morning on internet pricing—

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): My hon. Friend did not draw the conclusion that seems to be waiting to be drawn, although he may have been being his usual moderate self. The companies associated with the mobile technologies seem to be allowed to cherry-pick the BT network for their own benefit, while the future appears to be satellite based. Therefore, they are depleting BT's profit margins, and, at the end of the day, BT is the only company that has any interest in maintaining a fixed-line system which we hope will reach all our people and make them part of the information society. Therefore, matters are weighted towards those who will take off into the stratosphere by satellite, leaving behind a damaged fixed-line network in Britain.

Mr. Laxton: Cherry-picking has been common in many services, with companies wanting to cream off the lucrative areas, leaving the regulated companies, such as BT, which have to provide a universal service, unable to make much profit or to cross-subsidise with the profitable arms of the business that have been taken away from them.

I will not say that I heard the morning news at 5 or 6 o'clock, but I may test hon. Members' imagination by saying that I heard it shortly after 7 o'clock. In my half-awake state, I think that I heard about fixed-price internet access for £6 a month for residential customers and about £29 for business customers. There is no doubt that some of the new companies, such as AltaVista, are concentrating BT's mind.

All the communications companies operate in a highly competitive environment. BT would argue that it has been prevented by regulation from providing services such as surf packages quickly, which has hindered its ability to compete. As the days move on—it will be days, rather than weeks, months or years—we need to be conscious of the fact that the internet and original voice technology should be available to everyone throughout the land.

It has recently come to my attention that probably more than 70 per cent. of small and medium-sized companies in the south-east are wired up to the internet, whereas the figure in the north-west is probably 18 or 19 per cent. In Scotland, surprisingly, the percentage is probably down in single figures. It is not a north-south divide, but society and business are being segmented into those who see the sense of getting wired up and those who do not, and those who can afford it and those who cannot.

Mr. Connarty: I hoped that my hon. Friend would mention the problem that the providers of mobile telephone services do not universally cover large areas of Scotland because of the difficulties of access. In fact, even some of the central areas are sporadically blanked

out because of the technology that is used. That has always been a problem. The universal delivery that we get from the postal services and from BT is not being replicated by those who are cherry-picking the mobile networks.

Mr. Laxton: My hon. Friend has far more experience than I do of the difficulties experienced in Scotland. I can envisage the difficulty of putting communications towers on mountain tops all over Scotland. That would not go down too well with much of the environmental lobby, and rightly so.

The regulation imposed on BT can inhibit its ability to move rapidly in response to some of the issues that it faces. None the less, it must move faster. We must also bear it in mind that some of the new technologies that are coming on stream and will be with us in the next 12 to 18 months will further open up the market. We must push to ensure that, from a regulatory viewpoint, Britain is as well placed as it can be to thrive in this new era of technology.

11.55 am

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): On behalf of all hon. Members, I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) for initiating this debate on an important topic. There is broad cross-party agreement in wanting information technology and the internet revolution to continue apace and help society in the broadest possible way, but some political disagreement about the nature of regulation. I am very sorry that there are not more hon. Members present to take an interest in this matter.

The leaders of all major parties are expressing opinions, but the speech of the hon. Member for Twickenham was a tour de force and he has perhaps single-handedly given a new meaning to the brand image of Cable and Wireless. He has effectively dissected the current state of Government policy, and especially the manner in which consultation has or has not taken place with consumers and producers. At the kernel of his argument is the question of where regulation and competition clash or separate. That is the basis on which Government policy is being scrutinised.

As the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) rightly said, this debate takes place on the very day on which some .com companies have displaced traditional corporations in the FTSE 100. Sadly, it also takes place against the background of significant disarray in Government policy affecting the regulation of the whole of telecommunications and the internet.

I remember sitting as a spotty youth in 1976 in Committees and the Strangers Gallery—you were a fiery young Back Bencher, Mr. Deputy Speaker—watching the collapse under the previous Labour Administration of the Shipbuilding Bill. We had not since then witnessed an equivalent collapse of such a major flagship piece of legislation, until the crumbling last week of the Utilities Bill, which has proved itself an unhappy mixture of intent.

The Labour party's general election manifesto said:

> We recognise the need for open and predictable regulation which is fair to both consumers and to shareholders and at the same time provides incentives for managers to innovate and improve efficiency.

That was echoed two and a half years later when the Utilities Bill was introduced, but it hardly represents what happened subsequently. Shareholders and customers in two major sectors are now in limbo and the Government's overall policy on regulation is extremely uncertain and in complete disarray. The shambles has left a lot of people in the lurch. At a time when we all want progress to continue apace, there is an uncertainty that this country can ill afford.

Such is the disarray in the Department of Trade and Industry that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) tabled a parliamentary question to the Secretary of State asking whether telecommunications would be withdrawn from the Utilities Bill and on the day after the Bill had collapsed received a holding reply saying that he would get back to her in due course. Such is the lack of co-ordination in the Minister's Department that people are rightly considering its conduct extremely critically.

Although the Government speak the language of wanting to champion competition, in fact they remain a champion of regulation. Between the two, they are schizoid, to put it mildly. The Conservatives want to see a major shift away from regulation to competition. Competition is what happens naturally and it is beginning to happen with some force, although it is being hampered by an old-fashioned system of regulation that the Government are not prepared to tackle.

We have already seen in the drafting of the Electronic Communications Bill a two-year turf war between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Home Office on the nature of the regulation involved. Now, as technology takes a quantum leap from fixed wire links to an explosion of wireless technology, which also implicitly includes broadcasting, we are seeing a new turf war between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about which one should regulate those communications.

We desperately now need a clear statement of policy from the Government about the regulation of all those telecommunications matters. However, all we were promised in the mess of a statement last week at Trade and Industry questions was a communications White Paper, which I understand—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—will be published only in November. That means that we will have six months of limbo and uncertainty, while the country cries out for a clear statement of Government policy on that rapidly moving sector. Even when the statement arrives in November, no action is likely to take place in what will be left of this Parliament. Although the country demands speed, we probably will not see any proper Government action until the next Parliament.

Mr. Connarty: I am fascinated by the hon. Member's analysis that the country is demanding speed. In the past few months, I have attended several symposiums in Europe on e-commerce and the information age, and the feeling is that we have to get it right. Debate in Europe will continue at the Lisbon special council, but we should not rush it in case we get it wrong. The Government should be commended for admitting that the scene is changing so quickly that they must gain a clear view before rushing in. The previous Government pushed through regulations on the masts for the new

[Mr. Connarty]

mobile technology, and now everyone is complaining because those masts are stuck outside their doors. The planning authorities cannot stop that happening, because of the laws passed by the Tories when they rushed the issue.

Mr. Duncan: The hon. Gentleman has obviously not been following what we have said in Committee on the Electronic Communications Bill. We have clearly held out against the sort of fossilised regulation that was likely to emerge from that Bill. For the reasons that the hon. Gentleman mentions, we believe that the Government should not fossilise a system of regulation on a technology that is changing apace. We need the minimum light touch of regulation to safeguard certain standards and disciplines. However, the obverse of that is that we do not want the increasingly fossilised system of regulation to remain in place. We need a clear statement of policy from the Government that allows all the companies to compete fully with each other to bring about the benefits that we want to see. Therefore, I respectfully suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he has missed the point.

One needs only to consider the actions of the Department of Trade and Industry and, in particular, the Secretary of State to see that what I say is true. For instance, at a time when companies are attempting to develop cable technology as a powerful competitive force, the Secretary of State referred the NTL-Cable and Wireless merger—against the advice of the Director General of Fair Trading. He should not have done so. Even now, the Secretary of State is sitting on the report that he instigated, to the companies' great annoyance. He should probably have kept his nose out of the issue altogether, but the Government's track record is over-intrusive.

Mr. Wyatt: On the issue of NTL and Cable and Wireless, does the hon. Gentleman understand that the digital box would be a closed box, so that it would be open only for cable, not satellite or digital terrestrial services? That is a negative and dangerous approach, because we need open and transparent platforms.

Mr. Duncan: I agree that we need openness and transparency wherever possible. I do not want to go into the detail of that point, because I might be ruled out of order, given that it is sitting on the Secretary of State's desk—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The hon. Gentleman should feel free to make any point he likes, because the issue is not sub judice.

Mr. Duncan: I am grateful for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, in the interests of time, I shall restrain myself.

The other event of the past week was the unnecessary intrusion by the Chancellor of the Exchequer that led to an unfortunate decline in BT's share price, and he must choose between an independent regulator or in competition. The ambiguity of his position has caused unnecessary harm.

I hold no particular brief for BT, but, in the interests of fairness and justice, I must state that the Government's emerging attitudes to BT are rather distasteful. BT has become a whipping boy, and some politicians are trying to score political points by having a go at BT. As hon. Members have said this morning, BT has been in a different category because it had an obligation of universal provision imposed on it in the years following privatisation. Now that we have that universal provision, it borders on the unjust to attack BT for the way in which the regulator is regulating it. In fairness, all hon. Members should accept that BT's case should be fairly heard and it should be set in a proper understanding of where we want to be and of where we and BT have come from.

BT is in a unique position. It was the pioneer of privatisation, since when many other companies have followed, and it is unfair to attack BT in the way that the Chancellor and other politicians have done. BT has supplied me with a brief, and I shall read out a couple of paragraphs simply to put its point of view on record. It states:

> BT has always been keen to play its part in driving down prices—supporting the vision for a UK world-leading role in e-commerce.

We should remember that BT has been subject to price-reduction regulation since privatisation. It continues:

> However, unlike its competitors, and indeed unlike its European counterparts, it is prevented from swift action through a burdensome, slow and outmoded regulatory regime.

Perhaps the Minister could say whether she thinks that that is a fair point. BT also says:

> BT supports the removal of telecommunications from the Utility Bill and is pleased that the government recognises the competitive and converged nature of the UK communication market. This review must be underpinned by a robust analysis of the competitive framework of the future UK market. Any review that relies on an extrapolation of history will not create a durable and effective policy framework.

I read that this morning, and have been briefed no further, but it struck me as a reasonable point of view. The recognition that BT has a fair point reinforces our call for a swift and urgent statement of the Government's policy on telecommunications regulation. To have to wait for the White Paper until November, when it will doubtless be kicked further into the long grass until the next Parliament, is unacceptable. The Minister must answer those concerns in some detail.

I wish to leave the Minister time to answer the questions posed by hon. Members, especially by the hon. Member for Twickenham, but I have a few more points to make. It is good news that a sudden and vicious price war has broken out. Of course, some will fall by the wayside and others will become champions of the sort of access that the consumer is crying out to enjoy, but that competitive outburst is good news for the consumer and will also flush out the progress that we want at the speed that we want. However, the climate of regulation, for which the Minister is responsible, must not jeopardise that, or disadvantage any particular player in that competitive market.

Reference has been made in the debate to the way in which Government can use the IT revolution to improve service delivery. I have always considered that the matter divides into two distinct categories—e-commerce and e-government. They are allied, but

different. On the one hand, trade, retailing and communication between individuals and corporations must be encouraged to develop through e-commerce and the internet. On the other, the Government are responsible for form filling, tax returns, and the promulgation of views and information, and we want that to improve dramatically through a parallel use of technology.

It is of great regret to Conservative Members that the Government have mouthed words of support for the internet, but have continued to fail to make decisions that would keep Britain at the leading edge of that development. The IR35 tax rules will drive people out of this country, just when we need their expertise. That is an utter disgrace.

Although one cannot believe everything in the newspapers, it is clear from them that Germany is likely to import 3,000 technicians to help meet staff needs. It therefore seems doubly absurd that Britain, a competitor country with many such technicians, should have an idiotic tax policy that will drive 10, 20 or 25 per cent. of them abroad, or out of business altogether.

Mr. Connarty: Remarks like that make me angry. The hon. Gentleman is saying that people should enjoy a tax advantage. My son is a software engineer and has his own company. He admits that he has a massive advantage over people who pay their fair share of tax. He says that regulation is long overdue. If it were available, he would use it, as would all his colleagues. The hon. Gentleman is simply making a protest on behalf of tax dodgers.

Mr. Duncan: There is no dodging whatsoever. The comments from the Minister and the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) illustrate a failure to recognise the changing structure of risk taking in this country. Much of the gain for risk takers at the leading edge of technological development is on paper rather than in cash. They face unacceptable bills when it comes to paying national insurance, for example, and they are finding them very difficult to meet.

It is distasteful that the Prime Minister should seek publicity by jumping on the internet bandwagon, as if to claim the credit for gains that so obviously are the product of others' work. The Government should make a clear statement of policy on regulation. We want less interference from the Department of Trade and Industry, and from legislation. After the shambles of the past week, there needs to be a greater sense of order in the way that legislation passes through the House, so that this country can remain at the leading edge of what is a very important technological revolution.

12.13 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing the debate which, by a happy coincidence, takes place in a week of such fast developments in the matter of internet access and charging.

The first challenge to Government is to get the market framework right. I shall begin my response to the debate by saying something about the nature of the framework that we are seeking to create. Our approach is summed up in a simple rubric: competition where possible, regulation where necessary. Through the Competition Act 1998, the Government significantly strengthened the competition framework that we inherited. That Act came into effect last week, and it applies to all sectors, including telecommunications. It significantly strengthens the prohibitions on anti-competitive behaviour, on cartels and on the abuse of dominant and monopoly positions by companies in any sector. By doing so, it will bring real advantages to British consumers.

The Government inherited a telecommunications sector in which competition was not driven entirely by the market. There remains a need for sector-specific regulation. I want to pay tribute to Oftel and its director general for the work done in discharging that regulatory function. However, competition and regulation are not mutually exclusive. As far as possible, regulation must be used to promote greater competition.

The policy strategy document recently published by Oftel makes it clear that organisation's determination to use its regulatory powers to promote fair competition, and to withdraw from regulation as competition takes effect in different parts of the telecommunications market. However, BT retains its dominant position with regard to the local loop. Interconnection is at the heart of moves by competitor retail operators to create a more competitive market. It is therefore essential that Oftel uses the powers available to it under the legislation covering telecommunications and competition.

I shall return to the specific questions of charging and the local loop in a moment, but I shall first say something about the Utilities Bill. It was designed to deliver—and will deliver—an improved system of pro-competition regulation in the electricity and gas sectors. I regret that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) has denounced the Bill again today. I presume that that means that the Opposition want the Bill to be withdrawn completely, even though that would mean abandoning the real benefits for consumers that will stem from greater competition in the wholesale electricity markets.

The Utilities Bill contained a general provision that the Government will provide social and environmental guidance to the telecommunications industry regulators, to ensure that they take account of wider policy objectives.

Mr. Connarty: My hon. Friend mentioned the environment, and I hope that she will allow me to raise the matter of the lack of control over the erection of masts for mobile telephone networks. The New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 covers such installations, which have aroused great public concern. Do the Government intend to have a dialogue with the regulators to ensure the regulation of that activity? Would it not be even better to amend the legislation, so that planning authorities would be able to control the spread of sites that are highly unacceptable? In my constituency, for example, a mast was erected just outside the bedroom window of a child suffering from leukaemia.

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend earlier complained—understandably—that mobile telephones do not work properly in many parts of the highlands of Scotland.

[Ms Hewitt]

However, there is a tension between the desire to achieve near-universal mobile telephony and worries about the siting of the masts that would make that possible. The specific health issues involved are being considered by the Stewart inquiry, and by a Committee of the Scottish Assembly. We will examine those matters in due course.

The Utilities Bill contained no proposals to deal with environmental issues by means of the guidance to the telecommunications regulator. However, the social guidance that we published for consultation some time ago covered the question of establishing a universal service for the sick and the disabled, and for elderly or poorly paid people, and dealt with issues of universal access in rural areas. It also covered the matter of access to the networks for emergency services.

Those are enormously important principles, and the Government stick by them. However, we will consider their implementation in the context of the communications review, to which I shall return in a moment.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton also raised the matter of consumer councils. My understanding is that they cannot be introduced without legislation. That is one reason why we originally decided to include telecommunications in the Utilities Bill. We still want to see strong and effective consumer councils for telecommunications, and we will look at the issue in the context of the overall review. I understand that the National Consumer Council and the Consumers Association suggest that, as a stopgap measure, existing bodies such as the advisory committees on telecommunications should be given more resources. We will certainly have a look at that.

We have been in touch with the consumer bodies throughout the Bill's progress. However, in the light of our decision on the whole telecommunications review, the decision whether to retain the telecommunications element of the Bill had to be made very quickly given the progress that the Bill was making in Committee. We were therefore not able to take that decision in consultation with the consumer bodies or the industry. We had representations from the industry arising from the announcement about the White Paper on communications, and we took those into account.

Let me say a word or two more on the White Paper. It is at the heart of the revolution that is taking place in the economy and in society that telecommunications, broadcasting and computing are converging. We considered that issue in the Green Paper that we published in 1988 and the consultation exercise that led to the joint report last June of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on the way ahead for regulating communications.

We have now decided that, although the industry has benefited from much closer co-operation between the different regulators, it makes sense to look afresh at what is the best legal and regulatory framework for a sector whose boundaries are changing so very fast. We will do that properly. Rather than simply saying, "This is what the policy will be", the Government will do it through a process of consultation and dialogue, first leading up to the publication of a White Paper and then before the introduction of any Bill that may be necessary.

The White Paper will be very broad: it will consider the infrastructure and the appropriate framework for regulation of economic and access issues. It will consider the issues raised on broadcasting in particular about the regulation of content, just as it will look at media ownership rules and the role of public sector broadcasting. It is an essential piece of work, and I hope that many hon. Members will be closely involved.

The White Paper, which will be published later this year—not as late as November, I hope—will be an important milestone in ensuring that, as the industry and the market move very quickly, we have a regulatory system that is built for that purpose.

Mr. Connarty: I would like my hon. Friend to accept that, although Members on both sides of the House have made silly political capital out of the decision to withdraw telecommunications from the Utilities Bill, it was a very bold move and in line with what is required. I commend her for it, and I am sure that many other hon. Members will do so as well.

Ms Hewitt: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who has made an important point.

On charging and access, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday that we want to see access to the internet for everybody who wants it by 2005, and earlier if possible. It is important to understand that universal access will come through various means. It will come through telephone lines, cable, wireless and satellite. It will come through a variety of devices—computers, televisions, mobile telephones and other devices that are only now coming out of the research laboratories and on to the market.

Competition is driving down internet access prices and gives consumers much greater choice of new tariff packages. That policy of competition is working. We have seen in the past two weeks announcements from BT, Telewest, AltaVista and, yesterday, from NTL, all offering free or very cheap internet access with a variety of models and packages.

Mr. Wyatt: The Minister may just recall—or perhaps not—that, in 1936 when television was launched, there was competition between lines 205 and 405. Finally, the civil service decided on 405. We could help the community in Britain by saying, "Here is a basic internet system. This is all it needs", rather than having the hundreds of different systems that are available.

Ms Hewitt: I do not remember 1936. My sense is that different consumers and businesses want different levels of access and packages of content. Rather than the Government saying, "This is to be the standard, the package or the tariff", it makes sense to create a competitive marketplace in which there will be different offerings, and consumers will have the choice to get what they need. In many cases, consumers will access the internet through different means at different times of the day and for different purposes.

We are driving towards competition between BT and other operators connecting to the local loop. There will be competition between the local loop and cable. There will be competition on the local loop, with the advent of local loop unbundling. There will be competition between wired—local loop and cable access—and wireless access which, in turn, will come from satellite, third-generation—indeed, second and a half generation—mobiles and from broadband wireless.

On Monday, I launched the first world auction for third-generation mobile spectrum, with 13 bidders. I believe that that auction will help to keep the United Kingdom ahead of the game.

Mr. Connarty: Has the Minister given further thought to what seems to be the contradiction that Vodafone and Orange, which are now one company, appear to be able to bid separately?

Ms Hewitt: That was a matter to which my right hon. Friend gave very careful thought before the auction rules were finalised. It would have been quite wrong for Orange, through no fault or action of its own, to have been debarred from taking part in the auction simply because of the coincidence of timing of the Vodafone-Mannesmann merger and the third generation auction. We have put in place extremely stringent safeguards to ensure that there is no collusion between Vodafone and Orange in their bidding in the auction. It will not be possible for both companies to hold licences, should they both succeed in getting them through the auction, if they remain part of the same merged company. So we have taken care of that point.

I hope to make an announcement shortly about the allocation of further wireless spectrum at the 28 to 40 gigahertz spectrum band for purposes of broadband fixed wireless access. That is very important.

Let me say something about the digital divide, which several of my hon. Friends have mentioned. We are determined to ensure that access to the internet is not reserved for the young, the techie and the wealthy. That is why we have worked so hard and fast to connect up schools, colleges and libraries across the country. That has been very successful. It is why, this year, we will be rolling out learning and access centres, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities, which many of my hon. Friends represent, as, indeed, do I.

In another month or so, we will be publishing the report of one of the social exclusion policy action teams on how to exploit information and communications technology to overcome social exclusion. An enormous leap forward will come from internet access through digital television and through third-generation mobile. It will bring the internet and interactive digital services generally within the reach of people who are never likely to want, or could never afford, a computer at home. It will be a very different world.

We are also looking closely at how to exploit the new technologies to open up access to employment, learning and other services for people with disabilities. Like the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend, I pay tribute to Julia Schofield, the extraordinary woman who is blind and has done so much to advance the cause of user-friendly internet and web access. In Leicester, I saw a person with a very severe sight disability using voice recognition technology on a laptop to fulfil a demanding job at Voluntary Action Leicester.

In terms of online government—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up. May I ask hon. Members who do not wish to remain for the next debate to leave quickly and quietly?

Housing (Norfolk)

12.30 pm

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): In view of the Government's announcement yesterday on housing in the south-east, this debate is timely and the Government will probably be making decisions about housing in Norfolk in the next 10 days.

Any policy for housing in Norfolk or any other essentially rural county presents two key, and often contradictory, issues. The first is that current plans based on predict and provide, or more fashionably, in that wonderful Sir Humphreyish phrase, on "plan, manage, monitor", require a massive expansion in the number of new houses in rural areas. If that happens, much of our countryside and rural environment will be irreparably damaged.

The second issue is the high cost of housing, which makes it increasingly difficult for local people to afford to buy or rent their own homes. The 1999 survey of rural trends by the Countryside Agency noted that throughout the 1990s the gap between the need for affordable homes and those being built widened significantly.

I want to address both those issues. I turn first to the need, or perceived need, for new houses. The new housing requirement for Norfolk in the period from 1991 to 2016, as assessed by SCEALA—the Standing Conference on East Anglian Local Authorities—which represents the local authorities of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, is for 86,000 new houses. That is made up of net inward migration from outside Norfolk of 54,000 people, a net natural loss of population, which is the number of people dying over the number being born, of 5,000, and an increase of 37,000 due to a reduction in the size of households, which is an increase in the number of single-person homes.

The Government's panel subsequently increased the number of houses needed from 1995 to 2016 by 5,500. That gives a total of almost 100,000 new houses, which is a huge increase. Building those houses is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If they are built, they will of course be lived in, and people will move into Norfolk, often from more urban and developed areas. That flies in the face of the Government's protestations that there is an urban renaissance and that they are encouraging more brownfield development.

Moreover, the Government's apparent conversion from predict and provide to plan, manage, monitor, which they announced yesterday, rings a little hollow in view of the plan for the south-east, which I hope will not be duplicated in East Anglia.

Most of Norfolk's countryside is still unspoiled and special. The countryside should not of course be preserved as it is in perpetuity—it will evolve—but it should not be built on and concreted over for all time. Housing brings with it more cars, wider roads, new roads, more pressure on schools and hospitals, more employment problems and more pressure on natural resources and, especially in Norfolk, on water.

New development must be sustainable. Sustainable development is not, as Professor Crow dismissively described it, merely a fashionable expression used as a device for saying no. Let us take the example of water. Norfolk is one of the driest and lowest-lying parts of Britain. The available water depends on aquifers, which store winter rain and are a finite resource. As the demand for water increases, the water available for the environment decreases. The expanding population of East Anglia, together with a per capita increase in water consumption, had led to a doubling of public water supply in the past 30 years.

Although there is still much that can be done to prevent wastage and to encourage more judicious use of water, there is only so much that can be achieved by managing water demand. In addition, given that part of the demand for water in Essex is met by the River Ouse in Norfolk, it has yet to be demonstrated that development levels in Essex will not have an adverse impact on Norfolk's water environment and resources. There will therefore be genuinely unsustainable growth in the demand for water if housing development is not kept to lower levels in Norfolk and Essex.

I do not want to see Norfolk becoming suburban and its rural character being eroded. I would not want a latter-day John Betjeman to write a poem about Norfolk in the same vein as his poem about Slough, but I fear that if the Government's housebuilding plans proceed apace, that is precisely what will happen.

There is a further problem with new housing in Norfolk. The Government have rightly stated that 60 per cent. of all new housing should be built on brownfield sites. I support that requirement, but in a rural county it will be much more difficult to achieve that proportion. SCEALA estimates that only 36 per cent. of new housing will be built on brownfield sites in Norfolk, with the remainder being on greenfield sites. That is another strong argument for reducing the number of new houses in Norfolk so that the brownfield percentage can increase.

It is also important that the release of greenfield land should take place only after what is called sequential testing. In simple terms, urban and brownfield sites should be used first, and greenfield last. So long as greenfield development is an easy option, developers are bound to avoid more difficult investment in brownfield sites. In that regard, I hope that the Government will consider reducing VAT on repairs and developments on brownfield land.

I hope that hon. Members will forgive me for adding that it is not only the location of new housing that is important, but its design and quality. Planners currently have the powers to prevent unsuitable alterations to listed buildings, but if buildings are not listed planners are powerless to prevent such alterations as putting PVC window frames into a Victorian house. Councils can do no more than give advice. As one of my constituents, Miss Fran Weatherhead, has aptly expressed it, at present it is a matter of hoping that owners will be sensitive to the appearance of their property and are not out for a quick fix. The planning rules for conservation areas in particular should be tightened to prevent inappropriate modifications being made to older houses.

To summarise, there is a danger that we are building so many new houses that Norfolk's character will change. Policies must take more account of sustainability, protection of the countryside and the regeneration of brownfield land. The Council for the Protection of Rural England said:

> Planned expansion of the south-east—

and, I add, the whole of East Anglia—

> spells sprawl and congestion in the region and continuing decay and social exclusion in other parts of the country.

I turn now to affordable housing. The Prime Minister's performance and innovation unit drew particular attention to this, and I hope that the Government's much-delayed rural White Paper will address this vital issue. In my constituency, many local people can no longer afford to live where they were born. In part, that has been caused by the number of second home owners, who own up to well over 50 per cent. of the houses in some villages. That has an effect on prices and on the viability of the local community.

There is no easy solution to high house prices, although I appreciate the force of the argument that local people should be able to get on to the housing ladder. I believe strongly that second home owners should pay the full council tax, not 50 per cent. as at present. That should be at the discretion of the local council, and the additional tax raised should be ring-fenced and made available for low-cost, affordable housing. That would be fair and would remove any local resentment. It would be levied only in districts where there is a concentration of second homes, and the proceeds would help local people on low incomes or with special needs who want to live locally. I am pleased that North Norfolk district council shares that view, and I am disappointed that the Government have so far shown such little interest in it.

In 1999, North Norfolk district council commissioned a housing needs study. It concluded that there is a need in North Norfolk for between 2,250 and 3,200 additional, affordable dwellings. The survey had similar results to those of the earlier and much wider-ranging CPRE report "Housing with Hindsight", which was published in 1996.

It has become clear to me that greater provision of social rented housing is the only practicable means of providing affordable housing for local people. I therefore support the efforts of North Norfolk district council to secure between 25 and 30 per cent. of social rented housing on eligible developments of more than 1 hectare or 25 dwellings. It is also right to adopt a flexible, negotiated stance with the developer, and not just a uniform, dogmatic one. There will of course have to be proper and transparent safeguards.

The Government are also suggesting exceptional developments of affordable housing in villages, outside agreed structure plans. For transport, employment and environmental reasons, those should be very exceptional and treated with great caution unless it can be shown that there is both overwhelming need and acceptance among the local community.

I have drawn attention to the dangers of building too many houses in the countryside and to the need for affordable housing for local people. I make one last point: please will the Government leave local authorities alone and allow them to make their own decisions? Yes, they should give guidance, but they should also trust locally elected councillors to make the right decisions and stop second-guessing them. Let the housing policy for Norfolk, which will so much shape the county in future, be determined by people living in and representing what is still the finest county in Britain.

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): As the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) rightly said, this is a very timely debate. He has raised important issues and represents a beautiful area of the country. I greatly sympathise with much of what he said; indeed, much of it is Government policy.

It always cheers me up to hear a Tory Member calling for more public spending on social housing. I gently point out—I do so only gently because he made a very moderate and sensible speech—that the problems that he described are in part a consequence of the social and economic policies pursued by successive Conservative Administrations, whom perhaps he and certainly many of his friends still support.

If you deliberately set out over a long period to redistribute wealth from the less fortunate to the fortunate, you are not entitled to be surprised when you find that some people can afford two houses and many cannot afford one. If you enthusiastically promote the sale of council housing—in Norfolk, a huge part of the housing stock has been sold in the past 15 or 20 years—and at the same time discourage the building of any more, you are not entitled to be surprised that there comes a day when many people can no longer afford to live in some of the more attractive areas of the country. That of course has implications for the provision of services—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. I have never promoted the sale of council housing, particularly in Norfolk. When the hon. Member uses the word "you", he refers to me.

Mr. Mullin: I certainly would never suggest that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although I recall—I am sure that it is within your recollection—when we had four successive Governments who did so. All I am doing is gently pointing out that that policy had advantages and that it is no part of the present Government's policy to reverse it. Indeed, the genie is out of the bottle; it is impossible to reverse. However, there were consequences, and the hon. Gentleman referred to some of them.

The hon. Gentleman raised three issues. The first was about the policy of predict and provide, which is no more appropriate to housing than it is to motorways, and of which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister formally announced the death yesterday—although I think that it died some years ago. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the shortage of affordable housing in Norfolk. Thirdly, he touched on the possibility of increasing the council tax on second homes.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend set out the Government's position on predict and provide. We are abandoning it in favour of a more flexible and

[Mr. Mullin]

sustainable approach which takes account of a range of factors, including demographics, the capacity of the region to absorb growth and the impact of our policies on urban renaissance. We shall regularly monitor the indicators of housing provision instead of setting a target that will apply over 20 years. We shall monitor the market and demand for affordable housing and review the situation in order to adjust provision if indicators show that more or less housing is needed.

The new planning policy guidance note sets out the key elements of the Government's policy, which encourages greater choice for different sizes of household, greater affordability and more mixed development. It encourages the less profligate use of land—we have seen some very profligate use of land in many modern housing developments—and of course the use of brownfield sites before greenfield sites.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the national target for the use of brownfield land is 60 per cent., although there will obviously be local and regional variations. I understand his point that there is likely to be less brownfield land in his area of the country than in others, although substantial brownfield sites in Norwich, King's Lynn and Great Yarmouth are an obvious place to start. We are also anxious to see high-quality housing development and more imaginative thinking among planners and developers about designs and layouts.

That represents the most fundamental review of planning and housing for a generation, and sets what we hope will be a new, sustainable approach to planning, which demands the integration of planning, housing and transport, which is desirable, just as the hon. Gentleman said. I entirely agree with him.

On affordable housing, we are providing an additional £5 billion of resources in England over this Parliament to provide new social housing and to improve existing stock. That of course includes investing receipts from the sale of council housing, which the previous Government declined to do.

This matter is not just for the Government. Local planning authorities have an important part to play in increasing the provision of affordable housing. Unduly restrictive planning policy can drive up house prices and force more people to seek social housing, besides increasing the cost of providing it. Planning policy can also operate constructively to promote sustainable development by, for example, promoting re-use of derelict urban land and buildings, increasing housing densities and reducing the need for the use of the car.

Planning policy guidance note 3 recognises, however, that unmet need for affordable housing is a material planning consideration that may be taken into account in formulating development plan policies and in deciding planning applications. Planning authorities are encouraged to adopt policies that indicate targets for major sites and the intention to negotiate with developers the inclusion of affordable housing on sites above a given threshold.

Affordable housing policies may also be used to influence the mix of market housing, to ensure that more of it is in reach of people on modest incomes and to deliver housing for shared ownership or social letting. For the latter, Government guidance is that transfer of serviced land or completed houses to a registered social landlord is the best way to ensure that they remain available for social letting.

Norfolk county council obviously recognises such guidance. The county has recently adopted a structure plan, which says:

> Where there are local jobs and services or adequate public transport is available, affordable housing for those in need may be provided by seeking a proportion of affordable housing in larger schemes; and exceptionally—

the hon. Gentleman referred to this—

> granting planning permission for affordable housing on the edge of or within villages on land not otherwise identified for development.

The county and district councils may seek to build on such an approach in their local plan as it comes up for revision. The North Norfolk local plan already contains such policies, but the council needs to take account of the new framework set out in PPG3 when it comes to revise the local plan. However, I accept that the planning system can make only a limited contribution—initiatives are required from other parties, including landowners and developers.

For 2000-01, the county of Norfolk has been allocated £25.4 million for its housing investment programme, which is a 46 per cent. increase on the previous year. North Norfolk has had an increase of 61 per cent. Those are substantial increases. As I said, one of the reasons for the shortage of affordable housing is that so many council houses were sold off under the Conservatives.

On giving local authorities discretion to charge full council tax on second homes, there is a case for reviewing the 50 per cent. discount. That matter was considered as part of a general review of council tax in the local government White Paper published in 1998. The conclusion at that time was that, generally, council tax was working. There are no plans to make changes in this Parliament, but the hon. Gentleman's point has been raised by other hon. Members representing areas in which there are large numbers of holiday homes and we shall keep the matter under review.

Incidentally, it always makes me nervous when Tory Members of Parliament ask for tax increases because I know that, were the Government to do as the hon. Gentleman suggests, his right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front and Back Benches would jump up and down claiming that we had imposed another stealth tax. I hope that he has cleared his suggestion, which struck me as sensible, with the shadow Chancellor.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk made a sensible speech containing useful suggestions, many of which are contained in current Government policy. Many but not all of the problems that he describes are the consequences of social and economic policies pursued in the past by Governments whose members have, even now, not entirely repented of their ways. The Labour Government are doing their best to grapple with those consequences, but success will take some time. The genie is out of the bottle, but we are working on the problem and making progress.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) to start the next debate.

Fire Safety

12.53 pm

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): You took me by surprise by calling me to start the debate early, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My apologies if I was slow to rise to my feet.

I should declare an interest in that I am a non-executive director of the Fire Protection Association, a not-for-profit organisation whose aim is to reduce the number of deaths and injuries and the huge costs incurred as a result of fire—an objective that I am sure all hon. Members share. I also helped to establish the all-party group on fire safety, of which I am co-chairman. In addition, I was a member of the London fire brigade for 23 years—for 13 as an operational firefighter, and for 10 on secondment as an official of the Fire Brigades Union. I can therefore claim to be familiar with the subject.

United Kingdom fire authorities, supported by the Home Office, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and many private sector partners, are successfully raising public awareness of the value of fitting smoke detectors in the home. In its report "Safe as Houses", which was published by the Home Office in November 1997, the national community fire safety centre made several key recommendations, central to which was the recommendation that the primary focus of the fire service be shifted from firefighting to fire prevention. The report also recommended that community fire safety should become a statutory duty and that the prevention work of brigades and the Home Office should be united under a single umbrella in terms of programmes and objectives. That is now happening.

Notwithstanding all that, fire statistics remain a cause for concern. In 1997—the latest year for which UK figures are available—723 people died in fires and 18,600 were injured as a result of fires. Previous figures are just as worrying: in 1994, there were 641 deaths and 17,000 injuries; in 1995, 736 deaths and more than 17,000 injuries; and in 1996, 709 deaths and more than 18,000 injuries. The majority of those deaths and injuries resulted from fire in the home, which accounts for more than 60 per cent. of all building fires and more than 75 per cent. of all casualties. Someone is three times more likely to die in a fire at home as they are anywhere else. Insurance claims arising from fires totalled £615 million in 1994, £700 million in 1995, £707 million in 1996 and £739 million in 1997. Those figures do not take account of the many fires that occur in uninsured buildings. The latest total estimated cost of fire to the UK economy is £4 billion.

Fire is indiscriminate about where it strikes, as the tragic deaths of the late Member for Romsey and his wife show. Thirty per cent. of those who die in fires are over 65—the hon. Gentleman fitted that profile. However, those most at risk from fire are the less fortunate members of our society—those at the bottom end of the social scale: the very young or old, those who are physically or mentally incapacitated and who cannot help themselves, and those who are under the influence of drink or drugs account for more than 50 per cent. of all fire casualties. The politics of fire mean that people at the bottom end of the social scale are more likely to suffer injury or worse by fire than the more fortunate. As in health and education, it is possible to buy one's way out: double glazing and good insulation are far safer than paraffin heaters, poor wiring and candles.

A category of building that would benefit greatly from the introduction of residential fire sprinklers is houses in multiple occupation—HMOs. That category encompasses bedsits, shared housing, households with lodgers, purpose-built HMOs, hostels, guest and boarding houses, bed and breakfasts and self-contained converted flats. In the UK, 6.25 per cent. of the population live in HMOs, but statistics reveal that 28 per cent. of all fire deaths and 36 per cent. of all fire injuries occur in HMOs. In real terms, those percentages translate as 227 people dying and 6,240 being injured by fire each year in HMOs.

I welcome the announcement by the Home Office of the setting of targets for raising public awareness of fire safety and for reducing the number of fire deaths in residential buildings by 20 per cent. by the end of 2003. However, some would say that we should be more ambitious. The efforts of many individuals and organisations to reduce the number of fires should be applauded: those include the lobby for a fire safety Bill, the new national fire safety forum and the national smoke detector campaign. I have already mentioned the work throughout the country of the national community fire safety centre, which the Government have backed to the tune of £13 million to £14 million.

A less well-known but equally valuable tool in reducing the number of casualties and fire costs is the residential fire sprinkler. Although sprinkler systems have been installed in commercial properties for many years—the first being installed in the Theatre Royal, Drury lane in 1812—residential sprinklers are a relatively new concept in the United Kingdom.

Results from trials in the United States are encouraging. A large number of American towns and cities now require sprinklers to be fitted in new residential properties. The US Senate is considering a Bill promoting the installation of sprinklers in public and private college and university housing and dormitories.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, for example, all residential properties must have sprinklers fitted. Over a 10-year period there have been no fire deaths. During the same period, injury and property damage have been reduced by more than 80 per cent. In addition, there has been a 95 per cent. reduction in water usage for fire control.

Available figures also show that in the UK there is not one recorded case of multiple death by fire in buildings protected by sprinklers.

Recently I was fortunate enough to be invited by the Wiltshire fire brigade to view a demonstration of a domestic sprinkler installation at Westlea fire station. I understand that Ministers and local Members of Parliament have had the opportunity to witness similar demonstrations. I have also seen the video available from the Wiltshire fire authority, showing the comparison between a sprinkler-protected and a non-protected property. I shall return to that shortly. The installation at Westlea fire station has been in operation since 1990 and has been visited by hundreds of people. To date, not one demonstration has failed.

[Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick]

On the same day, I visited a project in Studley Green, an estate in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. Studley Green was considered a sink estate, with all the social difficulties associated with large, rundown estates. There had been many costly fires there and I was told that the estate was well known to the local fire brigade.

I should make special reference to the chief fire officer of Wiltshire, Mr. John Craig, who has been actively pursuing the case for residential sprinklers for the past 10 years and is making significant progress. In 1998, Mr. Craig, who is also a member of the Residential Sprinkler Association, became aware that 212 homes were to be demolished and rebuilt on the estate. With his knowledge of the American trials, Mr. Craig suggested that the rebuilt homes should be fitted with sprinklers. Agreement was reached with the appropriate bodies—McAlpine, the builders, the local housing association and the local fire authority—which recognised that that was the first step in developing the first sprinkler-protected major housing estate in Europe.

The tenants on the estate were consulted about the project at an early stage. The proposals were met with initial scepticism and hostility because of widespread misconceptions about sprinklers. Local residents were therefore invited to witness the test that I mentioned earlier, in which two identical properties with the same furnishings inside were set alight, and the local fire brigade was notionally called.

After seven minutes, one of the properties was a torch: wind had got into the front room and the entire building was ablaze. Not surprisingly, that was the non-sprinkler-protected property. In the sprinkler-protected property, the fire was contained in one room and was extinguished when the fire service notionally turned up. The hostility and scepticism of the local residents entirely evaporated.

The hostility is simply explained by the misconceptions regarding sprinklers. People think that they will have to put up with unsightly pipework and obtrusive sprinkler heads, like those that they see in buildings such as multi-storey car parks. In reality, domestic installations have no visible pipework or sprinkler heads. The heads are installed in a fitting no larger than the average ceiling rose.

People fear that the system will be activated accidentally by cigarette smoke or burning toast, but sprinklers are activated only by high temperatures. Accidental activation does not happen. It is commonly believed that, in the event of fire, the sprinklers throughout the building are activated, causing huge amounts of water to flood the household. In fact, sprinklers use between one 25th and one 100th of the amount of water used by a single fire brigade hose. Only the sprinkler head situated directly over the fire would be activated, not the entire system.

When fire broke out at the Queen's residence at Windsor, a Minister in the previous Administration was quoted anecdotally as saying, "Thank goodness the property was not sprinklered." In fact, had sprinklers been installed, the fire would have been contained within the single area of Windsor where it started until the fire brigade arrived, and we would not have lost so many national treasures.

Installation work in Studley Green is well under way, and the tenants in the protected buildings are expressing great confidence in the system. From being seen as a group of people near the bottom of the social scale, they now see themselves as being valued, because their safety is being taken seriously, and also because of the attention that the project is receiving. A commonly expressed view is that the residents now have peace of mind with regard to fire safety.

I met two of the residents. One was a lone parent with three kids, and the other was the parent of a child who was a fire-raiser. The parent of the three children told me that she slept in her bed easily. Had the building been protected by a smoke detector, her fear was that she would have had to choose which of her three children she would rescue if a fire broke out in the middle of the night. She now knows that every room in the house is protected, and that all her children can sleep in safety.

In the other family, the child had a record of arson, having burned down his previous home and damaged one of the local schools. The parents used to go round the house every night confiscating all items that could have led to combustion—matches, lighters and so on. They still do that, but they know that if the child manages to find such an item and continues in his dangerous habits, he and their home will be protected.

Despite residents' initial reservations about sprinkler installation, they are now convinced of the benefits. On a private estate being built next door, new residents are asking why their homes are not protected in the same way.

I ask the Minister to consider several points. Should the Government do more to promote the installation of residential sprinklers on target estates as part of regeneration schemes, with encouragement being available, for example, through the Housing Corporation, by way of grants to housing associations, particularly where there is a history of fires? In my area, there was a fatality only 36 hours ago, which is being investigated.

What progress is being made in the award of a British standard for residential sprinklers? That would be valued by the industry as demonstrating recognition, and would ensure that, across the country, when people install residential sprinklers, they are buying a product that has been tested to the appropriate standard.

Should the building regulations in due course require the installation of residential sprinklers for new build and regeneration schemes? The cost in the new build in Wiltshire is £1,000 per dwelling on average. The benefits are priceless. The cost of a retrospectively fitted system is about £1,500.

In conclusion, I shall quote from the paper presented by Chief Fire Officer Craig to this week's local government conference in Southampton. Referring to the first life saved by a residential sprinkler system in the UK, Mr. Craig reported:

> It only recently came to light that the first activation of a domestic sprinkler system in the UK happened at Piddletrenthide Vicarage in Dorset in June 1997. The vicar's three year old son was playing with matches and set fire to a dog's bed. The bedding was filled with plastic granules. The sprinkler system operated faultlessly and quickly extinguished the fire in the utility room, raising the alarm automatically at the same time.

The family were at the bottom of the garden at the time, and took a moment to get back to the house.

Mr. Craig continued:

The child was wet but unharmed and his father has stated that he thinks it possible that the boy could have died or, at least, suffered injury, but for the effectiveness of the sprinklers. Damage to the room was very slight. There was no damage to the rest of the house.

I congratulate the Residential Sprinkler Association and Sir George Pigot, and the British Automatic Sprinkler Association and its secretary, Bernadette, on promoting a cause that I believe will be part of the future of fire safety. We are making progress in developing safer homes. I know that the Minister is personally responsible for much of the regeneration of estates that have been neglected for decades, particularly in constituencies such as mine. Residential sprinklers are a tool for the future, and I would welcome any encouragement that the Government can give to promote them.

1.10 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate and on the way in which he introduced the subject. He has considerable expertise and practical experience based on many years of working in the cause of firefighting, and he introduced the debate in an exemplary manner.

My hon. Friend has given me pause for thought. His historical anecdote about the first recorded installation of a sprinkler in the Theatre Royal, Drury lane in 1812 made me reflect that if the Muscovites had been slightly quicker off the mark and up to speed, the course of world history would have changed and Moscow would not have burned when Napoleon reached it in that same year. However, such speculation will not yield practical consequences, and I shall revert immediately to the subject of our debate.

I am concerned about the number of deaths and injuries that occur each year in fires in residential accommodation. It is a serious matter, and it is important to learn lessons from fires that have occurred and to take all reasonable steps to prevent loss of life and injuries through fires.

The Department has a contract with the fire research station, which is part of the Building Research Establishment, to investigate fires in buildings, including residential accommodation, that could have implications for building regulations, to which my hon. Friend referred.

The contract with the fire research station enables us to consider amendments to the building regulations that could have a bearing on life safety. My hon. Friend knows that building regulations are made primarily to ensure the health and safety of people in and around buildings; they do not cover property protection. My hon. Friend rightly focused his remarks on the safety of people.

Guidance that will tend to satisfy the fire aspects of the building regulations is given in approved document B on fire safety. The guidance aims to ensure that buildings are as safe as can be reasonably expected while giving designers as much flexibility as possible. As my hon. Friend knows, a revised edition of approved document B was published at the beginning of this year. It will come into force on 1 July.

The 2000 edition of approved document B was produced after widespread consultation and with extensive input from many people, including a working party of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee. As with any amendments to regulations, the cost implications have to be calculated, and they are documented in a regulatory impact assessment.

We have progressed a long way with many life-safety issues through the 2000 edition of approved document B. For example, the latest edition suggests that all single-storey retail buildings with a floor area of 2,000 sq m or more must be provided with a sprinkler installation. It replaces current guidance, in the 1992 edition of the approved document, which suggests that a building can be of unlimited size without sprinklers being fitted. Our decision to amend the guidance was taken in response to representations from many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town. It has been warmly welcomed by those concerned with safety and the risks of fire in such structures.

It was suggested that smoke alarms, which are essential for giving early warning of fire, should be provided in new dwellings. That proposal was incorporated in the 1992 edition of approved documents. We have considerably strengthened that guidance in the 2000 edition to include the provision of smoke alarms in loft conversions in existing two-storey houses. The guidance has also been extended to cover most other non-domestic buildings. We have also updated the guidance so that it falls in line with the relevant British standards on smoke alarms.

Early warning of fire in domestic properties is an important life-safety feature, which should enable people to escape from a fire before it escalates into a threat to life. By giving guidance on smoke alarms in approved document B for dwellings and other buildings, we fully acknowledge the need to take account of life safety.

My hon. Friend referred to the Studley Green project, which had already been drawn to my attention. I know about the residential sprinkler installation project that is taking place in Studley Green in Trowbridge in Wiltshire. I understand that 212 new houses are being fitted with sprinklers. I fully support the initiative and I look forward to seeing the evidence of the outcome of the installations and any reports that may be produced as a consequence of the project. I noted my hon. Friend's comments on his visit and experience. I hope to hear many more reports and to draw the necessary conclusions.

I fully understand that more widespread installation of sprinklers in domestic property could be beneficial to safety and property protection. Although we currently have no plans to include in the building regulations the provision of sprinkler installations in residential or domestic buildings, I am aware of the growing support for the use of such systems in higher-risk residential properties, such as houses in multiple occupation, to which my hon. Friend referred. We intend to consider that in future.

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

As with the provision of sprinklers in large single-storey retail buildings, any decision would need to take full account of a range of views and expert advice; it would also require a regulatory impact assessment. In the meantime, the Department has informally supported domestic sprinkler installations when they are considered necessary as a compensatory feature.

Sometimes the normal fire safety recommendations, especially on alterations and extensions, that approved document B provides cannot be effected in older or listed buildings. Such circumstances can arise, for example, when a loft conversion is made to a two-storey house and a protected stair cannot be provided in accordance with the guidance in approved document B. That usually arises because the existing stair leads to a ground floor living room, which is too small to accommodate a protected route to the final exit door. In the case of listed buildings, considerations of heritage and the preservation of historic buildings militate against such provisions. In such cases, Department officials suggest that the provision of a domestic sprinkler installation on the ground floor of the property may be a solution. I support that pragmatic approach.

Sprinkler installations are a useful compensatory feature in residential accommodation such as nursing homes, where the more usual passive fire precautions such as fire separation and compartmentalisation cannot be provided.

I have already referred to HMOs, and I accept that they represent a high fire safety risk. Often, that unfortunately reflects the occupancy profile that is associated with such properties. As my hon. Friend knows, fire is only one of many hazards in such accommodation where tenants are often exposed to a variety of problems that relate to the poor quality of the accommodation and, often, the management. The Government are therefore committed to introducing a mandatory licensing scheme for all HMOs. The Department also commissioned a report on fire risks in HMOs. That report recommends that the provision of sprinkler installations in HMOs should be considered. We are carefully considering that recommendation.

My hon. Friend referred to British standards. There is no British standard for domestic sprinkler systems. The Department and the Home Office have been considering the matter and working closely with the British Standards Institution to produce such a standard. The standard is being developed in two parts.

The first part deals with sprinkler systems for residential occupancies. It will make recommendations on the design, installation, components, water supplies, commissioning, maintenance and testing of fire sprinkler systems that are installed for life-safety purposes, with obvious additional benefits for property protection. The first part is due to be published in draft next month.

The second part covers components, including sprinkler heads, test methods and the specification for residential and domestic sprinklers. I understand that work on the drafting has begun and, following a proper consultation, I hope that both parts will become full British standards in due course.

I hope that my hon. Friend appreciates from my remarks that we fully recognise the importance of fire safety in all buildings, including domestic and residential properties. We have recently issued a revised edition of approved document B, and draft British standards will be published shortly. We are preparing arrangements for a mandatory licensing scheme for HMOs and I can assure my hon. Friend that the merits of residential sprinkler installations will be a proper subject for consideration in future revisions of the building regulations.

1.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Pathology Services

1.30 pm

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I am pleased to have a chance to revisit the issue of the quality of the working conditions for staff in pathology departments throughout the country. I acknowledge that the Minister has already responded to this issue. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) last year raised concerns about work in this field. My aim is not to repeat those points, but to raise issues that have come up since then, and to urge the Minister to act swiftly and decisively.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. I am sorry, but I think that the Minister has an adviser sitting beside him.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): No, he is my parliamentary private secretary.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon.

Mr. Oaten: I am delighted that there are more than two people in the Chamber. It is welcome to see the Minister's parliamentary private secretary in his place.

I am seeking from the Minister an update on conditions for pathology staff, and some decisive remarks about the timing and the process for improving their working conditions. It is encouraging that there has been cross-party support on this issue. I was pleased yesterday to sign the early-day motion proposed by the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin), which notes that NHS scientific staff have received pay increases less than those awarded to comparable staff covered by the pay review body.

My personal involvement in this issue followed my visit a couple of weeks ago to the pathology department at the Royal Hampshire County hospital in my constituency. I confess that I went there with some trepidation. I usually pass out at the sight of blood, so the prospect of being shown lots of test tubes filled me with some dread. It was a squeamish experience, but I got over it by listening to staff and watching them perform their high-quality work.

During my visit, I met many of the pathology staff at all levels. My local *Echo* newspaper was right to describe them as

the hidden army of the NHS.

Laboratory scientists work behind the scenes, and are regarded as backroom men and women whose work in pathology saves lives.

A common public perception of pathology is that it is about post mortems and cutting up bodies. Endless television programmes reinforce that view. But pathology provides many vital services for the living—it is not just about examining why people have died. It is the branch of medicine concerned with the cause, origin and nature of disease. We need only cast our minds back to the recent flu outbreak to realise the pressure that those departments can be under and the importance of their work. The pressure is enormous.

In the Royal Hampshire hospital, 22,000 tests are carried out each week. I understand that that is typical of hospitals of a similar size throughout the country. Through such tests, biochemical scientists are able to diagnose hundreds of conditions, including life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, meningitis and, sadly, HIV. Figures suggest that demand for their services is on the increase. In the Royal Hampshire, the work load has increased by 60 per cent. in the past 10 years. Other hospitals have experienced similar increases.

Against that backdrop of an enormous throughput of tests and the massive rise in demand for pathology services, the NHS owes a tremendous debt to staff who work under these conditions and whose pay has not increased to reflect their increased work load.

During my visit to the Royal Hampshire hospital I spoke to science graduate Alex Walster, aged 22. He is one of three scientific officers who are training in the pathology department. His salary falls short of £9,000, which is £2,000 less than the salary that he was earning a few weeks before he took up that job, when he was working in a chicken factory testing chicken for salmonella. I think that that is a tragic story. A graduate who wants to use his skills to benefit sick people and to cure illnesses earned more when he was diagnosing salmonella in chicken.

I heard from another trainee, Sarah Lowdon, aged 23, who is suffering similar hardship. Sarah showed me a petri dish and told me that she was called out at 3 am to diagnose meningitis in the blood. That same evening, she went to work in a bar, which she must do to supplement her income. She received a call-out fee of £13 to do that test, which helped to save a child's life by monitoring the meningitis. She works four hours in the pub in the evening and earns the same money. She looked exhausted. I assumed that that was because of the pressure of work, but it was because she has to work in a bar most evenings to supplement her income.

I represent a constituency where accommodation is unaffordable for people on such low salaries. Even with the extra income that Sarah earns from her bar work, she cannot afford to live in Winchester near her place of work. She must commute daily from Portsmouth, which adds to the length of her working day. That problem was also experienced by the third trainee to whom I spoke, who could not keep up the costs of shared accommodation in Winchester. Not long after he started work at the hospital, he was forced to move back home with his parents, and now faces a 40-mile daily journey to work.

I should like to remind the Minister that in his response to the debate that took place in December, he touched on the question of salaries for trainee biomedical scientists. He said that they had been offered a 26 per cent. pay rise. It was welcome that the Government had recognised that they needed to support trainees at the lower end of the salary scale. Will he comment on the claim by the Institute of Biomedical Science that the 26 per cent. increase affects no more than 100 trainees out of a total work force of some 22,000? Even with that 26 per cent. increase, trainees still earn less than £9,500. Although welcome, the increase has not gone far enough and has not been broad enough to have made the difference that I am sure the Government intended.

[Mr. Oaten]

We are all aware of the debate about the quality of pay for NHS staff. It is easy for Opposition Members to argue that more money should be thrown at the problem. In this case, however, biochemical scientists have, for the past 20 years, received lower rises than other NHS staff. Like my constituents, many of them rely on overtime payments and have to work 50 hours a week to supplement their salaries.

I am sure that the Minister will remind me that through the "working together" programme, the Government are rightly reviewing the pay system in consultation with the Manufacturing, Science and Finance trade union. That process is expected to produce an agreed package later this year. I hope that the Minister will give more details on the timing of that, and tell us how those negotiations are going.

Although that review is welcome, it is odd that other professional staff in the NHS have already had their pay reviews completed in advance of the "working together" programme. Why is it proving so difficult for this particular group of individuals? It is making morale in the profession much worse.

Ultimately, if these issues are not tackled patients will suffer. If hospitals cannot recruit and retain suitable trained staff, there will be a knock-on effect on the throughput of work, which will not be delivered effectively. Indeed, alarming new evidence clearly shows that NHS trust laboratories are already experiencing recruitment and retention problems.

Research published in January by the Institute of Biomedical Science found that 88 per cent. of all trust laboratories were understaffed, and 66 per cent. had unfilled vacancies. There was a large shortfall in staff throughout the country, and 97 per cent. of respondents to the survey said that pay levels were the key to recruitment difficulties. When interviewed, 61 per cent. of individuals who had left jobs in pathology in the health service said that low pay was their reason for leaving.

My hospital is lucky that it has suitable trainees who are prepared to suffer financial hardship to pursue what they regard as a worthwhile career. Other hospitals are not so lucky. There are similar recruitment problems at higher levels of pathology. A recent national advertisement issued by my hospital for the position of area manager received just three applications. A potential applicant from Swindon was put off applying by local house prices. The successful candidate from Worksop turned the job down because she could not afford the price of accommodation. I know that the Government have recognised that problem through London weighting allowances, but could the Minister comment on some of the difficulties that regions outside London have with high prices?

Seven years ago, a study of pathology services by the Audit Commission concluded that improved communication was needed between those working in pathology and health managers, and recent research suggests that the problem still exists. About half the trusts that responded to the survey believed that biomedical scientist recruitment and retention problems were not being recognised by human resources directors. Even fewer thought that their problems were being recognised by trust chief executives, and only 10 per cent. of those working in pathology believed that their local authorities understood their difficulties.

Perhaps the most worrying conclusion of the research was that 76 per cent. of NHS trusts were using inappropriate staff groups to cover biomedical scientist duties. I have heard alarming suggestions that in some hospitals pathology departments are close to being run by agency staff. I fear that, as work load pressures increase in laboratories, the number of mistakes will also increase as staff members are continually chopped and changed and, owing to recruitment difficulties, agency staff are brought in.

It is time that pathology staff were fully recognised and rewarded for their major contribution to patient care. It is wrong to pass off well-qualified, dedicated young people as trainees, on salaries of less than £10,000 a year. It is wrong for people who are responsible for diagnosing life-threatening illnesses, and who work exhausting hours, to be forced to take second jobs.

The issue of the welfare of biomedical scientists in the NHS has been ducked for far too long. I hope that the Minister will refer specifically to the pay and conditions of biomedical scientists, rather than just to broader NHS salaries, and will give a clear indication that the Government value the contribution of those working in what I fear is increasingly becoming a Cinderella service.

1.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) on securing the debate, which gives me an opportunity to stress the importance of NHS pathology, to speak of the improvements that we are making in staff pay and conditions, and to draw attention to the excellent services provided by pathologists and laboratories.

Pathology services play an integral part in effective NHS treatment, the diagnosis of illness and the early detection of disease, the provision of evidence-based care and the protection of public health. The quality of the service is paramount, and we are taking wide-ranging action to ensure that the performance of laboratories meets national standards. Since December 1997, quality assurance measures have been strengthened and most laboratories have succeeded in obtaining accreditation. That is a testament to the hard work and commitment of the staff involved.

Nevertheless, laboratory performance is kept under close review. Pathology services are not perfect, and there will always be particular elements that need attention. In the very few cases in which concern has been expressed about a laboratory's performance, swift action has been and will continue to be taken.

Quality in pathology services is maintained at three levels: by laboratory accreditation, by state registration of staff, and by the underpinning of education and training programmes. The accreditation procedure is part of an overall quality assurance programme, and shows that a laboratory is operating according to defined standards of practice that have been independently confirmed. The application process itself entails exacting work on the part of the laboratory, and requires it to examine a number of aspects of its operation ranging from health and safety to staffing. As

a result of engaging in the process, laboratories gain detailed knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, and can begin to address the weaknesses. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that the pathology service at Royal Hampshire County hospital is fully accredited in all six areas of pathology: microbiology, histology, haematology, biology, immunology and public health.

We are not complacent, however. We are determined to modernise the NHS as a whole, and pathology is no exception. Successive reviews of pathology services conducted over the past 10 years by the Audit Commission and the NHS executive have identified a long-standing need for us to reconfigure and invest in pathology provision in England. We are acting on those reviews; we want to reconfigure the service, improve quality and efficiency and meet the changing demands of a modern NHS.

Last year, we embarked on a long-term pathology modernisation programme, overseen by an independent steering group representing a broad range of professional expertise, in order to ensure that developments are in tune with the many diverse facets of the NHS pathology service. To launch the programme and to put in train exemplar initiatives, we allocated £5 million of capital in the current financial year for pathology modernisation projects. We have identified five areas requiring modernisation: the needs of inner cities, the needs of isolated rural areas, the need for innovation in pathology provision, the role of information management technology and the need for modest modernisation initiatives. We intend to allocate a further £15 million in the next financial year to enable larger rationalisation to take place.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman finds that information useful as a context, reinforcing our central commitment to quality and our measures to bring about accreditation and investment. Recent media concern about staffing levels will have undoubtedly led to public concern about the quality of services. We should also bear in mind what is currently available, so that public confidence is not damaged.

One report was alleged—not, of course, by its authors, but by its interpreters—to show that unqualified staff were conducting laboratory tests. That allegation is entirely untrue, and we considered it serious enough to issue a statement jointly with the Institute of Biomedical Science refuting it. A corresponding statement was made by Clinical Pathology Accreditation UK Ltd, refuting allegations that clerical staff were playing a role in reading and interpreting test results. It confirmed that NHS laboratories provide a high-quality service—indeed, I think that it said "second to none".

It is true that, at present, laboratories contain a number of support staff who are trained in-house to carry out a number of tasks under the supervision of qualified staff, but quality services can be provided only by quality staff, and work must be "signed off" by them. There is a range of skilled staff: clinical and biomedical scientists—also called medical laboratory scientific officers, or MLSOs—and medical laboratory technical and support staff.

For the first time since the foundation of the NHS, our national service frameworks to deal with, for instance, coronary heart disease—in the case of one launched this week—and mental illness provide standards against which we can marry service, resource and staff planning. Pathology will play a crucial part in the work of the frameworks. We are determined to ensure that those three elements come together, so that we can make certain that the right pathology staff and services are in place to support the frameworks.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the issue of pay is important. Current pay for clinical scientists ranges from £13,000 to £54,000, and for biomedical scientists from £7,400 to £32,000. Our pay offer for the current financial year—now included in the offer of a three-year deal—seeks to address the problem of low pay at the bottom end of the biomedical scientists' scale by raising the salary to £9,400. That is an increase of 26 per cent.

All scientists have been offered at least 3 per cent., which is considerably higher than the rate of inflation. About half of all biomedical scientists—some 6,000, in the lowest grades—have been offered 7 per cent. to deal with special recruitment problems. Trainee biomedical scientists have been offered an enhanced deal as well. There are about 1,000, and, as the hon. Gentleman said, some 100 have been offered 26 per cent. The rest have been offered increases ranging from nearly 7 per cent. to 22 per cent. through a restructuring of their pay scale. That is a fair offer in current circumstances. We set out to target funds where the need was demonstrably greatest—in recruitment and retention. That is a bigger problem with some staff groups than others.

Last year, we carried out a survey of NHS staff vacancies in all staff groups. About 98 per cent. of people responded. It found that, across the board, pathology staff were in a relatively healthy position compared with other disciplines, and showed that hard-to-fill vacancies—those lasting more than three months—accounted for only 0.9 per cent. of vacancies across the discipline as a whole. However, there is a problem in recruiting staff at the bottom end of the biomedical scientist scale. We recognised that and have offered larger increases to staff at that end of the profession. That means that some pathology staff will receive more than review body staff: biomedical scientists will receive up to 7 per cent., and trainees up to 26 per cent., which compares favourably with the 4.7 per cent. that was awarded to many, although not all, nurses.

Local employers already have some flexibility within the existing national Whitley system to offer pay rates that are attractive enough to get staff with the skills that are needed. There is, for example, the provision within Whitley to restructure on-call and call-out payments to suit local service organisations. That action has been taken by NHS employers, including those at Winchester and Eastleigh Healthcare NHS trust, to pay staff more attractively to ensure key services are provided when they are needed.

At Winchester, that means that staff working in biochemistry and haematology may have their annual pay increased by £3,744 for providing on-call services twice a month. I am informed that the extra increase is paid to 13 out of the 15 biomedical scientists at Winchester who work in biochemistry and haematology. Having said that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the current pay system is out of date and in need of review. That is why, last year, we published "Agenda for Change", which gives detailed proposals

[Mr. John Denham]

for modernising the way in which the NHS rewards its staff. We want a new system based on efficiency, fairness, flexibility and partnership.

To free the time to design that new system properly, among other reasons, we have made a pay offer well ahead of inflation for 1999 to 2002. Our intention is to give staff security about their pay over that period while we continue to negotiate a new pay system that will give all staff better career progression, will give them fairer rewards for taking on extended roles, and will widen their skills and encourage people to work in teams. We want the new pay system to deliver modern conditions of service and to provide a fair basis for pay rises in the security of a national pay system.

Modernising the pay system is one of our key priorities. It will be fair for staff, but, critically, also help to deliver new patient-centred services that both the Government and staff want. Our discussions have been constructive and positive. We recognise that, for various reasons, some smaller groups of highly qualified health professionals are outside the remit of the Nurses and Midwives Pay Review Body. Talks are under way with staff and employer representatives around "Agenda for Change." Those will include discussion on whether any new groups should come under the pay review body. It is not intended to change in any way the fundamentally professional coverage of the body.

I understand why the hon. Gentleman wants further information about where and when decisions and announcements will be made. As I have said to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), it is too early to comment on proposals for specific staff groups. The negotiations are being dealt with as a package—as a whole. However, I am confident that pay modernisation will bring benefits to all NHS staff, whether or not they are covered by a review body.

Consultations and discussions are going ahead. They are constructive and useful. The MSF union—I declare an interest as I am a member—is, I am pleased to say, playing an important and major part in the talks and ensuring that scientists' views are well represented. The hon. Gentleman asked about time scales. I like to feel that, if our negotiations are successful, we could have a fully agreed package by the summer, with implementation starting next spring, but clearly that depends on the progress of the negotiations.

To get the work force we need in pathology, as elsewhere, we need to attract the right calibre of staff to employment. When we do, we need to ensure that we can keep them. Our wider human resources "working together" programme concentrates on providing a better human resources framework for the whole work force. That includes scientists and technicians. They are not one of the largest staff groups, but they are vital, as the hon. Gentleman said, to a first-class health care system. That means looking at issues such as flexible working patterns, flexible working life and staff participation.

We will target recruitment and retention at wider groups of staff. For understandable reasons, to date the more visible focus of recruitment and retention work has been on larger staff groups such as nurses, but the new recruitment and retention unit has met leading members of the scientist professional organisations and is working with them and NHS employers to draw together a new strategy to raise the profile of the work of scientists and technicians in the NHS. That will publicise the work and career prospects available. It will help to underpin effective national recruitment activity, to promote return to practice and to ensure that there is modern, up-to-date careers advice. We have established an annual recruitment and retention survey, so that we always know that we have the right information on which to act.

Pathology services are too important for us to be complacent about the issues that have been raised by the hon. Gentleman. The basic pay of some biomedical scientists, including trainees, is low. Employers can and do supplement that in a variety of ways to attract quality staff. There is an offer on the table that would make a significant difference to some key groups of staff. What is key is to recognise that accreditation of NHS pathology laboratories is high both in quality and coverage. That provides safeguards for patient services.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 March 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Work-Life Balance

Motion made and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): It is appropriate to have a debate on work-life balance following a night on which many of us stayed up very late in the House. No doubt some hon. Members will refer to that later.

In the wider context, this is an issue whose time has come. Achieving a good balance between work and the rest of our lives is central to the agenda of the Government, and to that of the British public. For the Government, economic success and social inclusion are not two conflicting aspirations, but inextricably linked objectives. Economic prosperity depends on our ability to harness our most valuable resources—the skills of our people—and businesses need to recruit and retain the best people that they can get. If businesses are to be globally competitive and responsive to changing consumer demands, they need to operate flexible working hours, which often involve 24-hour working.

Social inclusion depends on ensuring that work, for those who can, is the best route out of poverty and exclusion. Strong families help children to flourish, which means that parents need time to spend with their children. Flexible working practices support a better balance between work and life. They help businesses to operate flexibly, to recruit from the widest pool of talent and to retain their best people. At the same time, they help individuals to stay in, or return to, the workplace and juggle the competing demands on their lives. That is a win-win agenda, which enhances profitability and competitiveness for business at the same time as enhancing the quality of life for individuals. Our policies are grounded in businesses pursuing their business interests, enabling us to support families, communities and individuals in developing their strengths.

Work-life balance is not only about mothers and children. It is also important for fathers, who should be able to spend more time with their children, and for the changing circumstances in which people find themselves: for example, increasing numbers of people have to look after elderly, sick and disabled relatives, and need time in which to do so. Everybody wants a life outside work. As Members of Parliament, we recognise that as much as, if not more than, others. People may want to play sport, take an evening class, or put something back into their community. The policy is not only about fewer working hours—it can be about working in different ways, at different times, or in different places.

The issue has been driven by the increasing inclusion of women in the labour market. The statistics are stark: in 1971, women comprised about 38 per cent. of the work force; now, they comprise more than half the work force. Interestingly, the number of women with children under five who are active in the labour market has increased rapidly: in 1998, 36 per cent. of such women worked; now, more than 50 per cent. work. Another interesting statistic relates to women who return to work after pregnancy: in 1979, about one in four women who became pregnant while in employment returned to work within nine months of giving birth; now, two out of three return to work within that time. Many women still work part time: 40 per cent. are part-time workers, compared with 8 per cent. of men. Nevertheless, their activity in the labour market has helped to drive the change in work-life balance practices.

It is of interest to the Government that lone mothers are less active than partnered mothers: a third of partnered mothers are not active in the labour market, whereas half of lone mothers are not active. That is largely because we do not have the right work-life balance and flexible working practices to enable lone parents in particular to juggle competing demands.

Women's entering and remaining in the workplace is a change that has driven interest in work-life balance issues, but as I said, men are also involved. Britain has a long hours culture, and our men work the longest hours in Europe: half the 7 million male workers in the European Union who work more than 48 hours a week live in Great Britain. That is bad for families but, as is increasingly being recognised, it also create stress in the workplace, which impacts on companies' bottom line. The Confederation of British Industry has recently calculated that stress costs business about £7 billion a year. The shocking conclusion of a survey undertaken in 1999 was that the quality of the working life of 86 per cent. of managers had an adverse impact on their relationship with their children. We know that the role of fathers in supporting and caring for young children is crucial in ensuring that they grow up to be effective adults. That fact is staring us in the face and the time has come to do something about it.

As I said, the question is not merely one of parenting, but of the growing responsibility to care for relatives. In 1997, there were 8 million people in Britain aged over 65; in 20 years time, that figure will have increased to 11 million. As people live longer, they will need to be cared for by relatives. Two thirds of carers are in paid employment, but one in five care for elderly, sick or disabled relatives for more than 20 hours a week. If they are to provide appropriate care, striking a proper balance between work and life is essential. That is important for relatives and in terms of public expenditure. Informal caring networks would be better, not only for the elderly, sick and disabled, but for society.

There is another dimension to this debate. I have responsibility for trying to break down the massive barriers to disabled people's participation in the labour market. Disabled people are half as likely to be active in the labour market as non-disabled people, and those who are active are twice as likely to be unemployed. Six times as many disabled people are dependent on benefits as non-disabled people. One way to break down those barriers is to achieve greater flexibility in the workplace, so that disabled people can get themselves off benefit, participate in work, work hours appropriate to their

[Ms Margaret Hodge]

particular disability, improve their quality of life and feel that they are valued and important members of society.

Those are the groups of people for whom work-life balance matters most, but it matters to everybody: we all want a life. My own children are beginning to enter the labour market, and they are less likely to tolerate the inflexibility in the workplace that I tolerated when I first went into work. They want time to do other things. If employers are to attract and retain the best people, they must ensure greater flexibility in the workplace.

We have today launched a number of initiatives to make work-life balance issues central to the concerns of business and the political agenda, and to open the debate on changing our behaviour. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and I launched at Downing street this morning a business-led alliance, in which more than 20 leading businesses have come together. They have an interest in the issues, they all have good stories to tell about the way in which they have changed their working practices to the advantage of their business and their employees, and they will use the strength of the alliance to persuade other businesses of the case for a better balance between work and the rest of people's lives. At present, only one in 20 businesses offers the full range of flexible working practices essential to an improvement in work-life balance. We must improve that figure.

We have agreed with the alliance a set of principles, which we have set out in a discussion document published today called "Changing Patterns in a Changing World". I hope that all hon. Members will obtain and read a copy of that report, and give the Department their views on our initiatives to change work-life balance practices in this country. The principles underpin our philosophy. Work-life balance is about bringing benefits to industry and employees. We do not say that one working pattern is better than any other: flexibility means different things to different people. We want businesses, individuals and organisations to value the contribution that their employees make to the business, not focus on their working pattern. The initiative is not necessarily about working less. It may be about how people work, through job sharing, part-time working or term-time working; when they work, through systems of compressed hours, annualised hours or flexi-time; or where they work—home working is now more feasible, with the rapid improvements in information technology.

I hope that the business alliance will be an effective lever for change. I have no doubt that asking business to promote a culture change in the way in which organisations work is the best way to achieve real change in our working practices. As a Government, we want to work in partnership with that business-led alliance. We have a coherent strategy across government. We now have a basic framework of rights, a legislative settlement that will enable people to balance their work and the rest of their life better, with enhanced maternity rights and maternity leave and the benefits of the parental leave directive and the part-time directive, which is about to be introduced. We have introduced a series of fiscal measures, which also support a better balance between work and the rest of one's life. The two that I draw to hon. Members' attention are the recent massive increase in child benefit and the introduction of working families tax credit and child care tax credit.

We are putting in place a supporting infrastructure that will enable individuals to balance work and the rest of their life better. In my Department, I am responsible for rolling out the national child care strategy and the early years education strategy. That is an £8 billion programme, to be implemented during the current comprehensive spending review period, which will enable parents to have high-quality and affordable child care and so allow them to choose between the children that they love and the jobs that they need.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Before the Minister moves off the question of Government action—much of which is welcome—will she clarify the parental leave arrangements? Is she confident that in this country unpaid parental leave—unlike that in most other European countries, where an element of pay or benefit is attached—will allow low-income parents to take time off under the European directive, or will that option be open only to richer parents?

Ms Hodge: Not all European countries provide paid parental leave. We will have to test how well the new move works.

I would say two things to the hon. Gentleman, the first of which is that low-income families will be entitled to all of the other benefits through income support if they take time off. Secondly, as other parents in this Chamber will agree, the impact of child care responsibilities on the work-life balance does not stop at the age of five. In an odd way, the early years of a child's life are slightly easier because parents can organise their child's response to them from the moment that they come home. The child swiftly switches on to the parent, allowing the parent to give quality child care. I have had more difficulty with my four children as they have grown older and become teenagers. When I come home from work and am ready to spend time with them, they are busy watching "EastEnders" and "Coronation Street". When they do need me, I am tied up in a debate in the House.

My best work-life balance practice has been to carry my pager. It is not how I receive messages from Millbank, but how I receive instant messages from my children, saying "Ring home". My funniest story about that dates from the period in which the Labour party were in opposition. I had managed to secure a place behind my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, then Leader of the Opposition, during Prime Minister's Question Time, and I was feeling quite pleased with myself, but then my pager went off: it was an urgent message, saying, "Ring home. Desperate to talk to you." I rushed out of the Chamber, thus losing my place, and rang home, thinking "What on earth has happened?" I found that my daughter was testing my pager to see whether it would go off, or whether I had set it to vibrate.

I was talking about the support infrastructure. If we are serious about this matter, we must lead by example. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given

Baroness Jay, the Leader of the House of Lords and Minister for Women, the responsibility to examine how better work-life balance policies could be introduced across the public sector. As a provider of services, we should also ensure that we enable people to balance their lives. As other hon. Members will readily understand, one of the worst problems a parent faces is trying to fit in a dentist's or doctor's appointment around one's working life. Flexibility in public services is as important as flexibility in employment practices.

Further announcements were made by the Government today. Employers for Work-Life Balance, the business-led alliance, will work over the coming year to achieve our shared aim. As I said, we have agreed a set of principles, about which I am delighted. Those principles are set out in our document and in the one launched today by the business alliance, in which it sets out its action plan. That plan includes the establishment of a website, which I believe went live today, and a telephone information line. The alliance will also work on accreditation for work-life balance issues in the Investors in People standard. It plans to produce an employers' manual, as well as a guide specifically for small and medium-sized enterprises, and it will hold a series of seminars. Its work will complement ours. We have produced the document to which I have referred today, and I hope that that will encourage debate. I also hope that hon. Members will respond, not only by supporting our ideas, but by suggesting others that the Government might pursue.

I have also announced today a new challenge fund, for which my Department will set aside £1.5 million over two years. This is the first time that the Government have put money aside to support changes in work-life balance policies. The money will provide free consultancy advice to businesses—large and small, in all sectors and across the regions—to make them think about how they organise their work, and about whether that work could be organised in a different way so as to support a better work-life balance. The Government are to become involved in a series of awards in conjunction with Lloyds TSB. We already have the employer of the year awards, but they are national awards, and we hope to have regional awards as well.

My Department will also invest in a new telephone helpline, called Equality Direct—a signposting service, which will provide detailed and comprehensive advice on work-life balance issues, among others, to support employers as they examine paticular problems. If an employee comes to work one day and says that her mother has had a heart attack, or that there has been some other change in her circumstances, that service will support the employer in working through the problem. We shall provide clear, simple information, advice and guidance, and supplement the telephone line that the employers alliance is setting up.

We shall sponsor conferences around the country to discuss these issues, and, most importantly, sponsor a great deal of research. There is to be a baseline study, the results of which will be announced this autumn, which will give us some idea of where our business practices currently stand. We shall follow that up with a study, two or three years hence, to see what impact our campaign has had.

We shall also sponsor other research projects, because using examples of good practice is a key lever in encouraging businesses to think about what they are doing. For example, we have supported a project undertaken by Lucy Cavendish college, Cambridge, which is working with two companies—Marks and Spencer and GEC Marconi—to reconfigure their working practices. It will then compare the results with the practices of two companies in the United States. That will provide interesting analysis and comparisons.

These policies are not about altruism, but about sheer common sense and business interest. They require people who have the imagination to think about the world of work as it is today and as it will be tomorrow, rather than those who are stuck in the world of work of the past. There is a growing array of good practice in the community, and I shall give some examples. Asda did a very simple thing: it found that many of its women staff were leaving at the end of the school summer term because they had to look after their children during the holidays, so it introduced an unpaid six-week leave during the holidays. The company found that the women stayed, and so saved itself £1 million overnight in recruitment costs.

Asda is a big business, but there is a small business in Norfolk called Listawood, which produces mouse mats. It started up in 1987, has a growth rate of 36 per cent. a year, and now employs 100 people. Located in rural Norfolk, it needed to employ local people, mainly women, but found that the women could not balance their work and home lives. The company, by introducing an evening shift from 6 to 10 o'clock during the school holidays, has achieved a massive growth rate.

The Nationwide building society now has 30 per cent. of its staff working part time. Bristol city council undertook an interesting exercise with its workers, who had approached it to say that they could not stand the existing working practices any longer. They worked out in partnership how to reconfigure working practices and ended up with practices which suited individuals better and which allowed the authority to open its libraries on a Sunday. Both the services that were offered and individuals' quality of life were thus improved.

I have given four examples, but many more are contained in the documents. We shall seek to spread good practice through those exemplars. We need to develop working practices for the present and the future, not the past. If we can make progress in this regard, we shall achieve the economic prosperity and success to which we aspire and create a more inclusive society that allows us to give better support to our families.

2.55 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I greatly appreciate the fact that so many hon. Gentlemen are present for this debate. It would be a mistake to think that the work-life balance is only a woman's problem.

The work-life balance involves the pace of cultural change, which was discussed yesterday by the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) when she introduced her ten-minute Bill. She said that the pace of cultural change was too slow in relation to political power sharing. It can be difficult to achieve a life-work balance because the pace of cultural change is slow. I shall pursue the line of inquiry to which the

[Mrs. Caroline Spelman]

Minister referred, namely, whether we as a nation have a cultural problem. I draw to the Minister's attention an international global work force management study carried out by Gemini Consulting. It states:

> When asked which attributes are most important in their working life, respondents from all major geographic areas selected "balance the needs of work and family or personal life" as one of their top three choices. The strength of feeling was strongest in Japan—26.0 per cent. selected balance as the most important attribute in a job, followed by Continental Europe—21.0 per cent., the United States—20 per cent. and then the United Kingdom—19.0 per cent. Only Russia placed balance down the scale—12.0 per cent. of respondents in Russia chose balance compared with 47.0 per cent. who would opt for a good salary above all else.

I am sure that hon. Members understand who so many Russians rate a good salary so highly. None the less, the study reveals much about our cultural attitudes towards the work-life balance. Changes in this respect will benefit men and women.

As the Minister said, people in this country work some of the longest hours, and we have some of the least imaginative approaches to child care and employment policies. Change is needed. Women declare themselves more vociferously than men do, often because they feel that they shoulder much more of the burden of domestic duties and caring responsibilities, even when they are in full-time work.

A delightful article that appeared on the BBC Online Network had the headline "Women still tied to kitchen sink". It reported a survey of men's and women's attitudes, and it found that

> women spend twice as much time cooking as men, five times as long cleaning the house, and—

apparently—

> eight times as long doing the laundry.

The survey did report some balance:

> At least when it comes to doing repairs around the house, men come out on top, with 25 per cent. of couples saying that the man always gets lumbered with unblocking the sink.

The struggle to cope with the diverse responsibilities that women and carers shoulder is one of the causes of stress among the British work force.

The article continues:

> despite the advance of women in the workplace the woman's role in the home has not changed so dramatically from that of her mother—it is still the woman in a partnership who usually has the major responsibility for household chores.

The Beijing plus five conclusions make interesting reading five years after the Beijing meeting. One of the conclusions on education is:

> boys are not taught at school to share responsibility for household chores and childcare, so women still do 70 per cent. of the housework when they grow up.

As a nation, we shall have to consider cultural change.

A key to helping men and women in caring roles, especially those who care for young children, is to do more to provide high-quality, accessible child care. Let me make it clear that we share that objective with the Government. However, I want to refer to what the Minister said about provision of child care places. The Government made a pledge in their annual report for 1988–99 to provide up to 1 million new child care places, and that pledge was repeated in the document produced by the women's unit, "Working for women at the heart of Government", in which the Government said that they would provide 1 million child care places over the next four years.

I am a little concerned by what the Minister said about the increasing number of child care places, because the most up-to-date information available to the Opposition, which comes from the House of Commons Library, shows that child care provision fell by 47,248 places last year. Those figures were discussed in a debate in this Chamber on 16 December and were not refuted by the Government then. The Government should be careful about making claims about an expansion in child care places when that might not have occurred. During that debate, we heard that there had been an increase in the number of child care places in what the Minister called "certain settings" and a decline in the number of places in other settings. It is undoubtedly in the more informal environments, particularly playgroups, that the number of places has diminished. Up to 150,000 places have been lost without being counterbalanced by provision in other settings.

In the Government's review of child care provision, which was published under the title "Tomorrow's Children", reasons were given for the closure of pre-school playgroups. It is important to read the conclusions of the review because I feel strongly that those matters are not being fully addressed, with the result that places are still being lost. The review states that many groups struggle under what is perceived to be an excessive administrative burden, and that was reflected in the evidence collected by the consultants and widely reported. Playgroups face an excessive administrative burden, and it is possible that recent policies and developments have increased the burden and cost of regulation that they face. I know from my constituency, where two such groups have closed, that that acted as a disincentive to continuing.

I am not saying that additional child care places have not been provided in other settings, but there is a big contrast between a class of 30-plus for nursery provision and a small, informal playgroup where six or fewer children may be catered for. It is important to retain choice in quality of provision, because it is a case of horses for courses. Those of us who have children know that some are bolder than others in large groups, and that shyer children thrive in a smaller, more intimate environment. Statistics show a rise to more than 30 children in nursery classes, which runs contrary to the Government's pledge to limit class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds to 30. Children in that age range need a good ratio of teachers to children. Parents who work need to be satisfied that while they are at work their children have the best available care and are not struggling in an oversized class. They do not want to worry about their local playgroup closing or have to think about where else they can get their children in.

Child care costs money: that is part of the equation for all parents who weigh up the work-life balance. In marginal circumstances, where work is poorly paid, sometimes it barely pays to obtain child care because the weekly take-home pay after paying for it leaves the parent wondering whether it is worth while. I accept that the working families tax credit is designed to provide help with the cost of child care, especially for lone

parents; but, unfortunately, it penalises two-parent, single-earner families because, unlike lone parents, they do not qualify for the child care tax credit. It is a couple's choice: if they have both been in work before starting a family, and one parent decides to stay at home as the carer, there is usually a considerable financial knock to their domestic circumstances. It therefore seems harsh to members of my party that they are excluded from child care tax credit, especially as no real account is taken of the cost of rearing a child at home, which is exactly the same as for a lone-parent family.

The American experience has shown that the result can be more family break-ups. It is also a perverse incentive, in that making the child care element of the working families tax credit unavailable to two-parent, one-earner families could encourage people to divorce, or not to formalise their relationship, so that they can continue to receive the tax credits. We should like the Government to revisit those elements.

We feel strongly that helping parents with the work-life balance must not be too prescriptive. There are different attitudes to balancing this important stage of life. Some parents are entirely fulfilled by remaining at home with their children because they see it as a responsible job. It is just unfortunate that that role is often not fully esteemed. Many parents who opt to stay at home suffer considerable loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. They often introduce themselves as "Just a housewife". I am sure that hon. Members find that unfortunate, because such mothers play a vital role, but it is another cultural aspect of the problem. I urge the Government to bear it in mind as they make their big drive to get people who are raising children to go out to work.

Tellingly, I have been asked in my surgeries, "Well, Mrs. Spelman, what do you think is more important: to be stacking the shelves in Safeway or to be outside the school gate to meet my child from school?" It is a hard question to answer and one way round the problem is to persuade companies such as Safeway to alter their shifts so that parents can meet their children from school. However, I understand that parent's legitimate question.

Another concern about the Government's child care provisions is that pledging a pre-school place for every four-year-old means moving away from small-scale provision to more institutionalised provision. Parents at work, wondering how their four-year-old is getting on at nursery, are worried about formal methods being used to teach such young children. The Government's intention to make similar provision for three-year-olds heightens those anxieties. As a working parent, I would find it difficult to come to terms with three-year-olds being in classes as large as 30.

The Minister mentioned several employment settings in which the culture is changing and I shall refer to others where there is good practice. Reading them on to the record is one way of spreading the word to the public domain. There are still many employers who are not very well disposed culturally to striking a good work-life balance. Statistics from the Equal Opportunities Commission, published today by *The Express* newspaper, show that half of all staff who asked for flexibility in their working life had their request rejected as unacceptable. I stress that statistic, because it illustrates a key cultural point: that a Government may put in place whatever regulations they like, but if people feel that they cannot ask for what they need to balance their lives, little progress will be made.

The same report from the Equal Opportunities Commission shows that one fifth of those who request flexible working are sacked or made redundant. That is a very unenlightened attitude on the part of employers. As the Minister said, good-quality, human resources in the workplace are often what makes the difference between one company and another. Trying to retain good employees becomes all the more important in today's economic situation; there is a shortage of skills and of good-quality employees to fuel the good economic growth that I would argue the Government inherited. It is vital to Britain's competitive place in the global market to encourage good employees to remain in work, not only because of pay, but because account is taken of their families.

Recently, Diana Good, a litigation specialist and a partner of Linklaters and Alliance, was nominated for the award of female lawyer of the year. She spent 18 months researching the work-life balance in her company and found that a uniform and transparent policy was in place, rather than the old ad hoc arrangements. Although more than 50 per cent. of the firm's employees at recruitment level were women there were fewer women further up the ranks. In the preceding 12 years, only one in 10 had become a partner. That is a common average in a City firm, and the pattern is replicated in other professions. Linklaters was concerned about the loss of talented lawyers and thus wasted expenditure; that was the catalyst of the change.

Diana Good suggests presenting a business plan so that the needs of both the employee and the clients are met. Hours should then be drawn up, with some employees having a regular day off, others accruing extra holiday and others seeing a contract through and then having a couple of weeks off. The arrangements depend on the area in which the employee works. That kind of flexibility is practical, practicable and deliverable and Diana Good can prove it.

Asking for what is needed to help the work-life relationship stay in balance should not affect promotion or opportunities to achieve partner status but, all too often, anecdotal evidence reveals that that happens. Flexible working patterns were offered to men and women in Ms Good's company, but the majority of those who took up the offer were women; few men did so. That relates to the cultural problems that have been mentioned. The article appeared in *The Times*, and it is interesting that inquiries have been received from all over the world about Linklaters' approach, as it is the first City firm to implement such a policy.

I should like to refer to other examples of good practice, but first I reiterate that people will not be able to make progress unless they feel that they can ask for what they need. Despite the topicality of flexible working and family-friendly policies, the employee survey published in "First Findings" showed that the extent of personal access to flexible working provision was limited. A third of all employees said that they could work flexi-time, only 16 per cent. said that they could job share if necessary, and 9 per cent. said that they could work from home or at home.

[Mrs. Caroline Spelman]

I stumbled on a development during the spring recess. When I met a Foreign Office diplomat from the embassy in The Hague, I was astonished to discover that she was taking part in a job share with another woman. I remember not applying to the Foreign Office because I thought that it would be impossible to manage family life or even to get married. It was encouraging to discover that job sharing was possible even in the diplomatic service.

Only a quarter of employees said that they could take parental leave and a mere 4 per cent. of employees said that help with child care was available to them, either in the form of a workplace nursery or through help with meeting the cost of child care. However, fewer than half of employees said that none of those arrangements was available to them. The response in the marketplace to the genuine problem that many people have balancing their working lives with the demands of family life is still patchy. The bias is in women's favour, because they are much more likely than men to report on flexible working arrangements or even to ask for them in the first place.

It is Thursday afternoon, we are in Westminster Hall and it was a long night last night, so I should like to say that, although we are busy criticising employers who are not so enlightened and praising those who are more enlightened, we have to take the plank out of our own eye. It stikes me as a relatively new parliamentarian that high hopes were raised about modernising the working practices of the House, given the advent of a relatively young Government with a substantial majority. Indeed, their majority is so substantial that it exceeds the total number of official Opposition Members, so they can do whatever they want. However, I have been disappointed by the scale of change—although I hasten to add that even our Chief Whip, who is a family man, supported the changes to Thursday sittings. It is obvious that many Members have benefited from the revision in the timing of Thursday sittings, but that leads one to hope that it might be possible on other days.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): Many of us would endorse the sentiments that the hon. Lady expresses. If I am able to make a speech later, I shall mention them further. I hope that she will repeat those sentiments to her colleagues on the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons and that we shall gain the support of all Members from each party to introduce further modernisation arrangements.

Mrs. Spelman: There are forces of conservatism on both sides. That is worth saying. We will not get 100 per cent. of Members of Parliament in favour of a change that would support work-life balances. I have a horrible feeling that the longer one remains here, the more one gets used to it and adapts. My own motivation in seeking a change concerns not only the work-life balance—I am a mother of three relatively young children—but the esteem in which Parliament is held as an institution.

One of our problems is that, out there in the wider country, it was expected that Parliament would change in some way and modernise. Certainly one of our practical problems with the sitting hours is that they are poorly synchronised with the media day; therefore it is hard to get our work reported into media. If there was more coverage of Parliament, it would help to raise the esteem in which the institution is held. The more business that can be done before the lunchtime news, or the 6 pm news, the more chance there is of translating our efforts—sometimes very prolonged efforts—into good media coverage. That is a further reason for changing the way Parliament operates.

I should also like to speak for those hon. Members—none of them Conservative as far as I know, so I shall speak for Labour Members—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) laughs, but he is over-hasty: he has not seen where I am going. I wish to speak for Labour Back Benchers who have had the good fortune to produce a child while they have been Members of Parliament. I would like to put it on the record that the Palace authorities could do more to enable mothers, especially nursing mothers, to carry out their duties to the best of their ability and with peace of mind about the security and needs of a new-born infant. Perhaps the happy event expected by the Prime Minister and his wife in May will give a lead in that direction.

There is one other way in which Parliament works that makes it very difficult for the work-life balance.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. The hon. Lady is in danger of straying out of order.

Mrs. Spelman: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am trying to relate this to the subject.

The synchronisation of parliamentary terms—they are not called that, but many working parents think of them as that—with school terms would be useful to hon. Members. The way in which Westminster sittings are organised is especially difficult for Scottish Members, as their children's school holidays start much earlier in the summer than ours, so they see less of their children at that time. Something could be done in that respect. I have mentioned the working situation in Parliament only because it would be hypocritical to criticise working practices in other sectors of the economy without touching on the life-work balances here.

Finally, the main points that come out of the debate are about changing the culture towards a healthy balance between life and work. There is no question that, economically speaking, it is disastrous for companies when employees go sick for long periods because of unacceptable stresses in their work-life balance. If changes can be achieved culturally in that domain, there would be an overall benefit to the economy. Because of the good practice that it offers, I shall refer to the Parents at Work employer of the year awards. A number of companies tendered for the title and as I examined the bids, several themes emerged that are relevant to our debate. For example, the Automobile Association offered a teleworking initiative, which it launched in 1997, consisting of call centre staff moving from an office-based environment to working in the home. That was an interesting nomination, which would help a working parent with the work-life balance, by allowing work to be built around domestic responsibilities.

Under BP Amoco's initiative, a parental advisory networking service was set up for employees. It is staffed by two part-timers who provide information on child care options and parenting issues. That was another good initiative. British Telecom tried to achieve culture change—its term, not mine—by encouraging employees to talk about balancing work and home. The theme that employees find it difficult to talk about home even to fellow employees, let alone to the employer, comes through over and over again.

The winner of employer of the year award was Littlewoods, on the basis of its "making policy work in practice" bid. The company aimed to create a culture in which people felt comfortable talking about work-life issues that could have an impact on performance. As well as one-to-one discussions with line managers, there were focus groups, employee climate surveys, open forums and sessions held with the chief executive—no less a person than the boss, which is revealing. The award was won for making that policy work in practice.

When today's debate enters the public domain, I hope that it will inspire others to adopt more flexible working practices without their being forced to do so, which might create resentment and slow down the process of change. I hope that it will change the cultural attitude in our society, because we seem to lag behind other countries in rating the importance of the work-life balance. Finally, I hope that it will help us to get away from a state of affairs described by no less a person than Germaine Greer who, offering advice to other women, said:

> Oh yes, you can have equality, but you have to find the man to pay for it.

3.27 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): May I declare an interest? I am a trustee of the Daycare Trust and a spokesperson for the Institute of Management. One of my 60,000 constituents is Shirley Conran. I am pleased that, as chair of Mothers in Management, she sits on the ministerial advisory committee on work-life balance. Those of us were are old enough will remember her book "Superwoman", which set the agenda some 30 years ago. As a result, men and women who cared about parenting felt that there was a basis for working too. I am very pleased that Shirley is serving on the advisory committee.

I welcome the discussion paper on family-friendly policies, but I was disappointed to discover that it was launched at a business breakfast. It is important to ensure that fathers or mothers can take their children to school, make breakfast and have a good time at the start of the day. One of the aspects of parliamentary life that I enjoy, which I never had in business life, is that we start around 10 o'clock in the morning, so I can give my wife some breakfast, before she goes off to work, and take the children to school. It is more difficult on a Thursday, when we have to be here for 9 o'clock.

As a former director of a large company, I am pleased that we now have Employers for Work-Life Balance and that some of my former colleagues are on the list—Barry Gibson, for example, who does marvellous work at Littlewoods, and Margaret Salmon at the BBC. I noticed in today's newspaper the listing of new companies coming into the FTSE-100—primarily dot.com, technology and telecom companies such as Freeserve, the telecoms company Thus, the digital television and telecoms business Cable & Wireless Communications, and Baltimore Technologies. None of those companies is on the list. E-commerce companies should be encouraged to join the initiative, so that is is not seen as the preserve of companies representing old industry and the old economy.

I am pleased that the list includes PricewaterhouseCoopers, which audits e-commerce companies. The recent Turnbull report on corporate governance examined reputation, and how health and safety at work were scrutinised in internal and external aspects of the company report. As part of its involvement in the initiative, I hope that PricewaterhouseCoopers will be asked to ensure that it takes account of that in its audit of many major UK companies.

I am pleased that the Ministry's advisory committee included Stephen Alambritis of the Federation of Small Businesses, whom I know. It is often said that large companies can make progress on this issue, but small companies cannot. In a previous debate, I drew attention to research that my wife, in her company capacity, did as part of her masters degree at Kingston university—an institution that has done a lot of work on the subject. The £1.5 million research fund will put to rest the canard about small firms not being family friendly.

The House takes a different line, and the discussion document encourages a flexible approach. It is inappropriate for such concerns to apply only to large companies. I am sure that Mr. Alambritis will ensure that the concerns of small companies are not undermined, but enhanced. Certainly, research that I have studied shows that family-friendly policies have huge benefits for companies.

I have previously mentioned the tremendous campaign mounted by the Institute of Management on work-life policy. Its most recent research "Taking the Strain" was written by Ruth Wheatley. Hon. Members were surely shocked to hear the Minister say that more than 50 per cent. of people in the European Union working more than 48 hours a week work in Britain. That is borne out by Ruth Wheatley's research which shows that almost 37 per cent. of those studied had a working week of more than 48 hours. One hopes that that was before the regulations were introduced and is not the present position.

Almost half the respondents regularly took work home at the weekend and four people in 10 worked through most weekends. Almost 72 per cent. of managers received criticism from family and friends about their long hours of work. Nevertheless, 73 per cent. claimed that they did not take any time off during the previous year because of stress. Only 8 per cent. of respondents said that a stress audit had been conducted in their organisation in the past year. Audit companies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers have an important role in ensuring that companies keep health and safety and company reputation up to the mark.

Of course, the contra-view has been expressed. I picked out of my wife's post the 29 February issue of *Personnel Today*. An article headed "Do family-friendly policies keep parents at work?" cites the research of the

[Mr. Tony Colman]

Berkeley professor Arlie Hochschild, who has discovered that family-friendly policies and creche facilities result in people being happier at work than at home and preferring to work on.

Parenting is the most difficult thing to do in the world; it is much harder than earning a living. One learns that over time. Having raised eight children now aged six to 34, I can testify that it does not get any easier. We should pursue and support family-friendly policies, but that does not mean that parents should automatically spend more time at home than they do at present. Some parents are good at parenting, but some are, frankly, awful. It is important for the child or elderly person to have a choice as to who provides the care, and that may not necessarily be the parent or the adult who is looking after an elderly parent.

As the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) said, there is an equal number of men and women in this Chamber. I may still be smarting from international women's day, which was yesterday, but it is equally important to ensure that men are able to take an equal place in society. Perhaps there should be an international men's day.

The ministerial advisory committee lacks balance when considering the issues involved in caring for elderly relatives or dependents. I should like Age Concern to be represented as well as the Carers National Association. Problems arise not only in looking after the children of a family, but its elderly relatives. That dimension is missing.

Taking a blue-sky approach, I should like the Government to continue what they are doing, keep trumpeting it, and keep industry up to the mark. As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) said, paid parental leave must be kept on the agenda as a priority, and be available for all income groups in society, not only as a perk for those who earn enough to be able to take upaid parental leave.

Companies should receive more tax help in implementing work-life balance policies. We have heard about the life-long learning contract between Government and the individual. Perhaps a company could have an account with Government, whereby if it adopted polices that promoted work-life balance, which is what all of us, as a community of stakeholders in that company, want, it would qualify for a tax credit.

In preparing for my speech, I went to the Department for Education and Employment, where I was disappointed to find that the management goals set out in its "1999–2000 Workplan" contained no mention of work-life balance. I suggest that, when the 2000–01 document is produced, you may want to be seen as a model employer promoting work-life balance. I agree with the hon. Member for Meriden that it is important to take the mote out of one's own eye first.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that I am a model employer, but I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would address himself to the Minister, not to me.

Mr. Colman: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was of course referring to the Minister and her role at the Department.

I lauded the fact that I am able to deal with early-morning chores, but it is absurd that we have to work through the night. As Back Benchers, some of us wonder why that is. It is a bit of a cheek for the hon. Member for Meriden to mention late sittings, given that it is usually the Opposition who decide, for one reason or another, to keep us here all night. Many of us would like more timetabled debates to ensure that we get home at a reasonable hour. When we score own goals in that way, we make ourselves appear extremely foolish to our constituents and the media. That is a matter not only for the Modernisation Committee, but for the Government and Opposition whips, who could get together and decide that, as the House has operated in this way for the past 600 years, it might be time to have a rethink. Timetabled motions that would enable debates at reasonable times—for example, not in the middle of the night, when we are half asleep—would be a move towards a work-life balance.

I welcome the discussion document and strongly recommend it. I have banged on about the matter during my 30 years in business and, to be frank, it is good to see business taking a lead over Parliament. When we return to the matter in, say, a year's time, I hope that significant progress will have been made throughout the country, and in the way in which parliamentary business is conducted.

3.40 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I agree with most of the comments made so far and I shall briefly add to them. I am still getting used to the term "work-life balance", which implies that work is not part of life. I want people to enjoy work, and too few do. The Government want to tackle that issue by providing the skills and training to enable people in all trades and professions to have the confidence to enjoy their working lives.

There remains too much of the British macho culture. In a previous career, I was as guilty as others of wanting always to be the last person to leave the office, thereby encouraging others to stay longer than they should. Of course, working longer does not necessarily mean working better, and hon. Members will be aware that tiredness reduces efficiency.

There are lessons to be learned in the public and private sectors. At a hospital in which I worked, a senior staff post came up for renewal, and I suggested to the director of nursing services that it be made a part-time post. That would have enabled many senior women nurses to apply for it, and it would have been filled in an unusual way. A woman—or, indeed, a man—could thereby have had a part-time job that would have enabled the balancing of family life with work. However, my suggestion met with enormous opposition. I found it strange that a so-called full-time post that involved working 37 hours in a week was regarded as particularly precious. Why was it so important to work those particular hours, given that the hospital worked 24 hours a day? I never received a proper answer to that question. That issue is part of the general change in culture that we need to create.

I welcome the Government's efforts to get the balance right for everyone. The Minister rightly pointed out that proportionally fewer lone parents work outside the

home. I should stress that it is work undertaken inside the home that often presents the biggest challenge. Some of the most impressive people that I have met in Swindon are the mothers, especially lone parents, who raise four or five children incredibly well on the smallest of incomes. This week, the chairman of Unilever said that, if one wants to employ the best project manager, one should find a mum who has combined bringing up children with working outside the home. We should remember that when discussing work inside and outside the home. Some lone parents in Swindon have been greatly helped by the Government's new deal for lone parents. It has enabled them to work outside their homes, and there have been some fantastic and inspiring projects. One lone parent in my constituency has set up a hairdressing business. She cuts hair in people's own homes, which enables her to fit work around her children and her spare time.

Similarly, the working families tax credit is helping people to strike the right balance between work outside and inside the home, and it is ensuring that they are rewarded for working outside the home. A Labour councillor recently stood outside a school and handed out leaflets advertising the working families tax credit. He went back a week later to hand out more leaflets and was accosted by a woman who gave him the biggest bear hug he had had in a long time, saying, "I have realised that this will give me £40 a week extra. That will make a huge difference to my family." The credit would make her work outside the home pay and enable her to support her family better.

I want to pursue a point relating to the working families tax credit that has been raised with me by constituents. It relates particularly to shift workers. The Minister rightly said she expects more and more people—people who cannot find a child-minder or other types of child care and are covered by working families' tax credit—to work on a 24-hour, shift-work basis. Many of them are solving the problem by using nannies, but nannies are not covered by working families tax credit, and the Government should look at that. A range of quality child care initiatives should be available.

Mrs. Spelman: In its newsletter "Cascade", published on 8 March, the National Childminding Association says:

childminders are getting a raw deal in some areas, where parents are trying to get the new childcare tax credit but are then not using spaces which they have agreed to use.

That is another concern that I have been made aware of.

Ms. Drown: I am aware of that issue, which has also been raised with me.

I want to refer, as other hon. Members have done, to an issue raised by the Minister. Baroness Jay has been asked to make sure that the public sector leads by example and to look across the public sector with a view to enhancing family-friendly policies. Clearly, the House of Commons must lead by example. When we talk about changing our own practices, the question of consensus always comes up, but that is a recipe for staying as we are. Various surveys have been carried out into sittings in the House. There was a majority in favour of changing the times of sittings, but, because people chose slightly different times, the conclusion was "We can't change, because we can't agree on one way forward." We know that the whole House will never agree on one way forward, so this might be an occasion for abandoning consensus. I support the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), who said that she would like the Government to use their majority in this case. Let us use the majority and change the House for the better.

When I began talking to colleagues and constituents about this issue, they all said, "Stop worrying about it. You are being selfish. All these other things in the country need dealing with." I agree, but I am surprised how many constituents come to me and say, "No, this is important. You need to sort that place out. We don't admire it as much as we should. How can we be sure that the best people will stand for Parliament when it is run so inefficiently and does not allow you to balance your work and your family life?" They are absolutely right. We have a duty to improve the House. Therefore, let us consider doing away with consensus in the search for a system that we can make work. I remember that, in discussions about Thursdays, hon. Members said, "It won't work. Nobody will turn up for the Thursday morning debate." Yet for Treasury questions this morning the Chamber was packed. We can and we must do it.

We must also look at child care. We are not asking for free child care, or provision reserved for Members of Parliament. Ten thousand people work in and around the House of Commons, so it makes sense. We should lead the way.

We must keep trying to get the balance right. There are too many people in paid work who work far too many hours and there are too many people out of paid work. That is an equation that we should be able to resolve in the interests of everybody and their families.

I congratulate the Government on everything that they are doing in this respect and I look forward to seeing the results, some of which may take a long time to work their way through. We need to do more work, but the Government's initiatives will be good for families, good for employees and good for business.

3.49 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I did not come with a prepared speech, but I want to join in what I think is proving to be a consensus in this Chamber. I especially welcome the announcements that my hon. Friend the Minister has made. They are good news, and they represent a win-win scenario, for which we are extremely grateful. It is immensely important that business is to lead the endeavour, because that is where the experience lies and that is the place from which the cultural change can come.

We are not talking only about very large companies. Many of those already have the resources, the consultants and the facilities to do the sums and to work out how much it costs to recruit a new worker when they have lost one—a prime example being that of losing a woman from the work force after maternity. They have been able to prove the business case—the financial case. However, the majority of our businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, which have much greater difficulty understanding the case and in making the appropriate calculations. I especially welcome what my

[Joan Ruddock]

hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said about the Government's funding of consultancy advice, and I hope that it will be used to promote the message in the sector that experiences greater difficulties, and so get it on board.

Managers need advice if they are to be able to work out a proper strategy. Often, a well meaning employer will be able to deal with a one-off situation, but it is important to have a plan that is fair to employees and can be documented. Middle management in many companies have learned lessons, many of them applicable to themselves: I am not suggesting that they are always off at the golf course, but they have tended to work out over the years a way of balancing what they deem the important aspects of work and life.

However, the same considerations are often not applied to ordinary workers. My constituency—Lewisham, Deptford—is a very deprived part of the United Kingdom, in which there are still many unemployed people, although the number has halved since the Labour Government took office. There are also many low-paid workers, whose conditions of work are already unsatisfactory before we even start to take into account the issues before us today.

I ask the Under-Secretary to pay attention to the progress, or lackof it, being made in factories and service industries—places where some of the best modern management practices have yet to be applied, and where people may be experiencing a less than adequate quality of life, both in the home and in the community. They are likely to be the most deprived both at work and in terms of their life prospects.

I also draw the Minsiter's attention to the fact that for many of those workers, flexibility means insecurity. We must take into account the great sense of worry in many people's minds. We understand that the culture is changing and that young people are aware that they will have to change their jobs more frequently than their parents, but we must help people to feel that that is a challenge that can be met without experiencing desperate insecurity. That insecurity can lead to the circumstances described by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), in which a lack of confidence inhibits people from asking the quesiton "Can I have time off?", even when they have good, pressing reasons for so doing.

Trade unions have fought for many years for the rights of ordinary people to have time off for public duties. That is another aspect of the satisfactory, rounded lives that many professional people and managers at the top have secured for themselves. Why should not the ordinary worker enjoy similar rights? I heard a discussion on the radio earlier this week about the magistracy. I suspect that other hon. Members may not have heard it because they were in the Chamber; I, however, was elsewhere and able to listen. I heard a man talking about his home city, where, 20 years ago, many ordinary working people came forward to be magistrates. Today, that is not happening, which is exactly the reverse of what we would expect. As society has changed and become less class-structured, we would expect more ordinary people to come forward. I cannot provide a national example, but that man's experience was that although more and more women, people from ethnic minorities and younger people were coming forward to be magistrates, they were primarily from the professional classes. We must be careful to ensure that that kind of work-life balance, for private or public duty, or just because people want to add an extra dimension to their lives, is considered through the eyes of all our people—the many not the few, as the Labour party is wont to say.

I want to bring a little of my experience to hon. Members' attention. When I was Minister for Women, I began some of the work that has resulted in the programme outlined by the Government today. I went around different Government Departments to see what each could contribute. Employers were brought together to provide advice, and to hear what kind of experiences could be used as the basis of policy. One manager told me about a lowly woman worker who had to give in her notice because—this harks back to a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman)—she had to become a carer for her elderly mother. When the woman's case was discussed, her employer found that all she needed to do was go home at lunchtime to administer some medicine. That was all, but she felt that she had to give up her job. As she saw it, that would ruin her life, because she got huge satisfaction from her job, and was valuable to her company.

The strategy adopted was simple. The woman was given the managing director's car space, because, by being able to park her car outside the office, she was able to get home to her mother and return to the office within her normal lunch hour. Such an imaginative approach is a good example of what can be done. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will use such examples to encourage and enthuse people, and to demonstrate what can be done.

Twenty-five years ago, I was a manager of a voluntary organisation. I was in control—the top person—albeit with a committee to refer to. I took on a public responsibility that just grew and grew, and I needed to adjust my working time. As I was a manager, I was well placed to make an argument; but I went in trepidation to my board of management to propose that my deputy manager would benefit enormously from working one day a week as the manager of the enterprise, while I had one day a week off. I changed from a five-day week to a four-day working week. That was revolutionary at the time, and, as my employers saw it, a huge risk, but it worked absolutely brilliantly. The woman who worked as a deputy four days a week gained tremendously from being completely in control: it is refreshing for someone who is a deputy most of the time to have control for one day of the week. It worked splendidly for both of us, and, as is so often the case, the organisation received double the value from us.

As Members of Parliament, we are all small employers. Six people have worked for me during a 13-year period. Two of the women out of those six have had children while in my employ. If one has just two full-time members of staff, it is not easy when one of them is away. Many small employers say that that is why they cannot cope with women employees. However, the appropriate attitude is to recognise that to have children is a woman's right, and to see that she is a valuable employee.

I know from my experience that it is possible to work around the problem and I have benefited enormously from the loyalty of those employees and their commitment to our work. Not only have I had to make adjustments to cover maternity leave, I have had a woman employee decide that she had to have fixed hours. We do not have fixed hours in this place, but she had to have fixed hours to continue in her job. It was not convenient for me, but I decided that she was so valuable that I would say yes; she then decided that she needed to reduce her hours from five days to four days. We accommodated all that and if I, as a small employer could do that, any employer in the country could do the same. However, help is needed and I strongly endorse the proposal that consultants should be provided free of charge and that there should be help in sharing experience and learning.

I want to endorse a couple of comments that have been made today and which are not currently Government policy. More work must be done on aspects of child care and financial support. More work must also be done to assist lone parents who want to work, particularly with training, to enable them to have more appropriate career paths and a better work-life balance and ensure that they are not stuck at one level of employment. I support an element of paid parental leave and, again, I am conscious of people in my constituency who can least afford to take the time off that they most need because of the financial penalties.

I endorse wholeheartedly what has been said about the Government setting a good example. One of my tasks as Minister for Women was to examine the position in Government Departments and I was particularly interested in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence. The hon. Member for Meriden mentioned her surprise at finding a diplomat with a job share. Matters have improved enormously, particularly under the current Government. It was only in the 1970s that we raised the ban on married women remaining in the foreign service, and it is extraordinary that it should have been as late as that. The families association within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office pressed the Government, who responded, to ensure that men and women could serve overseas in our embassies and high commissions without having to send their children away to boarding school for the whole of their young lives. Now, parents often keep their children with them, or opt for home leave in the United Kingdom. They can have proper jobs and do what is necessary for their children. However, there are still problems with serving soldiers who become pregnant and the Ministry of Defence has a little more work to do.

I am proud that my Government have looked across the board at how to ensure that we are the exemplary employer that we should be, but that brings us to this place. A charge of hypocrisy is properly levelled at our Parliament, which is the only Parliament in the world that has no fixed hours. We are the only Parliament in which people habitually say that women and men with children cannot enter the House because the difficulties they would face would mean that they could not care for their children at the same time. It is nonsense and it must end. We must modernise ourselves. If we are not to suffer continually the charge of hypocrisy and lack of respect to which other hon. Members referred, we must modernise this place and bring it in line with the philosophy of a proper work-life balance that the Government have announced today.

4.4 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I apologise to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary for missing the first couple of minutes of the debate. I was supposed to be in Committee, but, thankfully, it was cancelled, so I was able to listen to this interesting debate.

I start by saying mea culpa, because I was a member of the Modernisation Committee for some 18 months. I can only say that one tends to travel at the speed of the slowest wagon in the convoy. I sometimes wondered whether we were going forwards or backwards, but the fact that we are able to be here today to discuss the issue—which we would not have had the opportunity to do if we had had to wait for a debate on the Floor of the House—proves that some progress has been made, even if it is not enough, and has not been fast enough.

My main reason for speaking today is to explain some of the different structures at work and their impact on the work-life balance. I shall relate a couple of anecdotes that show how serious the problem is: it is getting better, but we have come from a long way back.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary gave us some fairly frightening statistics. By pure chance, I have been involved in direct negotiations between employers and employees in one of the major firms in my constituency. It has been a real eye-opener. We tend to parody both sides in a company for conspiring to increase overtime, but we must recognise that that is what they have done for many years. Employers have almost condoned employees who go slow during the normal week so as to be able to do overtime, and employees have made it clear that overtime is a sacred cow. Employers could touch everything else about the work, but they could not touch overtime, because that was paid at an additional rate and it enabled employees to choose how long they wanted to work. Things are changing, but it is depressing that at the beginning of the new millennium we have to pick our way through these fairly negative attitudes and for no good reason. It is clear that if production were reorganised so as to get the work done in a normal week, not only could employers save money but everybody's lifestyle would improve. However, it is hard going, because it leads to stress.

An enormous number people in all types of work increasingly face stress. The 48-hour working week is important because it makes a statement about our expectation of the maximum working week. However, there is still a long way to go. We must not fool ourselves about that.

I want to talk about the structures of work, and consider the definition of work. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) touched on this. She kindly came to my constituency when she was Minister for Women for what I hope was an interesting, enlightening day.

What has not been brought out so far is that when we talk about work, we do not mean only paid work. Carers have been mentioned, and we have spoken about people who have to compensate for the other things that they do with their lives. I shall talk about volunteer work, which is also important. Last week the time bank was

[Mr. David Drew]

formally launched, and during Prime Minister's questions the Prime Minister offered to do a day's voluntary work. Last Thursday I addressed Prohelp in Gloucestershire, which is an offshoot of Business in the Community. Prohelp involves smaller professional businesses that offer their time to various Gloucestershire community and neighbourhood groups—my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham-Deptford is aware of its work. It provides assistance and advice which otherwise would not be available because there would be no money to pay for it and no time to do so.

It is sad that we often take volunteer work for granted: it has always been so. However, if we emphasise it enough, we can begin to change the culture. I have always used the silly term "compulsory volunteering"—an oxymoron. I believe that everybody should volunteer, not only for the benefit of the people whom they help but for their own self-esteem. Volunteering is one of the most rewarding things that people do. Many are unable to volunteer because they are too busy with work or children, but we should examine ways of opening up volunteering.

From the 1970s onwards people began to live longer, which is a jolly good thing, and began to retire slightly earlier: they did not go for the 60 to 65 age restriction. Many companies put on pre-retirement courses. I spoke to Judith Taylor of the Gloucestershire Women's Royal Voluntary Service about six months ago. She was worried that so few major companies now ran such courses. There are several reasons for that. Perhaps only a huge number of people leaving at the same time made them viable. Nuclear Electric, in my constituency, laid off hundreds of people within a reasonably short time.

It is important to encourage companies to run courses. I asked the business link group in Gloucestershire to write to companies who used to run such courses asking them to start them up again, because they are an important way of contacting people in the prime age group of 60 to early 70s. It will make an enormous difference. It is sad that in my constituency 80-year-olds are driving 90-year-olds around: a few more 60-year-olds would not come amiss in rural areas. There is a definite shortage of "younger" people, which may be because there is more demand on their time as many are grandparents and child carers. Although there has been a tremendous growth in the voluntary sector, we will be missing an enormous opportunity if we do not encourage more people to take part. I ask my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to look into the matter and try to do something about it.

I live in Stonehouse in my constituency, which has a time donor scheme for caring initiated by Edgar Khan. For the first time in this country, people can give their time in exchange for services. Such initiatives are important. One of the new stuctures of work is portfolio working, which is a lovely term, although I am not quite sure what it means. It enables people to be more flexible in how they work and who they work for, or to choose to work for themselves. There has been much innovation; there are many ways for people at the end of their working lives to be more flexible about how they apply themselves. However, employment rights need to be extended, because often people in those areas of work are vulnerable and need help. I have been involved in collective portfolio schemes in which people share the costs of equipment, advice and so on. Such arrangements are not easy when people choose to operate more flexibly, but if we do not try to help, opportunities will be lost and many people will be more vulnerable. As a Co-operative Member of Parliament, I think that it is important to look for genuinely co-operative solutions such as portfolio working. Such good practice should be extended to the whole country and to different types of work.

Politicians went through a learning curve recently in the IR35 debate. I shall not dwell on the matter, but whether one thinks that the Government are right or wrong, we would all be taken aback by the definition of a contractor, and how it affects insurance and tax. I shall be honest and say that I am not sure that the Government have got it right, but I am worried about the increase in contractorisation. There are some big issues at play; we all have examples of that, and some of us, although not I, have been directly affected by people being made redundant. They have had to find a way back into the work force, and have often returned as contractors. It is not unknown for them to return to the same workplace, which may be what firms and individuals want. The people who are most angry about IR35 are those who have been made redundant, as they see it, through no fault of their own, and who are being hit again due to changes outside their control. That has certainly left an indelible mark on my mind.

There is much to be done and many negotiations to be had. I do not want to spend any longer on that issue, except to say that the structure of our work force affects not only how people work, but how they find time to do other things. We must understand that.

Mr. Colman: Does my hon. Friend agree that many individuals involved in contractorisation operate according to standard company practice and work as sole traders or within a company scheme? Currently, those people are disadvantaged because of the tax haven system. IR35 seems to have covered that up.

Mr. Drew: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. There are many bizarre practices. It was drawn to my attention today that lecturers may be caught by IR35. I have never previously come across that. They may work in a succession of colleges. It is clear that some funny things are going on. I would like to know how a lecturer sets up his company so that he can sell his labour on the basis that he is a contractor. However, nothing surprises me in this regard. As I said, I do not want to get hung up on that issue, except to relate it to other experiences that we have had and to what has been done.

I do not know whether I should say that I am young enough or old enough to remember that, about 10 years ago, we bought out an enormous number of people in the public sector, especially in teaching, but in other areas as well, which has resulted in some skewing in employment. What has that got to do with work-life balance? Well, an awful lot—if we could get those people to do other things. However, it has caused some bitterness in the public sector, because employees who have previously seen people retire at 50 will have to

work for the normal 40 years into their 60s. There are very few enhanced schemes, unless employees make their own contributions, and that has an impact.

How do we map out our careers? It is a question of life episodes. Will we work continuously for 40 years, or will we have breaks? Traditionally, women have had such breaks; increasingly, men are doing so. It is about what we do not only during the week, but during life. That is linked to volunteering, among other things. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister would deal with that important issue.

I shall now consider the other side of the issue. I have written down the word "leisure"—not very cleverly—as an alternative to working life. When we are not working, the idea is that we are enjoying leisure time. I leave to hon. Members' imaginations whether bringing up children constitutes leisure, but that is how it is regarded.

People frequently refer to the notion of the income rich and time poor and the time rich and income poor. However, many of my constituents are both income poor and time poor, and there are two aspects to that. First, many people are employed in multiple part-time jobs, which means that their working time is much greater than it would be if they had only one job. That needs to be factored in. Again, it is a question of flexibility and what people can choose to do. The level of exploitation must be reduced.

I am especially interested in the second element: how people are affected by being so busy that they do not have any leisure time or, more importantly, time to spend with their family. I should be grateful if the Minister would comment on that. We are doing good work in this area, and the Government deserve a glowing tribute for that. However, people increasingly have to consider the costs of taking part in leisure activities. It is not cheap to take three or four children to the cinema or leisure centre. The summer play schemes run in many areas are highly laudable. Kids want to take part in them during those six weeks of holiday, and many parents want them to because it gives them more time to themselves. It is good that such schemes exist, but they are costly.

Mrs. Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is making some good points, but one of the problems with holiday schemes is that they often last only one week; they do not cover the whole holiday period. Even parents who work part-time find that those schemes do not cover the critical period when many child care providers are unavailable.

Mr. Drew: I thank the hon. Lady. Several schemes that originally lasted a week now last two. The duration of the schemes is gradually being increased, but the money needed to do so must come from somewhere. People need to organise such schemes carefully. They cannot be fully funded, because that would mean that they would be offered in fewer areas.

How can we offer access to leisure activities to low-income families without being patronising? I know that people often turn a blind eye and let others go on trips for nothing, but doing so can be difficult. Those who are poor but in work are often unable to afford leisure activities either for themselves or, more especially, for their children.

I hope that we can be creative. I am a great believer in local solutions. Schemes cannot be imposed from on high. Summer play schemes cannot be centralised; funding and flexibility are needed. I hope that my hon Friend the Under-Secretary will deal with those matters.

4.21 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, for not being here from the start of the debate. I was juggling my own work-life balance: I spent most of the day waiting for a surveyor to inspect some plastering work at my house. I am very frustrated that the person did not show up. All of us who work and have families deal with similar experiences. I shall refer not only to family-friendly employment, but to family-friendly services, which are another aspect of the debate.

I was pleased to take part in the debate on child care that the Department for Education and Employment initiated before Christmas, in which my hon. Friend Under-Secretary spoke. She is here today, pushing forward the debate yet again on issues that are important to families and working people. As many hon. Members have said, we must consider not only children, but the fact that many families care for elderly relatives; such care needs will grow in future. It is important to discuss the work-life balance, but it involves much more than child care places; it is the framework in which we live and raise our children, which takes into account the pressures of work, caring for elderly relatives, waiting at home for plumbers who never turn up, and everything else. It is right that we should start to bring those issues together.

I suggest that my hon. Friend considers extending the excellent early years and child care partnerships that the Department has established beyond providing child care places, although places are important. I say that as chair of the all-party child care group, I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) is here, because she is the vice-chair of that group.

The issues go beyond child care and involve the way in which employers structure work to provide the best opportunities for local partnerships. In the next phase, we need to consider how to make businesses play a much more dynamic role in those partnerships.

Many parents and those who care for others want to work flexibly. It is interesting that the women's unit in its "listening to women" survey, found that more than 90 per cent. of women said that the unit would encourage the Government to do more to promote family-friendly practices. That is a pretty ringing endorsement. The women who spoke were practical; they understood that it was difficult for small and medium-sized businesses to achieve flexibility, but it came through loud and clear that flexibility was wanted.

Some years ago when I worked in local government in London I was pleased to be part of a cross-London working group that looked at shift working in different organisations from the underground to local authorities and other agencies. The issue of how people organise their hours was being discussed 10 years ago, and it has continued to be a subject of debate. What I have always found interesting, both as a former shop steward and in my work in human resources, were the arguments about part-time workers. Both trade unionists and employers

[Caroline Flint]

put part-time workers down: it was too much trouble to organise a work pattern around them because they were used to the traditional work patterns that everyone else followed. One employer doubted whether he was getting as much productivity out of his part-time workers, but my experience has been that their productivity is likely to be much higher.

I remember discussing this with someone from the gas industry and we looked at an example of a gas showroom. A new manager came in and looked at working hours. She found that the problem was that everyone was working nine to five, which meant that there was not much flexibility for anyone who did not want to do those hours. She stepped back for a moment and thought about who used the gas showroom and when its peak hours were. The peak weekday hours were between 10 am and 2 pm: that was the time when people came in to pay their gas bills and to look at the products on show. At that stage, the showroom was not open on a Saturday morning, which was another crucial period for people who could not get out of work during the week to visit the gas showroom.

When the manager had a few vacancies, rather than issuing a job description that gave the usual hours that everyone did, she asked for people who could work from 10 am to 2 pm. That was an ideal job for parents with children at school: they could drop the kids at 9 am, go to the gas showroom and be out by 2 pm, ready to pick up at 3.30 pm. She also asked for extra people for Saturday mornings—she offered a contract for one day a week. My hon. Friend the Minister has been looking hard at employment issues facing people with disabilities and I would suggest that such contracts would be ideal for someone who may not be able to sustain a job over a full week or traditional part-time hours.

The starting point is to look at the services that people want as consumers and to kill two birds with one stone: a solution can be found that meets the needs of different people who demand different working patterns and provides a better service for those who want to use it. There is so much scope for imagination in that area that it is worth looking at.

Another development that needs to be addressed is shift parenting. The majority of parents do not use any formal paid child care: they cobble together different systems of parents, families and friends to look after their children. In shift parenting, mum goes off during the day, comes back and dad goes off during the evening. That is an issue that must be looked at. Remembering my experience of the working party in London, talking to staff on the underground, it occurs to me that some single people without dependants would be willing to do the more anti-social shift hours, possibly with a premium in recognition of that. If it were organised managerially, it would enable parents to take a common-sense approach to their family life.

I am a parent myself and I know that as children age, so child care changes. I have teenagers now, and the need to have parents around all the time lessens. There is scope for flexibility management and trade unions now regard it as part of the negotiating agenda that they operate.

I know how keen you are, Madam Deputy Speaker, on debating transport issues, so let me mention a conference about transport and work that took place last year in Don Valley, which I attended with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis). It dealt with creating a dynamic between transport providers and employers in a local area. For example, when new buildings are being constructed, employers can be encouraged to create a turn-around for buses, enabling them to approach the factory or office gate instead of stopping half a mile down the road; that encourages workers to use the bus. I sought to bring child care into the picture and to promote thinking about the best places for buses to stop to assist child care providers. Ideally, there would be a seamless stream of people getting on buses, dropping off their children, getting back on them, travelling to work and so forth.

The potentially enormous resources around train stations are often overlooked. I have mentioned it in several previous debates, but it is a missing link in all our discussions. We know how many buildings around train stations are underused. St. Pancras is a good example—I use King's Cross every week to travel up to Doncaster. There are many underused buildings there, so what better place is there to create a nursery, so that commuters can drop their young children there on the way to work?

Mr. Colman: My youngest two children attended Buffer Bear nurseries, which were created by British Rail, though spun off as a separate company. I understand that there are only around six of them in the country, so I agree with my hon. Friend about the need to expand them.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend. I am not talking off the top of my head: there are real practical examples of where the private sector sees an opportunity. My hon. Friend the Minister should talk with her colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—joined-up government, as they say—to examine where permissions are granted to establish new interchanges, as in Doncaster. Such interchanges can provide opportunities to set up child care provision, which will help people who want to leave their children in order to go to work; it might also prove an attractive option for shoppers. Creche facilities may encourage people to come and spend their money in the wonderful shops in places like Doncaster. There are real opportunities there.

Some interesting projects have been set up in America to deal with sick children. Having time off when children are sick is important. My three children have been through chicken pox and the like. Once the main part of their illness is over, children are recuperating. They cannot go back to school, but child care services will often not accept them, thus creating additional problems for parents. An American association has sprung up to examine the extent to which child care services can meet people's needs—either at home or through establishments with staff properly qualified to deal with health and other matters.

The other day I encountered a company that provides employers with maternity packages. We have a fantastic ante-natal system of support in this country, which

operates across every community and social class and is widely taken up, yet when women return to work, provision is still too patchy. A few weeks ago, I read an article about women's rates of return to work after maternity leave. I was worried because it showed how often women found the experience of returning to work overwhelming—in terms of the inflexibility of adjusting hours of work to suit their needs. Many of them left.

I put a question to every Department in Whitehall about the return of women to work after pregnancy. I have been told that the information is not readily to hand and that it would cost too much to answer my question. That might be part of the answer to my question: not enough research is being done into the terms on which women return to work and whether, 12 months down the line, they are at the same workplace.

Many important issues are involved. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned holiday play schemes. My hon. Friend the Minister and I have spoken about the way in which the school year is structured. It always seems daft to me. At one point in my parenting, I had to drop my children off at my child minder's at half-past eight in the morning for her to walk them round to school for quarter to nine. She was a wonderful child minder, but it seems ridiculous that many parents should have to arrange that on top of everything else. I welcome the breakfast clubs, but we must deal with the issue about schools. I understand their educational role, but we should make the most of school buildings by allowing them to be used by other care providers, so that parents have less stress.

We want to take the stress off mums, who undoubtedly bear the largest burden of child care. Only today, on my way in on the tube, I saw a report saying that, even where a mother and a father work full time, the mother does twice as much domestic work as the father. However, there has been an encouraging increase in the contribution made by men.

Mr. Colman: One in five single parents are single fathers. I am sure that the hon. Lady will accept that they also need the help that she is suggesting.

Caroline Flint: Absolutely. I welcome the fact that so many fathers in the House have not only attended their children's birth, but support the review of the working of the House and its facilities. They are a new generation of fathers who want to undo the old perception of fatherhood and the man's role. However, women are still doing far more than their fair share of the domestic work, and we must address that issue.

There must be less stress for mum, and we must create more space for dad. Men have said to me that when women colleagues have asked for time off from work it has been granted, but when men do, the request is not considered in the same light, because it is seen as something that they should not be asking for. That view needs to be changed. If we are to create confidence in child care, it must be of higher quality, but we must involve business more and allow the family-friendly employment agenda to play a larger part in our local partnerships to develop child care.

I have recently written to the Chairman of the Administration Committee seeking support for the issue of child care in the House to be discussed again. Many hon. Members support that request, and it is time for a debate. There is no simple solution, but we must have a discussion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) said, the Government are doing their job, but it is for the Members of the House to decide how the House is run.

4.37 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): This has been a fascinating debate and I am delighted to be able to contribute to it from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench.

One of the Minister's first remarks was that the issue of work-life balance did not concern only women. Clearly, I am not a woman. [*Laughter.*] I can assure you that that is clear, Madam Deputy Speaker. The debate has shown that the issues span both genders. It would have been disappointing if the debate had attracted only women Members, and I am delighted that there has almost been parity between the genders.

We must ensure that men are involved in the discussions on this issue, as on many others. Many of the barriers to a good work-life balance that are put up by employers or the establishment are down to men. The danger is that, however brillantly and incisively they do so, only women in public life will discuss this issue, based on their own experience, while those who should change their practices and thought processes may switch off.

That is why I pay sincere tribute to my party leader, who took a mould-breaking step in challenging stereotypes when he asked me to speak for the Liberal Democrats on issues of special but not exclusive interest or relevance to women. Someone in the Labour party said at the time that it was a retrograde step—a comment that was attributed to the Minister who is here today. I give her the opportunity to say that she welcomes the diversity that appointments such as mine bring.

I would not criticise a party for insisting that, in general, a woman should speak on these issues, but we need to breakdown stereotypes, so it is helpful for men to speak on them as well. I have received many faxes and letters from men who heard me speak on issues of particular interest to women, saying that they realised for the first time that some of their attitudes were not progressive. On that occasion, they did not switch off the television because I was speaking. Sadly, many people would, and no doubt do.

I am neither a woman nor a parent, but many work-life balance issues apply to potential parents as well. Moreover, I recognise those issues as an employer. One of the first people that I employed in my office was a single parent, fresh from university. Her contribution was first class and in no way impaired by the parental responsiblities that she retained once she had paid for child care from what I admit was not a wonderful salary. I am pleased to say that I did not consider whether a person with such responsibilities could do the job, and I can say from experience that people who have to juggle the hours of their day work very efficiently. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) recently described parents, particularly single parents, as experienced project managers, and that is certainly true in my experience.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

The discussion document looks interesting, but given that it was not available before today, it is difficult for hon. Members to respond to it. Had it been released earlier, we could have read it properly and discussed with the Minister those matters with which it deals, and those it omits. Alternatively, the Minister could have made the document available after the debate, and explained to us during the debate this very important initiative. I do not want to nitpick, but it has been difficult fully to engage with the subject, and I hope that we will be able to discuss it again in the near future.

Mrs. Spelman: I should like to place on record the fact that I could not obtain a copy of the document and, as Opposition spokesman, I was unclear about the relationship between its launch and this debate. I endorse the hon. Gentleman's view that the debate would have benefited by our being furnished with copies of it.

Dr. Harris: I should like to mention a feature of the document that is well known. People feel that they must work, and are prevented from getting right the work-life balance. They are dissuaded from taking certain jobs by the scourge—that is the right word—of presenteeism, which obliges them to work over and above the requirements of their job. Presenteeism could be described as the Lemsip phenomenon. Hon. Members will have seen the dreadful advertisement in which a macho man with flu struggles into work to find another macho man in his seat, trying to clinch the deal. The first macho man says that he was able to struggle in because his symptoms were alleviated by Lemsip and he wanted to stop his position being taken by another person. He appears to be happy to spread his germs left, right and centre and to delay his recovery in order to ensure that he is not usurped. I wrote to the manufacturer to ask whether that is the image that it wants to give. I am sure that the product is reasonable, but the macho work culture does not appeal.

The Government's consultation document states that people should be judged not on their working pattern but on the contribution that they make to business. They should also feel that working their contracted hours is what counts, and that if they only work those hours that should not affect their career. The medical profession, in which I worked, has an incredibly macho culture. The expectation of junior doctors was that when they had done their weekly hours, they should head straight to the library and then return to the wards in an effort to be spotted working beyond their contracted hours, which were already long enough. As I shall explain, that made it difficult to maintain a family life. The break up of my marriage was partly due to that regime. I was contracted to work 72 hours a week—I had contractual presenteeism. My wife at the time had non-contractual presenteeism of about 72 hours a week as a management consultant in a new business sector. The marriages of several of my medical cohorts also broke down either because the partner—it did not matter whether it was a man or woman—could not understand why his or her partner was not there, or because work demands meant that the couple never saw each other.

I inform Conservative Members that the working time directive is important—it protects people against employers' attempts to exploit them and against their own attempts to comply with opportunities to exploit themselves. As a Liberal, I have no qualms about introducing legislative controls over people's freedom to work long hours, for their own health and for the health of those who depend on them and who are in relationships with them.

There is a culture in the workplace that involves the need to lie to employers to get time off for family activities. We are all familiar with anecdotes about people who are not allowed the time off that they require—that applies in particular to men, and feeds into the macho culture.

Caroline Flint: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of research that was conducted into women's sick leave patterns? It showed that women quite often said that they were sick when they were tending to family matters. That creates a huge imbalance and distorts women's patterns of sick leave. It is terrible that women feel forced to take such steps.

Dr. Harris: I have heard of that research, and I agree that the situation is wrong. I am reminded of the old joke in a workplace notice that stated, "Employeers who wish to take time off to attend their grandmother's funeral should inform management at least three days before the day of the match." One can appreciate the humour of using one's grandmother's funeral as an excuse to attend a football match—the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) discussed the need for leisure. However, as the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said, people often lie about being ill in order to get time off to look after children or older relatives.

The Minister and other hon. Members rightly stressed that care for older people can be provided by their relations or by other people. I am glad to say that my parents are still in good health, although they have had recent health scares. I am their only close relative living in this country, and the pager messages to which I respond most quickly are those from my parents. I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I receive a message from them during this debate. The arrangement brought home, for the first time, the inevitably limited lifespan of one's parents. I am now of the age when I notice that my parents are getting older, and I think that they are aware that in future there will be a need for closer contact.

The Government would move the debate on if they responded to the royal commission on long-term care. Many insurance companies are waiting to develop policies, and individuals are finding it difficult to plan their caring careers—sometimes it can be a career—because they do not know what they will be entitled to. The Government's response to the royal commission is long overdue, and I hope they will take into account the issues that we have discussed today.

The Minister said that parents need time to nurture their children. When I pressed her on the question of parental leave, I was pleased to receive support from Labour Members. A parental leave system was much needed, and I welcome the fact that the Government have introduced it. However, the leave is unpaid. The

Minister correctly said that not all European countries provide paid leave. However, the majority do so. Research shows that take-up of parental leave, especially among low-income groups, is higher if it is paid. I pay tribute to the work that has been done in that area by the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), other Labour Members and the Select Committee. The right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has, in many respects, led the way.

Given that the research shows that take-up among low-income families is greater when leave is paid, it would be embarrassing for the Government to find that the UK is among the minority of countries that do not provide it. Countries that provide some form of payment include Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France—although it is unpaid for the first child—Italy, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland and Sweden. As the Minister is probably aware, the Swedes have paid great attention to the issue of whether parental leave increases the role of the man in bringing up children in a relationship. Research by the European Network, "Family and Work and New Ways to Work", revealed that Sweden has undergone significant changes in the attitude of Swedish men to their families. It is commonplace in Sweden to see almost as many men pushing prams as women, which is a positive development. The researchers recognised that the high level of parental leave—and the compulsion to take it, because otherwise it will be lost, even to the other partner—has contributed to that situation. Will the Minister tell us whether her Department is considering that sort of model? Nobody could describe Sweden as uncompetitive, historically speaking.

This can be viewed positively in respect of the private sector. From what I have seen of the worked examples in the consultation document, businesses can accrue huge advantages from ensuring that they have family-friendly policies. Those business benefits can be assessed from the research that the DfEE commissioned from the Institute for Employment Studies. For example, casual sickness absence has been reduced. That echoes the point that was made by the hon. Member for Don Valley. Employers felt that sickness absence due to employees' caring responsibilities had been reduced. That was reinforced by employees, who felt more able to be honest about absence due to dependents' illness. There were also benefits in terms of improved retention. That is logical, as people stay with firms longer because of access to family-friendly provision. As the labour supply is tight in many skill areas in the job market, that will be increasingly important.

Improved productivity was a third benefit. Many firms were convinced that employees working flexible hours were more productive than those working traditional hours. A routine is not as inspiring as enabling people to work flexibly and contribute the most that they can. The status of home working should be raised. People who have worked for me from home are at least as productive as those who come into a workplace. Home working has the extra advantage of ensuring greater opportunities for disabled people, although, clearly, such opportunities should not be restricted to working from home.

A fourth benefit is improved recruitment. Firms felt that offering family-friendly practices can attract recruits, and assist them in making comparative judgments of job offers. That underlines the point about it being a prospective employee's market, in which an individual can choose between firms.

The fifth benefit is improved morale and commitment, because people can regard traditional working practices as restrictive. Various approaches can be taken in the public and private sector: innovative work organisation, examples of which are in the Government's document; employee development; leave provision, about which I have spoken; employee back-up support; and, importantly, encouraging take-up. We need a workplace culture in which taking advantage of family-friendly policies is not seen as a cop-out, but as something to be positively encouraged.

The importance of a good work-life balance is, and continues to be, important for women. I am grateful to Cherie Booth QC for her speech on the "allerednic" syndrome, which is Cinderella in reverse. I heard the speech at an event organised by the Fawcett Society in commemoration of a woman's suffrage anniversary. In that syndrome, the princess marries the prince and becomes the scullery maid. The analogy is with a woman who is able to progress in her career and become a high earner and high achiever as a single woman, but who subsequently marries and has children. She then finds no way to continue with her former role or status because of the lack of opportunities in her chosen field to take the necessary time off to maintain a family and work life to the degree that she would like. Some women who have such difficulties never achieve their former high earning potential. Having been the highest earner when they became married, they never catch up with the earnings and status of the man in the relationship. I am not saying that earnings and work status are everything, but it is wrong to discriminate against a group of people who have to take time off at least to bear children, if not to look after those children in the early parts of their lives.

I think that Cherie Booth said—I scribbled it down during her speech—that the introduction of parental leave as a bridge between returning to work and nurturing one's family would be an important step in ensuring that the "allerednic" sydrome is not allowed to take off. I hope that the Prime Minister's household is not split on the matter. Unless the Government change their policy on paid parental leave, however, I fear that such a split will exist.

I want to refer to one area of the public sector where there are still major problems. This is an example from my own experience in the health service. It is a Government responsibility, which cannot be achieved through partnership with the private sector, however laudable. I want the Minister to reflect on the situation that I am about to describe and to reply to me at a later date with some ideas for solutions, as it is not reasonable to expect her to have the prescription now.

Clearly we are aware of the issues facing nurses. In no way do I denigrate those, and I acknowledge the Government's words and the fact that proposals are being made to ensure family-friendly practices for nurses. Another important group of health service workers, though not necessarily the most important, is doctors, particularly, doctors in training. About a third of a million pounds is needed to train a doctor, and it would be a terrible financial loss to the public sector, if not a personal tragedy, if we wasted doctors by not allowing those, particularly junior doctors, who want to

[Dr. Harris]

have families to train flexibly and appropriately. The NHS has been behind the times in this respect, and continues to be behind the times.

When I first began as a medical student and junior doctor, which was not long ago, the flexible training scheme, as it is now known, was called the married women's part-time scheme. I need not explain how the grossly misplaced assumptions arising from the name of the scheme can put many people off seeking to train part-time. However, I should stress what flexible training as a junior doctor means for men and women who wish to combine their training with having a family.

Does the Minister know that flexible trainees in the medical work force are expected to work 40 hours, which is not part time in any sense? They are expected to do around five sessions between the hours of 9 am and 5 pm and then do half the on-call work of other doctors. The standard rate is 72 hours and around 32 hours on call—16 hours on top of about 24 a week. Those extra hours are paid at half rate, so this is compulsory overtime in unfriendly hours—weekends and evenings—at half-rate pay of about £4 an hour, which is less than one would have to pay for child care. Therefore, doctors seeking to train flexibly, who have to do the on-call commitment, are forced to be net losers from employment.

I know that the Government are in protracted—extremely protracted—negotiations with junior doctors about out-of-hours pay and I do not expect the Minister to pre-empt that, although I should like her to, but I want to draw her attention to other problems faced by doctors who wish to train flexibly, most of whom are women.

The first is the lack of child care in the NHS. Clearly it would be sensible if all resident doctors who needed it—this also applies to resident nurses—had on-site affordable child care, so that people do not lose out from working in the health service. Hon. Members will agree that we desperately need to retain people in the system.

The fact that one has to offer well-founded reasons for seeking to train flexibly is a great deterrent, particularly to men with family commitments, who feel that they will not be given permission to train flexibly and will therefore spend even longer in the training grade than those working full time. There have been cases where people who wished to work flexibly have been turned down, although there would be no obvious disadvantage to the health service if they were allowed to do so.

There is an automatic assumption that if one works less than full time, one's training will have to be extended *pro rata*. In other words, if a person wishes to work half time, instead of training for five years, he is expected to train for 10 years, regardless of the level of competence reached in the time or whether the ratio of training to service in part-time work is higher, as it should be, than for full-timers. The blame for that cannot be placed exclusively at this Government's door or even, as the health service tends say, at the previous Government's door, because European Community rules state that training must increase *pro rata* for those working less than full time. If we are to achieve work-life balance in the health service, that issue must be tackled.

Finally, the issue applies to older people. I know older people in the health service who cannot function at 4 am, but otherwise work well as, for example, breast surgeons. They have a choice either to give up work altogether or work full time, including on-call time. That is unreasonable. Will the Minister examine the matter with the Department of Health in a joined-up way and make specific proposals on non-pay issues? Otherwise, we shall be in danger of losing valuable resources. Our debate has been useful and I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.6 pm

Ms Hodge: With your leave, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall reply to the debate. This is my second debate in Westminster Hall, and it is a joy to have an informed and intelligent debate. The open exchange of views and ideas is preferable to being entrenched in political banter, which is the style on the Floor of the House.

I shall respond briefly to the matters raised in the debate. I offer apologies if I do not cover everything but, in the interests of work-life balance, I shall keep my response short. The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) spoke about the culture change that we are attempting to achieve by our campaign. The Government will act in partnership with others. As my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) mentioned, a committee will support our work and a comprehensive range of initiatives will be undertaken, the key to which is the employers alliance.

The hon. Member for Meriden made a number of points about child care. We shall deliver child care places for a million children. This week, I received quarterly figures on the progress of the national child care strategy. The figures are always way behind, but those for the first three quarters of last year show that more than 107,000 new places were created, greatly exceeding the annual target of 82,000. In the first 18 months of the strategy, we have created three times as many child care places as the previous Government achieved in 18 years.

Mrs. Spelman: So that I am clear about the pledge, will the Minister confirm that it is for a million new places in four years, of which eighteen months have elapsed? The women's unit document certainly states that. If that is correct, the figures that the Minister just gave are not quite on target.

Ms Hodge: The pledge offers places for a million children: many children will not require a full-time place. This issue also relates to parents. As we have discussed, 40 per cent. of women working with children are part-timers, so will require part-time places.

Contrary to what the hon. Lady said, there is an expansion of places. We accept that there is a reconfiguration of available places, and are anxious to encourage child minders to provide child care. That is especially important in relation to provision for children up to the age of three, where there is currently a big gap. We are taking steps to recruit many more child minders.

Playgroups are closing. However, the Government have taken positive steps to support pre-schools that wish to remain open. Under the present Government,

more money has gone into the pre-school sector than under any previous Government. Resources are generous: we have provided a two-year grant of £500,000 for places for three and four-year-olds and money to the Pre-School Learning Alliance. Much work has to be done to ensure that pre-schools meet the changing needs of parents and families. I am engaged in that work now with the Pre-School Learning Alliance.

Let me correct the hon. Member for Meriden. There is no way that any three-year-old will be in a reception class. The expansion of provision for three-year-olds will take place in appropriate settings with appropriate adult-child ratios. It is interesting that 80 per cent. of the places created in the first phase of expansion have been in the private and voluntary sector. I must also tell the hon. Lady that this is all about choice—not about valuing work outside the home more than work inside it. It is about recognising the changing patterns of our world, in which 70 per cent. of mothers are now in the labour market. We must ensure that they have proper choices to enable them to balance their work and their life. Part of that choice is the provision of high-quality child care.

I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney for his contribution. Shirley Conran is certainly making a forceful contribution to the work of the advisory committee. Both my hon. Friends the Member for Putney and for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) raised the issue of small and medium-sized enterprises. We are conscious that we have a great deal to do in that sector. The research to which the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) referred dealt specifically with small and medium-sized enterprises. It showed that there are some examples of good practice in that sector.

In my view—as yet untested, but we shall undertake the necessary research—many SMEs have good flexible work-life practices to meet the needs of the employee and the job, they just do not call it that: they do not formalise it, and it may not be offered to all employees within the organisation. It is operated more formally by bigger firms. We need to capture the good practice that undoubtedly exists within the SME sector, spread it and support it in attempting to do more. The Government and the employers alliance are conscious of how important that is,

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney also asked whether those who care for the elderly were sufficiently represented on the advisory committee. I intentionally kept it small, so it can be a good working committee that can genuinely brainstorm new ideas in this new area of public policy. We have one representative for the elderly, but there is a range of initiatives. I have worked closely with my colleagues in the Department of Health on this, and I should like to draw my hon. Friend's attention to awards for caring about carers, which my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Hutton) has conferred in the past week or two.

Some hon. Members referred to the Government putting their own house in order. Ironically, the Department for Education and Employment launched its own "right balance" campaign today, and it will be examining work-life issues. The document that we produced today refers to some Departments, such as the Lord Chancellor's Department, that are not traditionally viewed as being at the forefront of public policy developments.

The Lord Chancellor's Department has three senior civil service posts that are filled by job sharers. One has been job shared since 1988 and the pair head up a policy division that advises the Lord Chancellor on reforming the justice system in respect of families, children and divorce. Their last job dealt with the appointment of senior judiciary—I ought to declare an interest—and Queen's Counsel. Another pair of job sharers head the personnel management division and are responsible for human resource strategy. We are beginning to make progress in that area, and I know that Baroness Jay, with her new responsibilities across Government, is determined to advance it further.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) asked why we use the term "work-life". We discussed that extensively. We no longer use the term "family-friendly"—though some hon. Members have used it in our debate—because it tends to make most people think about women and children, and we wanted to extend the parameters beyond that. We thought about "work-home", but many people work at home, such as those with flexible working practices, given the development of information and communication technologies. We ended up with the term "work-life" because it embraced the concept more fully. It meant that we could respond to the needs of carers as well as parents and everyone who wants a life. I should like to pay a warm tribute to the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford did during her time as Minister for Women in furthering this agenda. I like to think that I am building on the firm foundations that she established when she held that office.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon said that we should look across all sectors at those organisations and businesses that do not have a tradition of progress in this area. We have commissioned a broad-based study to give us that information from all sectors and all sizes of business, so that we can consider what measures we can undertake to pursue that agenda. She talked, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), about flexibility being traditionally associated with insecurity.

We need to recapture the term "flexibility". It should not be associated, as it has been in the past, with insecurity but with a sensible range of working practices that enable people to manage their lives and get the most they can out of life. Part of the campaign must be to recapture that term and refocus it in a much more positive way. The story that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford told about the individual who had to care for her mother and was thinking about giving up work when all she needed was a car parking space was poignant and true; I come across such stories every day in my work. We are not talking about big expenditure—often we are not talking about any expenditure. We are talking about a lot of imagination and basic common sense. If imagination and common sense can inform thinking in this area we will be able to make enormous progress to the benefit of both business and the community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud mentioned volunteering. I have responsibility for that as well. One of the reasons that we are pursuing the policy is to

[Ms Hodge]

encourage people to give to their communities. That is why we are trying to take the focus away from parenting. Another document that hon. Members will not have seen was launched today by the employers alliance. It gives an example from Prudential plc of a woman called Rosy Harris—the head of the independent financial advice service centre—who for the past seven years has worked flexible hours to enable her to balance work and other commitments—not only bringing up her family but, until recently, working in a voluntary and fund-raising capacity as deputy chairman for an NHS hospital. That is another good example of the sort of flexibility that we are trying to encourage so that people can volunteer within their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud talked about work-poor and income-poor families. The number of holiday play schemes that we are encouraging is growing, and we have introduced a new accreditation of such schemes. Indeed, at the annual conference of Kids Club Network this morning, I was able to announce the first three organisations to be accredited by the Secretary of State to accredit those holiday play schemes that cater for children in the eight-to-14 age group. Kids Club Network received that accreditation, which means that parents who use those facilities are eligible for child care tax credit. We therefore hope that those schemes will be available even for low-income families.

I should like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) who throughout her time as a Member of Parliament, and before—she helped me when we were in opposition—has worked hard on all these issues. I completely agree with her that this debate is not just about employment policies, but about family-friendly services. There is a convergence of interests on which we need to build, and that is what we are doing. I also agree that we need to engage businesses more positively in the national child care strategy. My hon. Friend will be interested to know that I have met employers several times recently to find out what further steps we can take to bring them into the strategy. I will attend another brainstorming session next week with a group of more progressive employers to discover what issues they want us to raise.

My hon. Friend raised some interesting issues that we need to consider, such as shift parenting. I am talking to colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about how we can work together to ensure that child care is considered not only in managing railway stations but in granting planning approvals, which will release some potential.

I have recently spoken to child care providers. A growing number of employers pay for back-up care, so an instant response is provided if children become sick, thus enabling employees to stay in work. The issues that my hon. Friend raised about school buildings are close to my heart, as she knows. School buildings are a central resource in our communities. We want to raise educational standards and ensure that those resources are used in the best way possible.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon said that such issues involves men. Most of those at the breakfast held this morning with my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education were men, which was deliberate. Company chief executives attended the breakfast, and they have now signed up to thinking about work-life balance. That is an important step forward in ensuring that they lead the cultural change that we desire. Incidentally, I apologise to those hon. members who have not seen the document.The timing of the launch in the Prime Minister's diary took place long ago, but the date of the debate was determined only a few days ago.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon referred to presenteeism. The document contains several cartoons, which is probably a first for a Government publication. There are two Dot cartoons. I am sure that hon. Members are familiar with Dot cartoons; they are good fun. A further cartoon shows a boss talking to an employee: the employee asks the boss, "I finished all my work. Can I go home early?" to which the boss replies, "No. You're an 'exempt' employee. That means you're exempt from having a life." The employee then says, "I guess I could clutch an unimportant document and shuffle around in quiet desperation", to which the boss replies, "That's the spirit!" We want to change that culture in partnership with business, trade unions and employees because we believe that business, individuals, families and society will benefit from better work-life balance.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-three minutes past Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 28 February 2000

NORTHERN IRELAND

Rathgael School

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many of the board at Rathgael School are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110451]

Mr. Ingram: There are five board members, all of whom are men.

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of staff at Rathgael School have taken time off work as a result of stress-related illness in the last 10 years; how many have done so on more than one occasion; and how many of those staff who have taken time off on more than one occasion have sued the Juvenile Justice Board at Rathgael. [110449]

Mr. Ingram: 52 staff have taken time off for stress-related illness in the last 10 years. 23 have taken time off on more than one occasion. None has sued the Juvenile Justice Board.

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to appoint a new Board at Rathgael School; and for what reason it has not yet been appointed. [110452]

Mr. Ingram: Steps to appoint a new Board at Rathgael will not begin until the outcome of the Criminal Justice Review is known.

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who is responsible for the arrangements for appointing a new board at Rathgael School. [110453]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is responsible for these appointments.

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of staff at Rathgael School went on sick leave as a result of assault by children at the school; and how many days were lost each year as a result of such assaults in the last 10 years. [110448]

Mr. Ingram: Over the past 10 years, 290 members of staff at Rathgael Juvenile Justice Centre went on sick leave following an assault by children. The information regarding the number of days lost each year as a result of such assaults in the last 10 years is not available.

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many teachers, social workers, casual staff and night supervisors have been assaulted by children at Rathgael School in the past 10 years. [110447]

Mr. Ingram: The information is as follows:

Teachers: 34
Social Workers: 217
Casual Staff: 26
Night Supervisors: 13

Rev. Ian Paisley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many civil servants there are on the board at Rathgael School; and what are their *(a)* grades and *(b)* religious affiliations. [110450]

Mr. Ingram: There are five civil servants on the Board at Rathgael. Their grades and religious affiliations are as follows:

(a) One grade A, three grade B1's, one grade B2

(b) Three Protestants and two Roman Catholics.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Solicitor-General what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111611]

The Solicitor-General: In the Crown Prosecution Service, 100 per cent. of paper and documents procured and specified for use by the CPS are recycled. It is assessed that 80–85 per cent. of waste paper, documents and card is presently collected for recycling.

The use of recycled paper in the Treasury Solicitor's Department and Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers is not quantified, but staff are encouraged in both departments to use electronic media where possible, to save paper by double sided printing and to place used paper in bins for recycling.

The Serious Fraud Office does not currently use recycled paper for its documentation, because of problems experienced in trials to date. It does seek to maximise the recycling of waste paper, but cannot quantify its use of recycled paper as a percentage of total paper used. It is anticipated that the amount of paper consumed within the department will be reduced with the developing use of electronic media for the transfer of cases to the Crown court. Two cases have been successfully transferred in this way so far, and, principally through the implementation of the DOCMAN project, it is hoped to build on these numbers.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

A3 (Hindhead)

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the roads-based A3 Hindhead study will report; what is the cost of the project; what plans he has to include a local planning conference as part of the study; when he plans to visit Hindhead; and if he will make a statement. [110200]

Mr. Hill: The A3 Hindhead study is expected to report in autumn 2000. The Regional Planning Body will advise the Secretary of State on the way forward in the light of

the study's conclusions and recommendations. The cost of the bored tunnel solution was estimated at the time of the Roads Review as being £110 million. Sufficient funds have been put aside from the Highway Agency's budget to cover the cost of the current study. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans to include a local planning conference as part of the study process. However, the study is to be undertaken in an open and inclusive manner ensuring that the voice of the local community and other interests are heard. My right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport met the right hon. Member on 13 September, when they discussed all the principal issues associated with the problems on the A3 at Hindhead. He undertook to visit the area when his diary permitted.

Pollution (Yeovil)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what monitoring of key pollution indicators takes place at sites within the Yeovil constituency; and if he will make a statement. [110804]

Mr. Meacher: My Department published a set of indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the UK last December[1]. In that report, almost all of the environmental indicators are presented at a national level and there are only a few which are based on site information. One of these is the water quality headline indicator of rivers of good or fair quality (H12) which is derived from measurements at thousands of river quality monitoring sites across the UK. The location and quality of water at sites in the Yeovil area can be found in the "What's in your backyard" section of the Environment Agency's website *http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk*.

This section also shows the location and emission details of sites which are regulated by the Environment Agency under the integrated pollution control regime. Data on emissions for these sites and large combustion plants are used in the compilation of the indicator of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides emissions (P3). The National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory can be found at the following web address, which is funded by my Department. The address is:
http://www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual

The headline air quality indicator of days of moderate or higher air pollution (H10) and the indicator of concentrations of selected air pollutants (P1) are based on data from air quality monitoring sites, but there are no pollution monitoring sites funded by my Department within the Yeovil constituency. Monitoring does take place in the wider region of South-West England and further information can be located under the "Frequently Asked Questions" section at the following web site address funded by my Department. The address is: *http://www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual*

Part IV of the Environment Act 1995 requires local authorities to review and assess the current and likely future air quality in their areas. Where a local authority considers that one or more of the air quality objectives, as prescribed in regulations, is unlikely to be met by the required date, it must declare an air quality management area, covering the area where the problem is expected. It must then draw up an action plan setting out the measures it intends to take in pursuit of the air quality objectives in the area. The Secretary of State has reserve powers to require local authorities to take action where they are failing to make sufficient progress.

The Yeovil constituency is covered by South Somerset District Council, who are working with three other authorities, Mendip, Taunton Deane and West Somerset, on a joint air quality review and assessment in their areas. They submitted a Stage 1 report to the Department for consultation in February 1999. South Somerset have indicated that the area of Yeovil has been identified as having potentially significant sources of nitrogen oxides and this will be investigated further in their Stage 2 report, which they are currently working on.

[1] Quality of life counts: indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom, DETR, 1999, ISBN 1 85112 3431

Public Transport (Rural Areas)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to encourage people in rural areas to use public transport; [110776]

(2) what plans he has to improve access to bus services in rural areas. [110777]

Mr. Hill: The Government are committed to improving bus services in rural areas. The 1998 Budget provided an additional £50 million a year for three years for rural public transport in the UK as a whole. This was increased by £10 million a year for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 in the 1999 Budget.

In England, the majority of this funding, £32.5 million per year, is being allocated to local authorities through the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant. Over 1,800 new and enhanced bus services were supported in the first year. We have also given support to 104 innovative rural transport schemes, totalling some £28 million, from the Rural Bus Challenge competitions. There will be at least one further Challenge competition.

Rural areas also receive assistance for public transport, including modes others than bus, through two schemes administered by the Countryside Agency. The Rural Transport Partnership scheme provides support for partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors to develop and implement transport strategies for rural areas. The Rural Transport Development Fund encourages the provision of innovative solutions to local transport needs in rural areas, meeting the start-up costs of new services and providing revenue support to services in danger of being lost.

The Transport Bill now before Parliament contains a range of measures to ensure that public transport plays its full part in an integrated transport policy, in town and country alike.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110687]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Information on ethnic origin in the Civil Service is collected on the basis of self-declaration and on the understanding that it will be treated on a confidential basis. To protect the privacy of individual members of staff we do not disclose data relating to fewer than five people.

My Department has fewer than five people in the senior civil service who have declared themselves to be of ethnic minority background.

Road Accidents

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department collects information by postcode on the location of road accidents involving pedestrians. [111065]

Mr. Hill: The locations of injury accidents involving pedestrians are recorded by Ordnance Survey grid reference and are not analysed nationally by postcode.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) of 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 523W, on London Underground, if he will list the principal causes of the failures of rolling stock, indicating the number of failures in each category. [111593]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for London Underground. To provide the principal causes of the failures of rolling stock, indicating the number of failures in each category would incur disproportionate cost.

Thames Water

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the steps taken by Thames Water to prevent leaks, with particular reference to the timescale for changing all lead pipes in street areas *(a)* in Leyton and Wanstead and *(b)* elsewhere in London, including those from mains to house stop-cocks; if he will indicate for each London constituency the amount of such piping which is deemed to need changing; how much Thames Water (i) has spent on this in each of the last five years and (ii) it is committed to spend in the next five years; and if he will break down (i) and (ii) by (1) Leyton and Wanstead and (2) other London constituencies; what incentives Thames Water provides to home owners to change old pipes; and if he will make a statement. [111273]

Mr. Mullin: The new Drinking Water Directive (98/83/EC) tightens the standard for lead in drinking water from its current 50µg/l to 25µg/l by 25 December 2003 and to 10µg/l by 25 December 2013. Where action is necessary to meet these standards, water companies will first treat water to reduce its ability to dissolve lead from pipes, or will optimise that treatment where it is already in place. Replacement of company lead pipes will be needed where water treatment fails to achieve the standards—mainly in soft-water areas. This will become fully apparent only after optimised treatment has been in place for some months. Water companies have no responsibilities for the pipework within the property boundary, which will remain the responsibility of property owners.

Thames Water has met targets for leakage reduction for 1997–98 and 1998–99, reducing leakage over that period by 29 per cent. Under targets set by the Director General of Water Services, this should be reduced by a further 24 per cent. by March 2001.

Information about spending on leakage and lead pipe replacement is not publicly available, and would need to be requested from Thames Water. However, in Ofwat's publication, "1998–1999 Financial Performance and Expenditure of the water companies in England and Wales", Table 26 states that a total of 86,850 communication pipes were replaced by Thames between 1990–91 and 1998–99.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111598]

Ms Beverley Hughes: About 99 per cent. of all printing procured through my Department's Print Procurement Unit is on recycled paper, containing at least 75 per cent. post consumer waste. Use of recycled paper by staff generally reached 50 per cent. in 1998–99. Recycling schemes now cover 80 per cent. of staff. Further action is planned to increase the use of recycled paper and to promote improvements in recycling paper and other items.

Rail Connections (Electrification)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the *(a)* advantages and *(b)* disadvantages of electrifying the North Wales mainline; [111429]

(2) what assessment he has made of the *(a)* advantages and *(b)* disadvantages of completely electrifying the main rail connection between London and Dublin via Holyhead. [111430]

Mr. Hill: The possibility of electrifying the North Wales line was investigated as part of the plans for the West Coast Main Line upgrade and it was considered that the expense of doing so could not be justified by the current or potential rail traffic over this line. Railtrack are committed to work which will increase the line speed considerably and some of this work has already been carried out. Both First North Western and Virgin Trains, who are the main operators over this route, are in the process of introducing new rolling stock, with tilting technology in the case of the Virgin Trains, and this will enable the line speed to be raised to between 90 and 100 mph over many sections.

Aircraft Altitude (Heathrow Approach)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the minimum permitted altitude of aircraft approaching Heathrow from the west *(a)* 5, *(b)* 10, *(c)* 15 and *(d)* 20 miles from Heathrow. [111260]

Mr. Mullin: The requirements for aircraft approaching Heathrow Airport to land are specified in the Aeronautical Information Publication (AIP).

Aircraft approaching Heathrow to land from the west are individually directed by air traffic controllers at West Drayton, and for noise mitigation purposes may not descend below an altitude of 2,500 feet before being established on the Instrument Landing System (ILS) localiser, which corresponds to the extended runway centreline. The ILS also includes a radio signal describing a 3° final approach descent gradient (or glidepath) along the extended runway centreline. The ILS glidepath reaches an altitude of 2,500 feet at approximately 7½ nautical miles (nm) from touchdown. At night (between 2300–0700 local time) aircraft are required to intercept the extended runway centreline no closer than 10 nm from touchdown (approximately 3,000 feet). In general, the altitude of an aircraft on final approach to Heathrow would be ca. 6,000 feet at 20 nm out, ca. 4,500 feet at 15 nm out, and ca. 1,500 feet at 5 nm out.

Precautionary Principle

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on the application of the precautionary principle included in Article 174 of the EC treaty and principle 15 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on the environment and development. [111426]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's policy on application of the precautionary principle is based on the Rio Declaration, and is set out in Chapter 4 of the Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK, "A better quality of life" (page 23), a copy of which can be found in the Library of the House.

A better quality of life specifies the precautionary principle as one of the 10 guiding principles and approaches that the Government will take account of in policy development. Based on the Rio Declaration definition, the Government's definition makes it clear that precautionary action requires assessment of the costs and benefits of action, and transparency in decision making. It also sees precaution as being relevant beyond environmental damage, to include affects on animal and human health.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to empower local authorities to have recourse to the precautionary principle in Article 174 of the EC treaty when assessing planning applications from telecommunications companies to erect mobile phone masts within highly populated areas. [111425]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Article 174 of the EC treaty applies only in respect of policy-making at the EU level, and not to policy-making by individual member states.

Housing

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the Housing Green Paper. [111661]

Mr. Mullin: We will publish a Housing Green Paper this year aimed at ensuring everyone has the opportunity of a decent home. The Green Paper will be fully consultative and we hope as many people as possible will take the opportunity to let us know what they think of our proposals on the future of housing in the 21st century.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proportion of heads of non-pensioner households in *(a)* social housing and *(b)* private rented housing were not in paid work in each region in (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1997–98 and (iii) 1998–99. [111517]

Mr. Mullin: The following table provides the available estimates from the Labour Force Survey of the percentage by region of heads of household who were below pensionable age and not in paid work.

Heads of households of non-pensionable age who were not in paid work[1]

Percentage

Region	*1996–97*		*1997–98*		*1998–99*	
	Social rented	*Private rented*	*Social rented*	*Private rented*	*Social rented*	*Private rented*
North East	66	n/a	64	[2]51	63	n/a
North West (including Merseyside)	66	47	64	47	64	48
Yorks and Humber	58	40	60	41	57	40
East Midlands	58	42	58	33	57	34
East Midlands	61	37	56	31	55	33
East	53	35	49	27	45	27
London	63	40	59	36	56	36
South East	48	34	51	27	49	25
South West	55	34	53	30	53	30
England	60	39	58	35	56	34

[1] Estimates from the Labour Force Survey Spring and Autumn Quarters. The figures are subject to sampling variability.

[2] Three years data have been combined to give reliable estimates for the private rented sector in the North East to overcome sample size limitation. Thus an average for 1996, 1997, and 1998 is shown under 1997. This calculation is not possible for 1996–97.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the anticipated liability is of the Highways Agency with respect to blight and compulsory purchase of property, associated with the proposed Birmingham Northern Relief Road; and what the basis is for that calculation. [111690]

Mr. Hill: The Highways Agency is responsible for the purchase of land under blight and compulsory purchase provisions, and it retains the ownership of all land and properties needed for the BNRR scheme. All the costs that the Highways Agency so incurs will be fully reimbursed by the concessionaire, Midland Expressway Limited.

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide an itemised estimate of the cost to the public purse of widening the M42 section of the proposed Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [111691]

Mr. Hill: A previous estimate for the Department's share of the reconstruction costs for widening the M42 near Water Orton was £20 million. That was a preliminary estimate at an early stage in the design process, and it has since been revised. A fixed sum of £18 million has now been agreed with MEL.

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the annual liability is of *(a)* the Highways Agency and *(b)* other Government departments to the private sector, including Midland Expressway, for any delays in the construction of the Birmingham Northern Relief Road and associated work caused by the Highways Agency or other Government departments; and what is the basis of such calculations. [111676]

Mr. Hill: There are no such liabilities.

M25

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the cost of resurfacing the M25 between junctions 8 and 10 in porous asphalt. [111815]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Crispin Blunt, dated 28 February 2000:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent question about the estimated cost of resurfacing the M25 between junctions 8 and 10 in porous asphalt.

We estimate that it would cost in the region of £14m to resurface this section of road using porous asphalt. This estimate excludes a 3 ½km section in the Leatherhead/Ashtead area at junction 9, which is already surfaced with porous asphalt.

Funding Inequalities (Education)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with Education Ministers with respect to inequalities in the levels of funding per pupil between different local education authorities across the country; and if he will make a statement. [111971]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend has had a number of discussions with Education Ministers on a range of issues relating to the financing of education. The distribution of grant is the subject of a review, announced in our White Paper, "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People". We expect to publish a consultation paper in the summer.

Heavy Goods Transport

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the level of heavy goods transport on the roads. [112319]

Mr. Hill: The latest available figures are for 1998 when heavy goods vehicles travelled 32 billion vehicle kilometres in Great Britain, accounting for 7 per cent. of all motor traffic. During the same period, 152 billion tonne-kilometres of freight were moved, and 1,630 million tonnes of freight were lifted, by heavy goods vehicles.

Serco

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the number, *(b)* the length of contracts, *(c)* the details of the service involved and *(d)* the location of contracts entered into by his Department with Serco. [111784]

Mr. Hill: The Department has no contracts with Serco.

I understand from Railtrack that the main contracts, past, present and anticipated, between Railtrack and Serco are as in the following table:

Title	*Scope*	*End date*
National Weedspray Services	Weed spray of the national rail network	Ended
Major Station Cleaning Contract	Cleaning of 14 major stations	April-June 2000
Rail Property Maintenance RT99	Maintenance of property in the north of England and in parts of Wales	July 2000
On-Track Infrastructure Monitoring Services	Operation of several instrumental train combinations running across the national network collecting data on the rail infrastructure	April 2001
Infrastructure Maintenance Contract	Maintenance of Railtrack's infrastructure in the east Midlands	Award imminent from 1 April 2000 for 5 years

Eurostar

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultations he intends to hold, and with which interested parties, on the consultants report into the viability of Eurostar Services north of London. [111808]

Mr. Hill: None. The consultants consulted widely with local and regional authorities and groups. It is for the British Railways Board now to consider the report as part of its review of its plan for international through services.

Non-domestic Rates (Consultation)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will abolish the requirement on local authorities to hold annual local consultation meetings with business rates payers; [111794]

(2) what assessment he has made of the usefulness of the compulsory annual local consultation meetings between local authorities and business rates payers regarding national non-domestic rates. [111793]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We will be considering the future of the consultation duty under the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as we develop proposals on the local authority-business partnership arrangements that will be required before local authorities can raise a supplementary local rate. Policy on this was set out in the 1998 White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People". We shall be consulting further on the details before introducing the necessary legislation.

In considering the future of the existing duty, we will also be taking account of the findings of the research into the duty published by the Department of Environment "Local Partnerships—A Research Review of Local Authorities' Statutory Duties to Consult with Business" (1997). In addition, we will also be making use of research commissioned by this Department, which is to be published shortly, about business perceptions of local government and local government involvement with the business community.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will institute regular consultations between his Department, local authorities and business rates payers regarding national non-domestic rates. [111795]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We hold meetings periodically with representative business organisations, at which the Local Government Association is represented, to discuss matters of concern to ratepayers.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions chaired a meeting on 7 September to discuss how to handle the effects of the non-domestic rate revaluation this April. The review group, which we established last month to consider how the revaluation system can be improved, includes representatives from the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Local Government Association, as well as officials from this and other Departments, the National Assembly for Wales and the Valuation Office Agency. There are also regular ad hoc contacts at official level.

This system of consultation works well, and we intend to continue with it.

West Sussex Coastal Strip

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the economic status of the West Sussex coastal strip. [112088]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Public Examination of the Draft RPG, held last year by an independent Panel, considered representations and evidence from a range of organisations and individuals. It included discussion specifically about the economic situation along the Sussex Coast.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what grounds the West Sussex coastal strip is no longer to be accorded priority status for special economic support. [112252]

Ms Beverley Hughes: SERPLAN (the London and South-East Regional Planning Conference) proposed a number of Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration in Draft Regional Planning Guidance for the South-East (Draft RPG9). The strategy and proposals in Draft RPG9 were the subject of a Public Examination last year. The independent Panel who held that Public Examination recommended that a more targeted area of the Sussex coastal area be identified as a Priority Area for Economic Regeneration. The Secretary of State is considering both SERPLAN's proposal and the recommendation of the Panel and will shortly be publishing "Proposed Changes to Draft RPG" for public consultation.

Virgin Trains

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compatibility between the condition of carriage arrangements employed by Virgin Trains in respect of loss or damage resulting from delays, and the customer service requirements placed on Virgin Trains under their franchise or by the Rail Regulator; and if he will ask the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority to examine this matter. [112016]

Mr. Hill: The National Conditions of Carriage, overseen by the Rail Regulator, govern all rail journeys regardless of the train operator involved. In addition, train operators are required by their franchise agreements to publish a Passenger's Charter, which provides compensation for passengers whose journeys are delayed for reasons within the control of the industry. The arrangements for compensation must be no less favourable than they were under British Rail.

Uniform Business Rate

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the increases in *(a)* cash and *(b)* real terms in the uniform business rate income (i) from and (ii) that is given to (1) each local authority in England and (2) in England as a whole for the years (x) 1997–98 to 1998–99, (y) 1998–99 to 1999–2000 and (z) 1999–2000 to 2000–01. [111926]

Ms Armstrong: I have placed the information in the Library. The tables contain information in respect of the amount given to authorities for all years listed in the question. Information on amounts paid in by authorities is so far available only up to 1999–2000.

Council Tax

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the estimated council tax increase for each local authority in England in 2000–01. [111925]

Ms Armstrong: It is for local authorities to set their own council taxes. I have made no estimates of increases.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 710W, what percentage of the compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when use of peat compost will be phased out on his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [111950]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department does not keep central records on the use of peat or organic wastes within its buildings or gardens. However, as I indicated in my answer on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 710W, the Department's Greening Operations Policy statement applies to all parts of the Department including its Executive Agencies and Government Offices for which DETR has property management responsibility. I can confirm that peat use has already been phased out within the three headquarters buildings.

Local Deprivation

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the local authorities designated or part designated for *(a)* Objective 1 and *(b)* Objective 2 status, indicating how each of them ranks on the Index of Local Deprivation. [111791]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Erica Oil Spill

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will implement the recommendations in the Friends of the Earth report on the Erica oil spill relating to transportation of maritime cargoes; [111922]

(2) if he will review Government policies on the transportation of maritime cargoes to take account of the Erica oil spill of 12 December; and if he will make a statement; [111921]

(3) if he will discuss with other EU member states changes to strengthen MARPOL regulations by including stricter regulations for older vessels, and regulation of flags of convenience; and if he will make a statement. [111924]

Mr. Hill: Transport of maritime cargoes is an internationally regulated business and accordingly my Department is already in discussion with counterparts in the relevant international and European organisations to determine a practical programme for enhanced protection against maritime pollution. The Friends of the Earth report on the Erika oil spill is being taken into account in that consideration, as is the potential benefit of improved collective enforcement of the MARPOL Convention and other relevant regulations. The case for additional international regulations is also being assessed by the Government and neighbouring administrations.

Rural Bus Subsidy Grant

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to continue the rural bus subsidy grant beyond 2000–01. [112405]

Mr. Hill: The Rural Bus Subsidy Grant, which was first introduced in 1998–99, has been of significant benefit to people in rural areas. In its first year it provided for over 1,800 new or improved rural services. I am therefore very pleased to announce our decision to continue the grant for English local authorities for a further three years beyond the initial period which ends in March 2001. The grant will be continued at least at its current level.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 4 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 754W, on how many occasions since May 1997 he has notified research contractors in writing that their project has been identified as being sensitive as provided for in clause 15.3 of his Department's standard research contract, indicating the subject in each case. [111652]

Ms Quin: No central records of the use of such notifications are kept. However, given the nature of most of the Department's research, the numbers will have been very small. The standard contract does not give the Department powers to prevent public statements by contractors unless such a statement would jeopardise the commercial exploitation of intellectual property. As is made clear in clause 15.5, the purpose of clause 15.3 is to ensure that the Minister has prior knowledge of a statement being made on a potentially sensitive matter relating to research which he is funding.

Extract from Standard MAFF Research Contract

15. Publication and disclosure

15.1 Subject to the provisions of conditions 15.3, 15.4 and 15.6, the Contractor shall endeavour to make information about, and results from the Project generally available, and may do so provided he acknowledges in any public statement the financial support of the Minister and of the Co-funders.

15.2 Subject to condition, 6.5, the Minister shall have the right to disclose, copy or otherwise distribute to the public or use in any way any information arising out of the Project or comprised in any work relating to the Project, as he sees fit.

15.3 Where the Project, or any matter related to it, has been identified as being sensitive by:

15.3.1 the Contractor or the Co-funders, or

15.3.2 the Minister, as notified in writing to the Contractor or the Co-funders, the contractor or the Co-funders shall give written notice to be received by the Minister at least 10 working days before any planned public statement or other disclosure relating to the Project, providing details of the information proposed to be disclosed, the reason, and the medium of disclosure.

15.4 The Contractor or Co-funders shall notify the Minster immediately if approached by the media about the Project. The Contractor or Co-funders shall notify the Minister immediately if approached by anyone about a matter related to the Project which is considered sensitive by the Contractor or Co-funders in accordance with condition 15.3.

15.5 For the avoidance of doubt, the notifications required by conditions 15.3 and 15.4 are for the purposes of informing the Minister or the Contractor or Co-funders (as the case may be) and are not designed to interfere with the issue of any public statement.

15.6 Where the carrying out of the Project results in, or materially contributes to the creation of Intellectual Property which the Contractor or the Minister considers may be suitable for commercial exploitation, no disclosure of information may be made by the Contractor or the Co-funders which would jeopardise such exploitation.

Fur Farms

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many fur farms are licensed; if he will list their locations by county; and if he will make a statement. [111014]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* As at 16 February 2000, there were the following mink farms in England:

County	*Number of licensed mink farms*
Cornwall	1
Dorset	1
Hampshire	1
Isle of Wight	1
Lancashire	5
Northumberland	1
South Yorkshire	1
Staffordshire	1
West Yorkshire	1
Total	13

As you know, the Government introduced a Bill on 22 November to fulfil its pre-election pledge to prohibit fur farming. The Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill will prohibit in England and Wales the keeping of animals solely or primarily for slaughter for the value of their fur. I understand that the Scottish Executive will be introducing their own legislation to ban fur farming in Scotland.

Meetings

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to meet individual hon. Members to discuss farming issues within the next two months. [111298]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* I discuss farming issues with many hon. Members on a variety of occasions.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is on accepting requests to meet *(a)* privy councillors and *(b)* other hon. Members to discuss farming issues. [111297]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* I have discussed farming issues with many right hon. and hon. Members on a variety of occasions.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many individual hon. Members *(a)* have requested a meeting with him to discuss farming issues, *(b)* he has refused to meet to discuss farming issues and *(c)* he has held meetings with to discuss farming issues, since his appointment. [111296]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 28 January 2000]:* I, and other MAFF Ministers, accommodate many requests from hon. Members to discuss farming issues.

GM Crops

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress the United Kingdom Register of Organic Foods Standards has made with re-examining UK standards relating to contact with genetically-modified crops, with special reference to *(a)* insect pollination and *(b)* bee-keeping. [109323]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Neither European Community legislation nor the standards approved by the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS) allow the use of genetically modified material in the production of organic food. No standards have been set in relation to the adventitious presence of such material, although EU legislation provides a procedure for a maximum limit to be determined.

UKROFS has established a working group to consider how best to reflect in UK standards the provisions of the EU regulation on the presence of GM material in organic produce. It is also participating in discussions between the organic and GM sectors under the chairmanship of MAFF officials with a view to identifying practical means of protecting the interests of both. These discussions are addressing questions relating to the separation of GM and organic crops and are taking account of research on cross-pollination by insects and bees.

Correspondence

Mr. Beith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to reply to the letter of 20 December from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, concerning problems his constituent has had with an IAACS/MAFF inspector. [111131]

Ms Quin: I replied to the letter from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tween on 21 February.

Diversification

Dan Norris: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to support farmers who wish to diversify within farming. [111270]

Mr. Morley: The England Rural Development Plan describes how Government intend to use the European Community co-funded measures in the Rural Development Regulation to support farmers wishing to diversify within farming. Of the £1.6 billion seven-year programme, £152 million will fund a new Rural Enterprise Scheme to encourage diversification; £44 million will fund a new

Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme to encourage innovation and achieve added value for primary produce, and £22 million will go towards providing targeted training to support these and other schemes in the Plan.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111612]

Mr. Morley: *(a)* Current estimates are that around 10 per cent. of documentation used by the Ministry is made from recycled paper. Procurement staff and environmental managers are looking to increase this percentage substantially subject to performance, cost and supply availability considerations. The Ministry's Greening Operations Strategy includes objectives to use recycled paper comprising genuine post-consumer waste.

(b) This information is not recorded. The Ministry's approach to waste management is set out in its Greening Operations Strategy and is based on the three "Rs", with "Recovery" (ie recycling, composting and energy recovery) following "Reduce" and "Re-use" as the preferred options for reducing waste sent to landfill. Schemes to recover waste paper are in place at over 95 per cent. of the Ministry's (including its Executive Agencies') key sites (those where there are over 50 staff) covering approximately 95 per cent. of staff.

Subsidies (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the cost of subsidy payments to farmers for organic conversion in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire in each year since their inception; and if he will make a statement. [111411]

Ms Quin: Information at lower than county level is available only at disproportionate cost. At a county level, I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 201W.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers received subsidy payments in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire in each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [111442]

Ms Quin: Information at below county level is available only at disproportionate cost. Information is held by agricultural holding. The number of holdings receiving subsidies in Shropshire is as follows:

Year	*Numbers*
1992	681
1993	3,089
1994	3,595
1995	3,473
1996	3,551
1997	3,459
1998	3,413

The low figure for 1992 reflects the fact that the only subsidy available in that year was Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance.

Marine Animal Bycatch

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what are the Government's plans for monitoring marine mammal bycatch in United Kingdom fisheries in *(a)* 2000–01, *(b)* 2001–02 and *(c)* 2002–2003; [110967]

(2) how many dedicated observers were employed by the Government to monitor the incidental take of marine animals in UK fisheries in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; what (1) sectors and (2) percentage of UK fisheries this monitoring covered; and how much was spent on such observer programmes in the last year for which figures are available. [110966]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* My Department has agreed to fund the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) to place observers at sea for 300 days in each of the years 2000–01 and 2001–02. They will be monitoring cetacean bycatch in the South western and Irish Sea set net fisheries and in pelagic trawl fisheries.

Details of the observers assigned to the specific monitoring of cetacean bycatch in the years quoted are included in the following table:

	1997	*1998*	*1999*
Number of observers	6	4	[1]2
Days at sea in gill net fleet	356	375	104
Percentage of fishery covered	1.7	[2]2	[2]0.6
Days at sea in pelagic trawl fleet	0	0	30
Percentage of fishery covered	—	—	[2]0.5

[1] Two more observers are working the Cornish Hake fishery on an EC funded project. MAFF funding supports the management of the project
[2] Estimate

SMRU's total budget for the monitoring work funded by MAFF in the three-year period between 1997 and 2000 was £275,398.

Farms (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the dominant farm type for each parish in Shrewsbury and Atcham; and if he will make a statement. [111072]

Ms Quin: The information requested is provided in the following table:

Parish	*Dominant farm type (predominant farming activity in the parish)*
Acton Burnell CP	General cropping
Alderbury with Cardeston CP	Dairy
All Stretton CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Astley CP	Cereals and other
Atcham CP	General cropping
Bayston Hill CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Berrington CP	General cropping
Bicton CP	Dairy
Buildwas CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Cardington CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Church Preen CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Church Pulverbatch CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Condover CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Cound CP	General cropping
Cressage CP	General cropping and cattle and sheep (lowland)
Ford CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)

Parish	*Dominant farm type (predominant farming activity in the parish)*
Frodesley CP	Dairy
Great Hanwood CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Great Ness CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Harley CP	Cereals
Hughley CP	[1]—
Kenley CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland) and mixed
Leebotwood CP	Dairy
Leighton and Eaton Constantine CP	Dairy
Little Ness CP	Other
Longden CP	[1]—
Longnor CP	Dairy
Minsterley CP	Dairy
Montford CP	Dairy
Pimhill CP	Dairy
Pitchford CP	Cereals
Pontesbury CP	Dairy
Ruckley and Langley CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Sheinton CP	Dairy
Shrewsbury CP	Other
Smethcott CP	Dairy
Uffington CP	Dairy
Upton Magna CP	General cropping
Westbury CP	Dairy
Withington CP	Dairy
Wollaston CP	Cattle and sheep (lowland)
Woolstaston CP	Cattle and sheep (LFA)
Wroxeter and Uppington CP	General cropping

[1] Suppressed to prevent discourse of information about individual holdings

Note:

This data relates to main holdings only ie minor holdings excluded

Source:

June 1998 Agricultural and Horticultural Census

The table indicates the farm type with the most main holdings in each parish. Further information on the farm types is available from "The Digest of Agricultural Census Statistics 1993".

Broiler Chickens

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to encourage the broiler chicken industry to give a higher priority to selective breeding of broiler chickens so as to reduce leg disorders, strengthen legs and increase walking ability. [110771]

Mr. Morley: Breeding companies select for a wide range of traits and I am aware of no evidence to suggest that leg strength is not accorded sufficient priority. However, since the Farming Animal Welfare Council reported on broiler welfare in 1992 we have taken a range of measures to address leg weakness, including an extensive research programme and improved training for veterinarians conducting welfare inspections. The industry itself is conducting a survey of leg health, the results of which it is reporting to the Farm Animal Welfare Council.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [110730]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry has had a policy since 1993 to substitute the use of peat with suitable alternative organic wastes such as compost, manure, leaf mould, bark chippings or coir. Advice on how to replace or minimise the use of peat has been circulated to all MAFF sites. The policy was updated in June 1999 and applies to all sites where the Ministry is responsible for grounds maintenance, including those of its Executive Agencies. We will be using the Green Ministers' Biodiversity Checklist (which encourages the use of peat substitutes and which is due to be published early in March) to raise awareness and to reinforce further our policy. The Ministry has specification clauses included in its contracts covering this issue.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110681]

Mr. Morley: One member of the senior civil service (SCS) in MAFF has declared himself to be from an ethnic minority background. Two MAFF staff who have declared themselves to be of ethnic minority background are currently on secondment to SCS posts in other Government Departments. Both are men.

Water Quality

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the recent representations he has received regarding EU regulations to control nitrate in *(a)* surface water and *(b)* ground water in the UK. [110536]

Mr. Morley: This Department has received two recent representations from industry organisations about general implementation of the EU Nitrate Directive as part of the Review of Regulatory Burdens on Agriculture.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent meetings he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss *(a)* the economic state of the agriculture industry, *(b)* the high value of the pound sterling and *(c)* supermarket prices. [110532]

Mr. Nick Brown: I am in regular contact with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Meat Industry

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received on the cost burden that faces the UK meat industry in comparison with other EU countries; and if he will make a statement. [110534]

Ms Quin: A large number of representations has been received from Members of Parliament, industry organisations, individual meat plant operators, farmers, consumers and others about the cost burden facing the UK meat industry in comparison with that in other member states.

The Government have, on a number of occasions, made clear to the European Commission its concerns over the lack of transparency in the charging arrangements applied in other member states and its doubts as to whether such charges are being set on a common basis throughout the European Union, in accordance with Community Law.

We have passed to the Commission copies of both our own survey of meat inspection charges in other member states and the Meat and Livestock Commission's report on meat inspection charges and other enforcement costs. These have been published and copies are available in the Library of the House. My right hon. Friend the Minister and officials continue to press the Commission to carry out a thorough investigation of the way in which the EU Charges Directive has been implemented in all member states and to establish the level of inspection charges in each country.

At the same time, the Government do recognise the difficulties faced by the industry and has acted on the concerns of the meat industry over the impact of increased inspection costs. As the hon. Member will know from my right hon. Friend the Minister's announcement on 20 September 1999, charges for Specified Risk Material controls will now not be imposed before 2002–03 at the earliest. In addition, on 1 December 1999, he announced that Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) hygiene inspection charges for the whole of 1999–2000 were to be held at the level fixed for 1998–99. This will result in a saving to the meat industry of some £7 million in charges in 1999–2000. We also gave a commitment that the rates of MHS hygiene inspection charges in 2000–01 will not rise by more than the rate of inflation above the levels charged in 1999–2000. These measures represent a considerable cost saving for plant operators.

The cost burden faced by the industry was one of the main issues considered by the Meat Industry Red Tape Working Group, whose report was published on 13 December 1999. Of its 35 recommendations, 32 have been accepted, or are under further consideration, including the establishment of a small task force to explore all the issues surrounding a "capping" approach to charging. This is being pursued urgently.

Paper and Timber Products

Mr. Reed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to ensure that paper and timber products purchased by his Department come from a sustainable source. [110147]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry's Greening Operations Strategy, which was updated and re-published in June 1999, has among its key aims to conserve resources and minimise waste by reducing the use of materials from non-renewable resources and to ensure that any products derived from nature, such as paper and timber, are derived from sustainable resources and comply with EU and international trading agreements such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

To help meet these aims the Strategy includes objectives to use recycled paper comprising genuine post-consumer waste and to ensure that any virgin pulp used in its manufacture comes from sustainably managed woodlands. It also, for example, requires the introduction of procedures to ensure as far as possible that timber and timber products come from sustainable resources by requiring documented proof or, if available, independent valuation under an internationally recognised certification or ecolabelling scheme.

As part of continuing efforts to raise awareness and promote best practice across Government the Ministry is represented on inter-departmental groups concerned with the procurement of timber and paper and, in addition, is a member of The Sustainable Office Forum which is a cross-industry group interested in improving ogranisations' environmental performance through consideration of issues in forestry papermaking, recycling and printing.

Remploy

Mr. Caton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what Remploy products his Department has purchased in the last three years. [109940]

Mr. Morley: In the last three years, the Ministry has purchased office furniture, packaging, packing and filing materials to an approximate value of £154,310 (excluding VAT) from Remploy.

Agricultural Development Scheme

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the Agricultural Development Scheme. [109794]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith) on 2 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 640–42W.

Austria (Bilateral Meetings)

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many bilateral meetings were held between his Department and its Austrian counterpart in each of the last five years; and what was discussed at each meeting since May 1997. [109873]

Ms Quin: In addition to the contacts that have taken place in the regular Agriculture Council meetings, five Ministerial bilateral meetings have been held with our Austrian counterparts during the period 1995–99. The dates of these and the subjects discussed at the meetings held since May 1997, are shown in the table.

Date	*Subjects discussed*
24 November 1999	EU enlargement Rural development BSE
11 September 1998	Agenda 2000/CAP reform Agrimonetary proposals Animal welfare Date-based export scheme Energy crops Fishery control regulations

Date	Subjects discussed
20 July 1998	Agenda 2000/CAP reform Agrimonetary reform Animal welfare Date-based export scheme Wine Organic farming Forestry protection EU-wide SRM controls
19 November 1997	Agenda 2000/CAP reform Preparation for UK presidency Banana regime BSE Chocolate directive Energy crops Fisheries
12 June 1996	—
Nil in 1995	—

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those previously planned meetings, and their subject, between his Department and its Austrian counterpart which have been cancelled since the formation of the new Austrian Government. [109898]

Ms Quin: We are no longer proceeding with plans for an Anglo-Austrian seminar on rural development for applicant member states under the auspices of Technical Assistance Information Exchange (TAIEX), as a follow-up to an earlier Anglo-Austrian seminar in November 1999.

Animal Slaughter

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has made to *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* the French Government about the slaughter of animals as part of the annual Eid-el-Kebir festival in France; and what was the (i) date and (ii) nature of these representations. [109745]

Mr. Nick Brown: I wrote to Commissioner Byrne on 9 February 2000 expressing the concerns of many British people at the outdoor slaughter of sheep in France during Eid-el-Kebir, and urging him to take steps to secure compliance with the laws of the European Union relating to this and other animal welfare concerns.

Gardening Leave

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many officials in his Department are currently on gardening leave. [108424]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 3 February 2000]:* One staff member, an Administrative Assistant, is currently absent on full pay awaiting a medical assessment.

Chicken Imports (Thailand)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many chickens were imported from Thailand in each of the past three years; what assessment he has made of the quality of the feed given to such chickens; what health problems have arisen from consumption of Thai chicken products; and if he will make a statement. [108110]

Ms Quin: UK imports of chicken from Thailand in 1997 to 1998 and in January to November 1999 were as follows:

	Tonnes[1]	*£ million*
1997		
Carcase meat	3,784	7.6
Preparations	2,131	6.4
Total	5,915	13.9
1998		
Carcase meat	7,216	11.1
Preparations	6,760	17.2
Total	13,976	28.3
1999[2]		
Carcase meat	9,767	14.1
Preparations	9,724	24.0
Total	19,491	38.1

[1] Product weight
[2] January-November
Source:
HM Customs and Excise

No live chicken imports into the UK from Thailand were recorded during this period.

Responsibility for approving countries from which poultry meat may be imported into the European Community, and for collecting information on practices within those countries to aid decisions on approval, rests with the European Commission. In deciding whether to approve countries, the Commission must, in particular, take account of information on the state of health of the livestock, other domestic animals and wildlife; the provision of information on incidence of certain diseases; the country's rules on disease prevention and control and how these are organised and implemented; the structure of the veterinary services; and legislation on the use, authorisation, distribution and marketing of substances which might be administered to livestock. The quality of feedstuffs used is not a specific consideration.

Thai chicken products have not been directly implicated in outbreaks of foodborne illness reported to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (CDSC) of the Public Health Laboratory Service. Should it be evident that any animal product from any country of origin will pose a serious threat to human or animal health, safeguard action can be taken in accordance with EU veterinary rules.

Pig Industry (EU Aid)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he proposes to meet European Commissioner Franz Fischler to discuss the issue of aid being provided to pig farmers to assist with the additional welfare costs imposed on the industry. [111154]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Minister has many discussions with Commissioner Fischler on all manner of topics. The

Minister and I discussed state aids in the pig sector with Mr. Fischler in the margins of the Agriculture Council on Monday, 24 January. The Minister, and Mr. Fischler held further discussions in the margins of the NFU AGM on Tuesday, 1 February. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on 1 February, any investment by Government must be linked to long-term change in the structure of the industry. It must also be part of an agreed overall strategy; to this end, my officials are in touch with the National Pig Association and others. Further communication with the European Commission will follow the outcome of these discussions.

Farmer Suicides

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what initiatives are being pursued *(a)* to reduce suicides among farmers and *(b)* to investigate the stress levels of farmers. [110531]

Ms Quin: A MAFF official has been seconded to work for two years as Deputy Director of the Rural Stress Information Network, an authoritative source of information and advice on initiatives to combat rural stress.

Staff working at or for MAFF's Regional Service Centres have received guidance to ensure that where their work brings them into contact with distressed farmers they know how to deal with the situation and instigate any follow up. Free business advice is also made available to distressed farmers referred to MAFF by the Samaritans or social services.

The Department of Health has funded research in this area, the results of which were published in a report in 1998 called "Suicide and Stress in Farmers" available in the Library of the House.

Livestock Imports (BSE and TB)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on how many cases in each of the last two years of *(a)* BSE-infected material and *(b)* TB-infected material have been discovered to be in livestock imported into this country; and if he will list the country of origin for each case. [107380]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 31 January 2000]:* In the last two years, there have been two cases of BSE in imported livestock. One was an animal imported from France in 1994 and the other an animal imported from the Netherlands in 1996. Because of their long stay in the UK, it is not possible to determine whether the animals became infected before or after importation.

With respect to TB, in 1998, 10 cattle imported into Great Britain from Ireland were disclosed as reactors to the tuberculin test at a 60-day post-import check test. The figure for 1999 is seven, all from Ireland.

Beef on the Bone

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the names of those representatives of his Department present at the meeting at which the reintroduction of the ban on the sale of beef on the bone was discussed, details of which were confirmed in a leaked internal Welsh Assembly document. [107237]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 27 January 2000]:* The Government do not comment on leaked documents nor on internal policy discussions.

Live Animal Exports

Dr. Brand: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the regulations for inspection of live animals destined for export, enabling the Ministry to nominate which local veterinary inspector should examine a particular consignment, as announced in 1997, will be brought into effect. [102599]

Mr. Morley: We are in discussion with the Scottish and Welsh Administrations about the implications of carrying forward the proposals of which these changes form part, in the light of the views expressed in response to our public consultation exercise last year.

Peat

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his Department's policy is on the purchase and use of peat for its own operations and activities; and what performance targets his Department has set to reduce current peat use. [103011]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry's policy on all slow renewables such as peat is to substitute them with suitable organic wastes such as compost, manure, leaf mould, bark chippings or coir. This policy is included in MAFF's Greening Operations Strategy, which was updated and reissued in June 1999.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102373]

Ms Quin: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

DEFENCE

Property Management Market Test

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the outcome was of the British Army (Germany) Property Management Market Test. [112047]

Mr. Spellar: Following rigorous competition, Garrison Works Alliance (GWA) is to be awarded a contract to provide elements of Property Management for the British Army in Germany over the next five years. Garrison Works Alliance is an in-house organisation with commercial management support from Laing Management.

RAF

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to enhance the participation of the Air Training Corps in the recruitment process of the Royal Air Force. [112134]

Mr. Spellar: None. Although we are pleased that members of the Air Training Corps (ATC) often go on to become high quality recruits for the RAF, the ATC is a national youth organisation, not a recruiting agency of the RAF.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent guidance he has issued to improve the relationship between air cadet organisations and the Royal Air Force. [112083]

Mr. Spellar: The Air Cadet Organisation and the Royal Air Force have long enjoyed a good relationship and continue to work closely together on a wide range of activities.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on how the Air Training Corps contributes to the recruitment process of the Royal Air Force. [111875]

Mr. Spellar: Although the Air Training Corps (ATC) is not a recruiting agency, it is an important source of high quality recruits for the RAF. 16.1 per cent. of the overall intake during Financial Year 1998–99 were ex-air cadets, as the table shows.

1998–99	*Entry into RAF*	*Actual Ex-ATC and CCF(RAF)*	*Percentage Ex-ATC and CCF(RAF)*
Officers	533	252	47.3
Airmen aircrew	84	34	40.5
Ground airmen	3,682	407	11.0
Total	4,299	693	16.1

Departmental Staff

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what provisions are made available to (i) departmental staff and (ii) employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department, for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contract, *(l)* child care allowances, *(m)* careers' leave and *(n)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [108847]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given her by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 519–22W.

The following provisions exist for Departmental staff and staff working in executive agencies of the Ministry of Defence:

(a) Maternity Leave

18 weeks for all women in accordance with the Maternity and Parental Leave Etc. Regulations 1999. Those with at least one year's established service may have a further period of unpaid leave up to an overall total of 52 weeks.

(b) Maternity Pay

Women who have completed 26 weeks service by the 15th week before the expected date of confinement qualify for statutory maternity pay for 18 weeks. Women who have at least one year's established service will in addition qualify for occupational maternity pay which guarantees them full pay for the 18 weeks.

(c) Paternity Leave

Five days special paid leave at or about the time of their baby's birth. All staff qualify except casual staff.

(d) Parental Leave

13 weeks unpaid leave for each parent after one year's service and for each child born or adopted on or after 15 December 1999, in accordance with the maternity and Parental Leave Etc. Regulations 1999.

(e) Flexible Working Hours

Flexible Working Hours schemes are operated widely, and their use is encouraged. There are no specific eligibility requirements save that there should be no adverse effect on the efficiency of the Department.

(f) Part-time work

This is encouraged, subject to the needs of the particular post. There are no specific eligibility requirements.

(g) Job-sharing

This is encouraged, subject to the needs of the particular post. There are no specific eligibility requirements although job share partners would need to be compatible given the nature of this working arrangement.

(h) Leave to care for sick children

Special leave, either paid or unpaid, may be granted for the care of sick children in accordance with the Employment Relations Act 1999 (right to time-off for dependants).

(i) Home-working

Home-working is available as an alternative working pattern subject to the needs of the organisation, the equipment required, security implications and health and safety.

(j) Term-time contracts

This is encouraged, subject to the needs of the particular post. There are no specific eligibility requirements.

(k) Annual hours contract

These are available where irregular hours are a key feature of the post.

(l) Child care allowances

No formal child care "allowances" are currently provided. Financial support is given through subsidised workplace nursery places and places in holiday playschemes.

(m) Career Break Scheme

Career breaks may be offered for a period of up to five years. Applicants must have a good work and attendance record.

(n) Career Leave

Up to three years special unpaid leave is available to pursue a course of study of benefit to the MOD and the future career of the officer concerned.

Collaborative Programme (USA)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those items of military equipment which are part of a collaborative programme with the USA. [109857]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

BEST COPY

Letter from John Howe to Mr. Christopher Gill, dated 28 February 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about those items of military equipment which are part of a collaborative programme with the USA. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The list of military equipment which are part of a collaborative programme with the USA is shown below.

Collaborative Defence Projects	*Nations Involved*
Sea Gnat Decoy	United Kingdom, United States, Denmark
M483A1 Artillery Shell	United Kingdom, Netherlands, Turkey, United States
Multiple Launch Rocket System Phase I	United Kingdom, United States, France, Germany, Italy
Harrier AV8b/GR5/7	United Kingdom, United States
Joint Striker Fighter-Concept Demonstration Phase	United Kingdom, United States
Multifunctional Electronically Scanned Radar (MESAR) 2 Technology Demonstrator Programme	United Kingdom, United States
Joint Tactical Information Distribution System	United Kingdom, United States
Directed Infra Red Countermeasures	United Kingdom, United States
NAVSTAR Global Positioning System (GPS)	United Kingdom, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, United States
NATO Improved Link Eleven	United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, United States
Intercooled Recuperated Gas Turbine Engine (WR21)	United Kingdom, France, United States
Co-operative Outboard Logistics Update	United Kingdom, United States
Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System	United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, United States
Universal MODEM for Satellite Communications	United Kingdom, United States
Surface Ship Torpedo Defence	United Kingdom, United States
Future Tank Main Armament	United Kingdom, France, Germany, United States
Future Ground Based Air Defence	United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Turkey, United States
Lightweight Mobile Artillery System (LIMAWS)—Howitzer	United Kingdom, Italy, United States
Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment Requirement (TRACER)	United Kingdom, United States
CONDOR-Covert Night/Day Operation of Rotocraft	United Kingdom, United States
Chinnook Low Maintenance Rotor Head	United Kingdom, United States
Future projects under negotiation (subject to national approvals)	
Technology, Equipment and systems development for Environmentally Sound Ships and Naval Installations of the 21st Century	United Kingdom, France, Netherlands, United States
Programmable Integrated Ordnance Suite: Technology Demonstrator Programme	United Kingdom, United States
Laser Vibrometry: Technology Demonstrator Programme	United Kingdom, United States

TRACER

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the United Kingdom will continue with the development of the TRACER system if the United States ceases to participate; [110141]

(2) what contractual provision exists for compensation to be paid in respect of incremental costs incurred by the United Kingdom in the TRACER programme in the event of the United States' withdrawal from the programme; [110142]

(3) how much money the United Kingdom has *(a)* spent on and *(b)* committed to the development of the TRACER programme to date. [110143]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Howe to Mr. Quentin Davies, dated 28 February 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on the TRACER programme. These matters fall within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

On the question of contractual provisions in the event of US withdrawal from the programme, the collaborative arrangement with the United States on the TRACER programme is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Whilst the framework of the MoU allows for the programme to progress through to a Production Phase, neither the UK nor US Government has made any formal commitment beyond the current Project Definition phase. Accordingly, compensation would not be payable should either nation decide not to proceed beyond the current phase. However, as is normal for collaborative programmes, provisions have been made in the MoU which would allow the remaining nation to continue to the end of the current phase in the event that either partner withdraws prior to completion of it. Specifically the MoU requires that *'The terminating Participant will pay all Contract modification or termination costs that would not otherwise have been incurred but for the decision to terminate'.*

On the question of whether the United Kingdom will continue with the development of the TRACER system if the United States ceases to participate, I should confirm that the Project Definition phase, a phase to which the United States and the United Kingdom remain committed, is not due to finish until July 2002. At the end of the Project Definition phase, the programme will be formally reviewed, taking account of all relevant factors, before a decision on how the TRACER requirement might be pursued is made.

On the question of programme costs, UK expenditure to date on the TRACER programme is around £39M. We currently estimate the overall cost to the UK of the Project Definition phase to be £130M.

AVAILABLE

Weapons Contracts

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what criteria the Minister will decide between the BVRAAM European guided missile and the USA's AMRAAM; and if he will make a statement. [111012]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence gave him on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 554W.

A400M Programme

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will take into account the Airbus Industrie partners' track record of delivering military aircraft programmes in the assessment of the A400M proposal; [111339]

(2) what account has been taken of Airbus Industrie's track record of delivering aircraft *(a)* on time, *(b)* on specification and *(c)* to cost in the assessment of the A400M proposal; [111338]

(3) how many A400Ms would have to be ordered by his Department for a viable programme to be sustained. [111336]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Howe to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 28 February 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked if he will take into account the Airbus Industrie partners' track record of delivering military aircraft programmes in the assessment of the A400M proposal; what account has been taken of Airbus Industrie's track record of delivering aircraft on time, on specification and to cost in the assessment of the A400M proposal; and how many A400Ms would have to be ordered by his Department for a viable programme to be sustained. These matters fall within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

I can confirm that our assessment will take account of the track records both of Airbus Industrie itself, and, in the military sector, of the Airbus Industrie partners.

The viability of the A400 programme will depend on the offtake of several nations. We continue to discuss with our partners and Airbus Military the effect of the total offtake on visibility and costs.

Since there is a competition in being it would be inappropriate for me to go into detail at this time. We continue to aim to announce a decision on this programme in the early part of this year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact upon the United Kingdom's defence collaboration and wider strategic relations with other European partner nations should the A400M programme not proceed. [111337]

Dr. Moonie: In deciding how to meet our future air transport requirements, we will take into account a range of factors, among which will be any implications for our international defence relations.

Cancelled Exercises

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the exercises in 1999 involving *(a)* the Royal Navy, *(b)* the Army and *(c)* the RAF from which units or equipment were withdrawn in advance of the planned exercise, indicating in each case (i) the name of the exercise, (ii) the equipment or units withdrawn (iii) the estimated cost to his Department had the equipment or unit taken part, (iv) the actual cost after withdrawal and (v) the reason for withdrawal; and if he will make a statement. [111675]

Mr. Spellar: As the information requested is lengthy, copies have been placed in the Library.

Ammunition

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his oral answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 1231, what was the amount of ammunition provided to each of the armed services for training purposes in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1997–98. [111787]

Dr. Moonie: The overall provision levels of ammunition have remained constant. However, I am withholding specific information in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which relates to Defence, Security and International Relations.

Staff Targets and Requirements

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will publish the seventh annual edition of the compendium of current staff targets and staff requirements. [111969]

Dr. Moonie: Our aim is to publish the updated Compendium in April.

Indonesia (Arms Exports)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of arms exports from the UK to Indonesia in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998 and *(d)* 1999. [112328]

Dr. Moonie: The information for 1997 and 1998 has been published in the Strategic Export Controls Annual Report, copies of which are available in the Library of the House. Corresponding information for 1996 and 1999 is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Nancekuke

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 607W, (1) if he will release the document containing individuals' names and medical records taken from the Nancekuke study; [111699]

(2) what factors underlay the decision taken in 1999 not to release the individuals' names and medical records contained within the study concerning illness at Nancekuke. [111701]

Dr. Moonie: The document requested is being withheld under Exemption 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Privacy of an Individual).

The document containing information on individuals' names and details of their medical records for the study of sickness and absenteeism among employees at Nancekuke is held by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) who decided not to release it as disclosure would

breach those individuals' right to privacy. As required under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, due account was taken in reaching this decision of the nature of the information, the conditions under which it was supplied and the possible public interest in disclosure.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 554W, what estimate he has made of the cost of identifying all archived files relating to defence activities at Nancekuke. [111700]

Dr. Moonie: Files are stored in the Ministry of Defence archives in a variety of means, generally, by date of review and, within that, by branch. This method of storage ensures that a systematic review programme, consistent with the procedures recommended by the Public Record Office, is in place. On review, records are assessed on the basis of continuing administrative and potential historical value. Records falling into the latter category are transferred into the custody of the Public Record Office and generally become available to researchers after 30 years, in accordance with the provisions of the Public Records Act, 1958 and 1967.

The volume of files under 30-years-old, their method of storage and the absence of thematic and computerised indexes would mean that the information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Defence Capability

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the *(a)* objectives and *(b)* present work programme of the Defence Capability Initiative; and if consideration of theatre-wide missile defences forms part of that programme. [111356]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Defence Capabilities Initiative (DCI) aims to improve NATO's defence capabilities in order to ensure the effectiveness of multinational operations across the full spectrum of Alliance missions, with a special focus on improving interoperability among Alliance forces (and, where applicable, between Alliance and Partner forces).

The DCI addressed five key areas where NATO has identified shortfalls and deficiencies in force capabilities (deployability and mobility; sustainability and logistics; effective engagement; survivability of forces and infrastructure; and command and control).

The UK strongly supports the DCI. It reflects both the work that we undertook in the Strategic Defence Review and the emerging lessons learned from Kosovo. Successful implementation of the DCI will also assist the achievement of the European Headline Goal, agreed at Helsinki in December 1999. We welcome the progress that has been made so far, and look forward to further substantial capability improvements.

The DCI includes consideration of Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence. UK policy remains as set out in my answer to my hon. Friend on 9 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 594W.

Nuclear Test Veterans

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress there has been in the National Radiological Protection Board study on the incidence of multiple myeloma among UK nuclear test veterans. [111689]

Dr. Moonie: I am pleased to report that work on the study into the incidence of multiple myeloma in the nuclear test veteran population is under way. The first meeting of the independent Oversight Committee took place on 8 November 1999, at which matters such as methodology, scope and timetable were agreed. An observer from my Department and another from the British Nuclear Test Veterans' Association were present. It was originally intended that the study should examine only the incidence of multiple myeloma. However, the Oversight Committee has recommended that, as the information will be available, the scope of the study should be extended to cover other causes of death and other forms of cancer. My Department accepts this recommendation.

The National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) have begun to gather the necessary data from military and other national records and the data collection phase is expected to complete by the middle of this year. Thereafter, the data will be validated and analysed. The NRPB report will then be peer reviewed and the findings published early next year in a suitable scientific journal. This is slightly later than was first envisaged and is due essentially to the NRPB's existing commitments and the time taken to constitute the Oversight Committee.

Chinook Crash (Mull of Kintyre)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what conclusion investigators reached about the possibility of an unforeseen technical malfunction that would not have left any physical evidence as having occurred in the final flight of RAF Chinook ZD576 on 2 June 1994. [108759]

Mr. Spellar: The initial stage of the Board of Inquiry acknowledged that an unforeseen technical malfunction, which would not necessarily have left any physical evidence, was a possibility and could not be discounted. They concluded however that technical failure was unlikely to have been the direct cause of the accident, although they considered it possible that a technical malfunction or indication could have provided a distraction to the crew.

None the less, after careful consideration of all the available evidence the RAF Board of Inquiry concluded that the most probable cause of the accident was that the crew selected an inappropriate rate of climb to safely overfly the Mull of Kintyre, and the actions of the crew were thus held to be the direct cause of the crash.

Through-deck Carriers

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average annual cost is of maintaining and manning a through-deck carrier. [109861]

Mr. Spellar: The average cost of maintaining a through-deck carrier is currently assessed at some £17 million per annum. In addition the average cost of the ship's company is around a further £17 million per

annum, although such costs vary according to the phase of the ship's operating cycle. For example, while in refit the ship's company would reduce significantly, with the associated average annual manning cost reduced to some £2 to £3 million.

DERA

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 4 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 744W, on DERA, what assumptions have been made about the size of the credit to the defence budget. [109351]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* For strictly planning purposes we have assumed that a Public Private Partnership for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency will generate a credit to the Defence Budget; the actual size of any credit will ultimately depend on the PPP option chosen. No final decision on this has yet been made.

Departmental Functions (Food)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if all food served at his Department's official functions meets the standards of production required of domestic producers. [109769]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* Food served up for departmental functions comes from a variety of domestic and non-domestic sources. Food supplied to the Ministry of Defence must meet our quality standards and comply with relevant United Kingdom, European Community and other legislative requirements, including prescribed welfare standards, which govern home and imported products.

Defence Exports

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the costs and benefits of defence exports to the UK. [110319]

Dr. Moonie: The Government believe defence exports foster a healthy, technologically capable and competitive UK Defence Industry. Competition for defence contracts has helped to stimulate efficiency in UK firms to the benefit of our own defence needs while enhancing their ability to innovate and compete successfully in international markets. Defence exports can also contribute to international stability by strengthening bilateral and collective defence relationships. MOD officials are currently working, with independent academic support, on an assessment of the costs and benefits of defence exports to the UK for completion later this year.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many questions for written answer he replied to by means of a letter placed in the Library rather than by a substantive answer in the *Official Report* in session 1999–2000 to date; and if he will make a statement. [110638]

Dr. Moonie: As at 15 February 2000, my Department had received 465 questions for written answer in the current session. Of these, 15 were replied to by means of a letter placed in the Library of the House.

Contractors

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those defence contractors which have been *(a)* instructed not to submit invoices for defence equipment and supplies until after the end of the current financial year and *(b)* have been asked to accept that payment will not be made until then. [110553]

Dr. Moonie: No defence contractors have been instructed not to submit invoices until after the end of the current financial year. The MOD routinely enters into agreements with its suppliers to promote commercial relationships which benefit both parties. Details are commercially confidential between us and individual companies and are consequently being withheld under Exemption 7a2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Our arrangements are freely entered into by both sides.

Communications Equipment (Balkans)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the additional communications equipment supplied to army units in the Balkans is compatible with the BOWMAN specification. [110841]

Mr. Hoon: There are fundamental differences in the capabilities of the communications equipment being supplied off-the-shelf to army units in the Balkans and that being procured by the BOWMAN project.

The equipment being supplied to units in the Balkans will mostly be installed in fixed locations and will provide a wide area network in support of peacekeeping operations. BOWMAN has a much wider scope. It seeks to provide mobile, tactical, war-fighting communications, to a military specification, for use by all three Services. In order to be suitable for a hostile environment, the BOWMAN military communications system must be capable of operating without being dependent on a fixed, static infrastructure.

Cluster Bombs

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the figures provided by his Department for the number of BL755 cluster bombs used during Operation Allied Force include bombs *(a)* used during (i) training and (ii) trials and *(b)* dumped at sea following aborted missions; [111077]

(2) which types of aircraft operated by Her Majesty's Armed Forces used BL755 cluster bombs during Operation Allied Force. [111078]

Mr. Spellar: RBL755 cluster munitions, the medium altitude variant of the weapon, were used by RAF Harrier GR7 aircraft during Operation Allied Force. During the operation, (i) none was used for training, (ii) 12 were used in trials and (iii) none was jettisoned at sea following aborted missions.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111596]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. However, it has been the Ministry of Defence's policy to use recycled paper wherever it is practicable.

RAF Accidents

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the causes of the accidents involving *(a)* a Chinook HC2 in Oman in 1999, *(b)* an RAF Harrier GR7 in Coldstream in 1999, *(c)* an RAF Jaguar GR1 in Moray Firth in 1999 and *(d)* an RAF Tornado F3 in Torness in 1999; what steps have been taken since with regard to each case; and if he will make a statement. [111460]

Dr. Moonie: Each of these RAF aircraft accidents is the subject of an ongoing RAF Board of Inquiry. I am unable to comment at this stage about the cause of any of these accidents.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the level of the damage to *(a)* the Tornado F3 that crashed in Torness in 1999, *(b)* the RAF Jaguar GR1 which crashed in Moray Firth in 1999, *(c)* the RAF Harrier GR7 which crashed in Coldstream in 1999 and *(d)* the Chinook HC2 which crashed in Oman in 1999; what was the cost of the damage in each case; and if he will make a statement. [111461]

Dr. Moonie: In the first three of these accidents, the aircraft was destroyed beyond economic repair. The approximate cost of the aircraft involved was as follows:

(a) Tornado F3 that crashed near Torness power station: £25 million

(b) Jaguar GR1 that crashed in the Moray Firth: £10 million

(c) Harrier GR7 that crashed in Coldstream: £16 million

The Chinook HC2 that crashed in Oman is repairable, but the extent of the damage is still being surveyed.

Boarding School Allowance

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the boarding school allowance money the MOD spent in the independent sector in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and what proportion is forecast for 2000. [111140]

Mr. Spellar: The total cost of Boarding School Allowance (BSA) and the estimated amount of money spent by MOD on Independent Schools during the academic years 1996–97, 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is as follows:

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*[1]1999–2000*
Total cost of BSA	59.831	59.205	58.999	61.846
Estimate for STABIS Schools[2]	3.920	3.847	4.332	5.167
Estimate for Independent Schools	55.911	55.358	54.667	56.679
Percentage	93.45	93.50	92.66	91.65

[1] Average for the year based on Autumn Term only

[2] State maintained boarding schools

Equipment

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all legally binding agreements relating to the supply of defence equipment or services his Department has with foreign Governments. [111484]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* There is a range of Government to Government supply arrangements, as described in the Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls for 1998 (page 128). Sales agreements covering disposal to overseas governments of UK Services' surplus equipment are legally binding. Other Government to Government arrangements are set out in Memoranda of Understanding and Letters of Offer and Acceptance. While we treat the latter as binding on the Government, they are not legally binding agreements.

Trident

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action his Department plans to take following the ruling by Sheriff Margaret Gimblett on Trident in October 1999. [111520]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Lord Advocate has referred Sheriff Gimblett's judgment to the High Court of Judiciary for its determination. It would therefore clearly be inappropriate for the Government to comment on it at this stage. The United Kingdom's minimum nuclear deterrent is consistent with international law.

Low Flying Training

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review the Air Force's low flying training programme. [112304]

Dr. Moonie: Military low flying training is kept under continuous review.

WALES

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111608]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department operates a purchasing policy which gives full weight to environmental considerations in the procurement of all goods and services. The current paper contract provides paper that is at least 80 per cent. post consumer waste, produced using environmentally chlorine free pulp from sustainable forests.

Information is not held centrally on the percentage of recycled paper in documentation which was produced externally, but which is used by my Department.

My Department has a staff of 39, and a correspondingly small production of waste paper. We do not therefore keep formal records of waste recycled, but we recycle paper as a matter of routine.

Child Abusers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales on what date an urgent search was ordered in Wales for those people named in the Waterhouse report as being unsuitable to work with children. [111368]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The National Assembly for Wales e-mailed a letter dated 15 February to local authorities, health authorities and trusts in Wales on the morning of 16 February.

Traffic Flow (Shotwick)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions concerning the need for improved traffic flows at the Wales-England border at Shotwick; and if he will make a statement. [107421]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have made no such representations. I understand that the Highways Agency are carrying out a study of the A5117 Deeside Park Junctions, which includes the junction at Shotwick. Progress will continue to be monitored closely by the National Assembly for Wales.

Departmental Functions (Food)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if all food served at his Department's official functions meets the standards of production required of domestic producers. [109771]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* All food served at departmental official functions is provided by an external caterer registered on the list of approved Government hospitality suppliers, and obliged to meet all legal requirements and relevant regulations governing the procurement and preparation of food and related activities.

Central Government Expenditure

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the latest estimate of Government expenditure and revenue in Wales, updating the Welsh Office assessment of 1994–95 made in January 1997. [111615]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No update of the report "Government Expenditure and Revenue—Wales 1994–95", which was produced in January 1997, has been undertaken.

Objective 1 Funding

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many meetings he has attended in the past six months with the Prime Minister to discuss Objective 1 funding for Wales; and if he will make a statement. [111687]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I see the Prime Minister regularly to discuss a number of issues.

Advertising Budget

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the average cost of issuing a media release from his Department in 1999. [110268]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 16 February 2000]:* The average cost of sending out a press notice from my Department in 1999 was something in excess of £40 for each press release.

Health Authority Funding

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned, to assess the impact of amending the formula for funding health authorities in Wales since 1997. [110943]

Mr. Hanson: In February 1997, the Welsh Office set up the Resource Allocation Working Group (RAWG), comprising Welsh Office officials and NHS representatives. The purpose of the group was to evaluate the existing formula for allocating health resources and, if appropriate, recommend an alternative method.

The group took account of many factors and recommended that a modified version of the English Department of Health method should be used. This method took account of socio-economic variables.

Following this an analysis was undertaken to quantify the financial impact of applying the RAWG recommendations and it became apparent that it would exacerbate the financial problems faced in the NHS. At the same time the Department of Health announced a review of the English formula. In view of that, changes were postponed.

Since 1 July 1999, the responsibility for the allocation of health funding has become the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales, and I understand that they have recently decided to set up a technical group and a steering group to review the NHS revenue allocation formula.

Sub-post Offices

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the future of sub post offices in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [111796]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary and colleagues in Whitehall to discuss a range of issues that affect Wales. Postal services have not been devolved to the National Assembly for Wales and are matters for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. My officials have also had a number of discussions with their counterparts on the Government's proposals to move to an automated credit transfer system that will assure a safer, modern and efficient way of paying benefits, which is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

In addition, the Prime Minister announced on 21 October 1999 that the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) in the Cabinet Office is to carry out a study on the post office network which will seek to identify the contribution made by post offices to the viability of local communities. Close independent monitoring of the post office network will ensure that proposed closures which would create significant problems of access to post office counter

services, including in rural areas, are taken up with the Post Office, which will then be able to investigate how access needs can best be met.

Rateable Values

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of businesses in Wales that, as a result of the rates of revaluation which will take effect in April 2000, will *(a)* have an increase in their rateable value, *(b)* have a decrease in their rateable value and *(c)* will have no change in their rateable value. [112305]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Business rates revaluation in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 538W, for what reasons he has not placed a copy of the standard contract for research services in the Library. [111651]

Mr. Paul Murphy: A copy of the standard contract for research services, which for my Department are the same as for the National Assembly for Wales, has been placed in the Library of the House.

New Deal

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with his departmental colleagues and the First Secretary concerning the progress of the New Deal in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [109678]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions concerning New Deal with colleagues in central government and the Assembly. I am pleased to note that up to the end of November 1999 well over 17,000 people in Wales had secured jobs through New Deal and 4,941 employers in Wales had signed up to support New Deal.

Theatre in Education

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he will deposit in the Library the bids of *(a)* Theatre Iolo and *(b)* Gwent Theatre for the provision of theatre in education; and if he will make a statement. [105169]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* This is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Child Contact Court Orders

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many resident parents have disobeyed court orders for contact by non-resident parents with children; and what penalties were imposed for disobedience in the latest year for which statistics are available. [111918]

Jane Kennedy: We do not have information about how many residents have disobeyed court orders for contact by non-resident parents with children, or what penalties were imposed for disobeying orders. Failure to comply with a contact order can ultimately render a person liable to being fined or imprisoned for contempt. However, before imposing such a penalty the court would give careful consideration to the consequences for the child of imprisoning or fining the parent with care of that child.

Family Courts

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what plans he has to establish family courts in England and Wales; [111889]

(2) what recent representations he has received in favour of establishing family courts in England and Wales; [111890]

(3) what studies he has commissioned into the costs and benefits of establishing family courts in England and Wales. [111891]

Jane Kennedy: The Children Act 1989, which came into effect in October 1991, introduced a unified family court system in England and Wales including the Family Proceedings Courts (Magistrates' Courts), County Courts and the High Court. From the beginning of 1999 to date I have received one representation suggesting changes to this system. No studies have been commissioned into the costs and benefits of establishing another system of family courts in England and Wales. There are no current plans to change the set up of this unified system.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make it his policy to collate information on the number of cases in which judges have been asked to consider a public interest immunity certificate. [111677]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department currently has no plans to collate such information.

National Insurance Commissioners

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the cost of *(a)* reports and *(b)* publishing starred decisions of the National Insurance Commissioners (i) in loose leaf format, (ii) in bound format and (iii) on the Internet; and if he will make a statement. [111391]

Jane Kennedy: The publication of reported decisions is currently under review and the estimates of costs are not known.

(i) At present the Commissioner's office only publishes reported decisions in loose-leaf format. Not all starred decisions are reported. There are normally 100 starred decisions a year of which normally about 50 are reported. The DSS publish decisions in loose-leaf form and I am therefore unable to give an estimate concerning cost.

(ii) Reported decisions have not been kept in bound format since 1990. Until then bound volumes of reported decisions were published every two years but this was judged to be uneconomic. Improved arrangements for publication of reported decisions are currently being discussed with the DSS and commercial publishers.

(iii) At present the costs of publishing decisions on the Internet are borne internally from existing budgets by the Court Service Agency.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many official visits the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) has paid to the United States since his appointment as Parliamentary Secretary; what was the location of each visit; who he met; and what subjects were discussed. [110911]

Mr. Lock: I have made one visit to the United States of America since my appointment as Parliamentary Secretary, where I had the meetings set out in the following table. I also visited Winnipeg and Ottawa, and details of the meetings I held there are also set out in the table.

The purpose of my visit was to meet experienced practitioners in the USA and Canada to discuss the successful operation of criminal defence services, and the use of salaried defence advocates.

This forms part of the policy making process for the development of the Criminal Defence Service in England and Wales, the first stage of which will be implemented in October 2000. I will be consulting with professional bodies and other interested parties on the detail of our proposals in the coming months.

Location	*Subject*
Los Angeles	
Michael Judge, Public Defender Robert Kalunian, Assistant Public Defender Adolfo Lara, Assistant Public Defender Public Defender Office Management Board Penny Van Bogaert, Assistant Deputy Public Defender (Resources) Trial lawyers, Paralegals and Investigators from the Public Defender's Office	Setting up and running publicly funded criminal defence services, different models of public defence services, ensuring quality services for defendants, monitoring mechanisms, training and development of public defender lawyers and staff, attending court hearings
Portland, Oregon	
Ann Christian, Oregon State Judicial Department, Head of Indigent Defence Services James Hennings, Metropolitan Public Defender, Portland Ross Shepard, Lane County Public Defender Managers and Trial Lawyers, Multnomah County Defender Office Judge Frantz, Principal Criminal Judge, Portland Ron Williams, Attorney in charge of drug treatment programme, Metropolitan Public Defender's Office, Portland Group of Private Attorneys contracted to do public defence work	Setting up and running publicly funded criminal defence services, different models of public defence services, ensuring quality services for defendants, monitoring mechanisms, training and development of public defender lawyers and staff, attending court hearings, judicial views on service provided by public defence services
Seattle	
James Crane, Office of Public Defence, King County, Washington Robert Boruchowitz, Public Defender, King County Managers and Trial Lawyers, Office of Public Defence, King County Daniel Sattenberg, Chief of Staff, King County Prosecutor's Office Judges from King County Criminal Courts	Setting up and running publicly funded criminal defence services, different models of public defence services, ensuring quality services for defendants, monitoring mechanisms, training and development of public defender lawyers and staff, judicial views on service provided by public defence services
Winnipeg	
Gerry McNeilly, Executive Director, Legal Aid Manitoba Managers and Trial Attorneys, Legal Aid Manitoba Judge Judith Webster, senior criminal judge, Provincial Court Gord Mackintosh, Manitoba Minister of Justice and Attorney General	Setting up and running publicly funded criminal defence services, different models of public defence services, ensuring quality services for defendants, monitoring mechanisms, training and development of public defender lawyers and staff, judicial views on service provided by public defence services, operation of civil courts, Narey reforms, legal aid expenditure and control, public service agreements, policy co-ordination across Government
Ottawa	
Morris Rosenberg, Federal Deputy Minister of Justice Janice Charette, Senior Assistant Deputy Minister Officials from Department of Justice, from legal aid research division, judicial affairs division, research and statistics division Senator Gerald Beaudoin Mr. John Godfrey MP Elizabeth Mulholland, Senior Adviser, Prime Minister's Office Professor Errol Mendes, University of Ottawa	Setting up and running publicly funded criminal defence services, different models of public defence services, ensuring quality services for defendants, monitoring mechanisms, training and development of public defender lawyers and staff, implementation of the Human Rights Act, constitutional reform, judicial appointments policy, Law Commission, policy research projects

HOUSE OF COMMONS

HOC Commission Meetings

Angela Smith: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, when the Commission met in the last 12 months; when it next will meet; and if he will publish the minutes of the Commission's meetings. [112024]

Mr. Kirkwood: During the last 12 months, the Commission has met on:

1999

15 March
17 May
28 June
5 July
12 July
19 July
4 November
6 December
13 December

2000

21 February

The next meeting is on 6 March 2000. It is not the practice of the Commission to publish its Minutes, but it is considering ways of improving the distribution of information about relevant decisions to Members.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what provisions of the UN Convention on the non-navigational uses of trans-boundary waterways have implications for his consideration of ECGD support for the Ilisu dam. [111697]

Mr. Caborn: The provisions of the Convention as a whole are relevant to our consideration of ECGD support for the Ilisu dam. The UN Convention has yet to enter into force. However, the UK supports the principles of the Convention and intends to sign and ratify in due course. We encourage all countries to abide by the principles of the Convention, as we do.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in his consideration of projects seeking ECGD support, for what reasons he seeks the views of the Department for International Development; and if he will make a statement on this matter in connection with the Ilisu dam. [111696]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD seeks the views of DFID and other interested Whitehall Departments (including FCO, DTI and DETR) as appropriate when considering applications for export credits cover. This is in order to ensure consistency of policies, for example the White Paper on International Development makes it clear that the full range of the Government's policies affecting developing countries, including environment, trade, investment and agricultural policies should take account of its sustainable development objectives.

The consultation between ECGD and the Department for International Development (DFID) is carried out in a number of ways. DFID is a member of the Export Guarantees Committee and in this capacity sees high value applications for ECGD support in certain markets as a matter of course. DFID are also involved in assessing the productive expenditure implications of all applications for ECGD support for business in Heavily Indebted Poor Countries and countries who are eligible to borrow from the World Bank on International Development Association terms.

With regard to the Ilisu project, at the beginning of last year DFID provided advice on the environment and resettlement aspects of the project and how these concerns could be addressed. Since the commissioning of the studies on these issues, DFID's involvement has declined significantly, as Turkey is not one of their key development partners.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has asked the World bank for its assessment of the merits of the Ilisu dam. [111698]

Mr. Caborn: No. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not asked because at this point in time the World bank has not been asked for its opinion of the project by the Turkish authorities.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many employers have been reported by minimum wage inspectors for paying less than the national minimum wage in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the United Kingdom, broken down by size of firm. [111436]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The following data refer to all complaint cases passed to the network compliance teams by the minimum wage helpline for inspection and subsequently closed at the end of January 2000. Data on information where non-compliance was detected by minimum wage inspectors in the course of their targeted inspection visits will not be available until late March. I will write to my hon. Friend when that information becomes available.

Number of employees	*Scotland*	*United Kingdom*
1–10	58	692
11–100	71	635
100+	13	220
Total	142	1,547

Arms Brokering

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) in relation to the conduct of arms brokering from the United Kingdom, what research his Department has *(a)* carried out and *(b)* commissioned to ascertain (i) what countries are buying arms by such arrangements, (ii) how much business is transacted with each country and (iii) if the countries involved are on the UN embargo list; [111420]

(2) what the Government's policy is on controlling the conduct of arms brokering from the United Kingdom; [111432]

(3) what assessment the Government have made of the number of *(a)* UK nationals and *(b)* non-UK nationals who are involved in conducting arms brokering from the UK. [111418]

Dr. Howells: The Government already have powers to control trafficking and brokering under the United Nations Act 1946 where this is necessary to implement a binding UN Resolution. Additionally, under the European Communities Act 1972 the Government have the power to provide for enforcement of a Council Regulation prohibiting trafficking and brokering of specified goods, e.g. dual use goods where there is Community competence. However, competence to prohibit trafficking and brokering of arms or military equipment lies with the member states.

The Government's White Paper on Strategic Export Controls, published in July 1998 (Cm 3989), proposed new legislation to extend the Government's power to control trafficking and brokering in several areas, including with respect to the supply of military equipment and other controlled goods to destinations subject to any form of embargo and the supply of equipment the export from the UK of which has been banned because of evidence that goods of the same type have been used in torture.

The Government are reviewing the White Paper proposals in the light of comments received. In the course of this review, we are examining the information available from both public sources and internal Government sources

about trafficking and brokering activities conducted in the UK or by UK nationals abroad, and this is being taken into account in the review. The Government have not commissioned external research on this issue. We will announce proposals for new export control legislation in due course, following conclusion of the review of the White Paper proposals in the light of the responses received.

Shareholders

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to allow *(a)* Limited Liability Partnerships and *(b)* their (i) partners and (ii) shareholders to hold shares in companies to which they are supplying services. [111348]

Dr. Howells: Restrictions on the holding by a service provider of shares in a client company relate to the nature of the service rather than to the type of entity through which the service is delivered. In other words, the general rule would be that any such restrictions placed by statute or by a regulator on a company or a partnership would apply equally to a Limited Liability Partnership.

For example, the conditions applying to the appointment of auditors operating as LLPs will be governed by the Companies Act 1989 (which will be applied to LLPs by regulation) and by the byelaws and ethical guidelines of the appropriate supervisory body. These byelaws preclude an audit firm—and this would include LLPs—from reporting on any company in which it or any partner has a beneficial investment.

An LLP will not have shareholders.

British Coal Pensions

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list the *(a)* assets and *(b)* liabilities of the former British Coal Pension schemes; [111089]

(2) if he will list the number of former mineworkers aged *(a)* 40 to 50, *(b)* 50 to 60, *(c)* 60 to 70, *(d)* 70 to 80 and *(e)* over 80 years who are in receipt of pensions from the former British Coal Pension schemes. [111088]

Mrs. Liddell: These are matters for the Trustees of the coal pension schemes. I have asked them to write to my hon. Friend direct.

Supermarkets

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the Competition Commission's report on competition in the supermarket sector; and if he will make a statement. [111383]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 21 February that the deadline for the Competition Commission to complete its report on the supply of groceries from supermarkets has been extended from 7 April to 31 July. The Commission advised that more time was needed to complete the inquiry.

Wages Councils

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each wages council in each year from 1970 to their abolition, the years when wage awards were not uprated. [111326]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Low Pay Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Low Pay Commission is established on a permanent basis; and if he will make a statement. [111659]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Low Pay Commission was placed on a statutory base in November 1998 following the commencement of provisions of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. The Government have announced that they will ask the Commission to monitor the national minimum wage and produce a further report, including whether there is a case for an increase and if so to what level, by July 2001. Professor George Bain has accepted the Prime Minister's invitation and agreed to continue to chair the Commission.

Miners Pension Scheme

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many trustees of the Miners Pension Scheme are employees of his Department; and what reports they have submitted to him concerning the current actuarial review of the scheme. [111574]

Mrs. Liddell: Five of the 10 members of the corporate trustee body of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme (MPS) are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in his role as guarantor to the Scheme. One of these five Secretary of State appointees is a Departmental official. I have received no reports on the actuarial review of the MPS which, I understand, is still under way.

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will use his powers under the Miners Pension Scheme to enable the scheme's trustees to reduce the retirement age of working miners to the age of 50. [111507]

Mrs. Liddell: The Trustees of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme are currently awaiting the results of a recent actuarial valuation. They will no doubt consider a wide range of options for allocating any surplus which emerges for distribution to beneficiaries. These could include retirement terms for all deferred members of the Scheme including working miners. I shall consider any proposals that the Trustees may make.

Broadcasting

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's responsibilities in respect of matters where telecommunications and broadcasting issues converge. [111496]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The forthcoming Communications White Paper will deal with the changes in regulation required as a result of the

convergence of the telecoms and broadcasting industries. The Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport have joint and equal responsibility for this work.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list, for each year from 1997 to 1999, *(a)* those countries in receipt of defence-related contracts covered by the ECGD, *(b)* the United Kingdom companies involved in each of these contracts, *(c)* the goods covered by each contract and *(d)* the financial value of each contract. [108765]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 7 February 2000]:* The second table contains details by country and value of the cover which ECGD has provided in support of defence business in each of the last three years.

The types of goods covered, broken down by category of equipment, are included in ECGD's Annual Report and repeated in the table:

Percentage

	April 1997-March 1988	*April 1998-March 1999*	*April 1999-January 2000 (provisional)*
Aircraft	31.0	60.0	27.5
Ancillary	1.3	2.0	0
Artillery/Missiles	16.4	1.0	42.0
Naval vessels	0.3	35.0	0
Radar/Communications	15.0	1.0	10.9
Vehicles	36.0	1.0	19.6

The further detail the hon. Gentleman requires is a commercial confidence.

Value of ECGD guarantees issued in support of defence-related contracts 1997–98 to 1999–2000

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
Botswana	12	—	—
Brazil	—	29	—
Brunei	—	580	—
Chile	—	—	2
Egypt	9	—	—
Germany	1	—	—
Greece	19	—	5
India	—	14	—
Indonesia	17	9	—
Italy	—	2	—
Korea, Rep. of	62	20	—
Kuwait	56	—	30
Lithuania	3	—	—
Malaysia	—	15	123
Oman	1	21	204
Qatar	183	—	—
Saudi Arabia	225	1,000	—
Singapore	19	—	—
Sweden	—	4	—
Thailand	27	—	—
Turkey	36	—	208
UAE	10	—	—
United States	—	7	—

[1] to 31 January

Renewable Energy

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to exclude renewables which produce below 500 kw from regulations that currently apply to larger producers of power. [111492]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Companies which generate and supply less than 500kw of electricity from any source, including renewable sources, are not subject to licensing requirements under the Electricity Act at present. We are currently consulting on changes to the relevant Order to relax the present requirements.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons the survey results of international price comparisons were not published on 11 February; and if he will make a statement. [111631]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The survey on International Price Comparison was commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry. The publication of the report was not subject to Parliamentary protocol. The report was published on Sunday 13 February and copies were made available from the Department.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which journalists attended the briefing session at his Department on 11 February about the results of the survey on international price comparisons. [111636]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Consumer and Lobby journalists from the national Sunday papers, the Press Association, BBC, ITN, Sky and IRN.

Austria

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what change *(a)* his Department and *(b)* British Trade International has introduced as a result of the Government's new policy towards bilateral relations with Austria. [111633]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* As a result of sanctions imposed by the 14 EU member states, Ministers will have no bilateral contact with the Austrian Government. There will be no bilateral ministerial visits to or from Austria. Ministers will not receive the Austrian Chargé in London. Along with our other EU partners, the UK will not support Austrian candidates for positions at international organisations.

These are bilateral measures by the 14 individual countries. The agreed measures are not intended to affect trade.

North Sea Oilfield

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the membership of the Government task force on the tax and employment aspects of North Sea oilfield decommissioning; when the task force began its work; and when it will report. [111350]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Government have not set up a task force on North Sea oilfield decommissioning. However, the oil and gas

industry has set up a North Sea Decommissioning Group to take forward a range of industry cooperation and other issues which emerged from the conclusions of a number of workgroups set up by the Oil and Gas Industry Task Force which reported in September 1999. The Decommissioning Group's membership, which comprises representatives from a number of industry bodies including the UK Offshore Operators Association and the Oil and Gas Producers Association, includes representation from my Department. No deadline has been set for the Group to complete its work. General matters of taxation and employment are being considered by workgroups within PILOT (the second phase of the Oil and Gas Industry Task Force) which will continue to meet during the year. More information about the ongoing work of PILOT can be found by accessing the PILOT website at: www.dti.gov.uk/ogitf.

End of Life Vehicles

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the cost of the End of Life Vehicle Directive to the UK motor industry. [111127]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 715W.

Offshore Wind Power

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what target he has set for the percentage of UK electricity to be generated by offshore wind power by 2010; and if he will make a statement. [111128]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The Government have adopted the target for 10 per cent. of UK electricity to be supplied from all renewable sources by 2010, subject to the cost to consumers being acceptable. Electricity suppliers are being given the freedom to contract for renewable energy from the most economical sources available to them to reduce the cost impact to consumers. It is expected that offshore wind will make a significant contribution.

MOX Shipments

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on matters discussed and agreements made during the recent visit of departmental staff to Japan to meet officials of the nuclear industry, the Japanese Government and safety regulators. [109914]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* I am arranging for a copy of the joint press communiqué between the UK and Japanese governments to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library copies of reports, safety assessments and other material given to the Japanese Government and nuclear authorities by his Department's director of energy during her recent visit to Japan. [109906]

Mrs. Liddell: I understand that BNFL's report into the data falsification incident at its MOX Demonstration Facility, which formed the basis for these discussions, was published on Friday 18 February.

Laurence Williams, HSE's Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations Inspectorate also visited Japan to explain to the Japanese nuclear regulator the findings of HSE's independent investigation into the issue. Their report was also published on Friday 18 February.

As I said in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) on 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 629W, I have arranged for these reports (together with two other HSE reports on the Sellafield site) to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

WTO

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to encourage the EU to make progress towards the elimination of subsidies on exports in relation to the forthcoming round of WTO agriculture negotiations. [110963]

Mr. Caborn: The Government support further liberalisation of agricultural trade in the WTO. This is firmly linked to further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, where the Government support the phasing out of all forms of production-related support, including export subsidies, accompanied by targeted measures to conserve and enhance the rural environment and promote the rural economy.

However, although negotiations on agriculture are getting under way as part of the built-in agenda, progress is likely to be slow outside a Round. The Government therefore remain committed to launching a new comprehensive Round of trade negotiations, including agriculture, as soon as possible.

Departmental Staff

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what child care provision was made available in the financial year 1998–99 for use by his departmental staff; what was the cost to parents of this child care; and how many parents used the facilities; [108858]

(2) what provisions are made available to (i) departmental staff and (ii) employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department, for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contract, *(l)* child care allowances, *(m)* careers' leave and *(n)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [108854]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 518W, in which he set out the importance placed on improving the balance between work and family life in the Civil Service as a whole which is reflected in the Civil Service reform programme. Arrangements for DTI are as set out.

Childcare

Departmental staff in central London have access to a 32-place holiday playscheme for a minimum of 54 days each year. Staff contribute £7.50 per day per place towards the £16.90 daily fee. DTI HQ staff in Cardiff have access to a local holiday playscheme for a contribution of £6.50 to the £13.00 daily fee per place. An annual contribution is also made towards the costs of an inter-Department Easter and Summer playscheme for staff in Government Office for the East Midlands.

Approximately 100 staff have used the central London playscheme in 1998–99 (academic year October—August) using a total of 1,550 places over the year i.e. 93.6 per cent. occupancy rate.

Leave and flexible working

The Department has a range of policies providing for leave or flexible working:

for women with one year's service, maternity leave of up to 52 weeks, including 18 weeks on full pay;

10 days paid paternity leave;

for staff with one year's service, parental leave of up to 4 weeks per year up to a maximum of 13 weeks in total for each child;

up to five days paid leave to deal with an emergency involving a dependant which may include nursing a sick child;

part-time working including job share, homeworking, flexitime working and term time working are all available. The Department does not offer annual hours contracts;

where staff incur additional child or elder care costs due to a requirement to make a temporary change to their normal working pattern, these costs may be reimbursed;

for staff with one year's service, career breaks are available for up to five years for those with caring responsibilities.

Except where the provision is an entitlement, eligibility is based on a judgment of the individual's circumstances and the needs of the Department taking account of guidance provided to staff covering the different arrangements.

The arrangements are for DTI Headquarters staff; Chief Executives of the Agencies will reply separately on their arrangements for leave and flexible working.

Letter from David Hendon to Caroline Flint, dated 28 February 2000:

I am replying to your questions on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency which is an executive agency of the Department of Trade and Industry.

Childcare

Radiocommunications Agency staff have full access to the DTI's 32 place holiday playscheme as outlined in their separate reply to you on this issue. Approximately three Radiocommunications staff used the central London playscheme in 1998–99 (academic year Oct-Aug).

Leave and flexible working

The arrangements for leave and flexible working are identical to those outlined in the DTI's reply. You will note that the DTI does not currently offer annual hours contracts and the position is the same for Radiocommunications Agency staff. Additionally no staff are employed on term time contracts at present.

When requests are received for alternative working patterns (outside the normal individual entitlement) we consider each request on merit, taking into account the individual circumstances and the Agency's business needs.

Letter from J. S. Holden to Caroline Flint, dated 28 February 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in respect of Companies House Executive Agency.

Companies House provides up to 52 weeks maternity leave (a), of which 18 weeks is paid (b), the balance being unpaid for qualifying staff (over 1 year's service for permanent staff and on two or more year contracts if fixed term appointees). Ten days paid paternity leave (c) is given for similarly qualified staff. Unpaid parental leave (d) is allowed up to a maximum of 13 weeks for those with children born on or after 15 December 1999 and under 5 years old.

Almost all staff benefit from flexible working hours (e) and 30% additionally avail themselves of the opportunity to work part-time (f). Of the 30% part-timers, 5% are in job-share arrangements (g). Leave of up to 5 days paid, 20 days unpaid is normally given to those needing to care for sick children (h), and longer arrangements are considered sympathetically. Home working (i) is a possibility in a few posts, but is not an entitlement. There is not provision for term time contracts (j) or annual hours contracts (k).

Companies House offers subsidised holiday play schemes (l) and child care allowances when staff are required to be absent from home outside their normal work hours. Carer's leave (m) and career breaks (n) are considered on application from those with satisfactory performance and attendance records.

Letter from Seton Bennett to Caroline Flint, dated 28 February 2000:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory to your question about our provisions for maternity, paternity, and parental leave as well as for a range of other flexible employment practices.

Provision for these within the National Weights and Measures Laboratory are the same as those within DTI, as the Agency follows the Department's guidelines on these issues.

Letter from Ian Jones to Caroline Flint, dated 28 February 2000:

You tabled a Parliamentary Question on 3 February to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry concerning conditions of employment in his department and executive agencies. I have been asked to reply in respect of the Employment Tribunals Service (ETS) which is an executive agency of the DTI.

The following provisions are made available to ETS staff in line with DTI policy on eligibility:

Maternity Leave; Maternity Pay; Paternity Leave; Parental Leave; Part-Time Working Hours; Job-Sharing; Career Break Schemes and Leave to Care for Sick Children.

Flexible working hours are available to all staff regardless of status and eligibility is dictated by operational need. Home working is presently limited with each application considered on its merits. As with Term Time and Annual Hours Contracts, opportunities are restricted by the operational needs of the judicial process.

Childcare allowances are in line with the DTI Policy and ETS also operate a subsidised holiday play scheme. Permanent staff are eligible. Careers leave would be considered for permanent staff on request.

If there is further information you would like to have, please let me know.

Letter from Peter Joyce to Caroline Flint, dated 28 February 2000:

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has asked me to reply to your question about the provisions made available to employees of The Insolvency Service for (a) maternity leave, (b) maternity pay, (c) paternity leave, (d) parental leave, (e) flexible working hours, (f) part-time working (g) job sharing, (h) leave to care for a sick child, (i) home-working, (j) term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) child care allowances, (m) careers' leave and (n) career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility. The provisions available to staff in The Service and the eligibility criteria are set out in the attached table. In several areas the provisions and criteria are under review as part of The Service's "Working 2005" study which is looking at further developing flexible family friendly working policies alongside improvements in availability of services to users.

Annex A

Subject	*Provision*	*Eligibility criteria*
Maternity Leave	Statutory entitlements Contractual entitlements—52 weeks maternity leave	Permanent staff with one year's service within the last three years
Maternity Pay	Statutory entitlements Contractual entitlements—18 weeks maternity pay at normal standard rate of pay.	Permanent staff with one year's service within the last three years
Paternity Leave	Statutory entitlements Contractual entitlements—10 days paid leave except during periods of unpaid absence	Permanent staff
Parental Leave	Statutory fall back scheme applies until internal policy formulated i.e. 13 weeks unpaid leave; right to return to same or equivalent job. Contractual entitlement to adoptive leave—52 weeks (20 days paid)	One year's continuous service Child born/adopted on or after 15 December 1999 and who is under 5 years old or 18 for adoption of child with a disability
Flexible working hours	Current agreement in place since 30 September 1991	All staff Withdrawal for misuse of scheme or poor timekeeping
Part-time working/job share	Currently have 180 staff working part-time. Managers required to consider when advertising a post whether suitable for part-time/job share.	Available to all staff. Subject to justifiable operational need/job requirements.
Leave to care for sick child	Emergency time off under Employment Relations Act 1999. Also covered under special leave with pay—up to 5 days.	
Home working	A number of home-working posts exist. Staff can request to work from home within their present job in whole or part.	Suitability of the post for homeworking
Term-time contracts	Not currently available in this form. Other flexible working practices may be utilised to help staff deal with their responsibilities during school holidays. These include part-time working, flexible working hours and special leave without pay.	
Annual hours	Not currently available in this form.	
Child care allowance	Not available. The Service does recompense staff who need to make additional child care arrangements to attend work-related events outside their normal working pattern. DTI provides assisted play scheme placements during school holidays	
Careers' leave	Not available as such. However staff may avail themselves of the provision of extended special leave without pay to pursue external qualifications. Staff studying for an external qualification, which is of benefit to the organisation, may get assistance with cost and study leave.	
Career Break Scheme	Extended period of special leave without pay to deal with domestic responsibilities. Annual keeping in touch scheme, including two weeks work placement each year.	Subject to: completion of probation; satisfactory performance; satisfactory attendance. Currently limited to a maximum of 5 years

Letter from Alison Brimelow to Caroline Flint, dated 28 February 2000:

I am replying on behalf of the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry relating to the provision of family friendly benefits. Our provision for the initiatives you listed are detailed below.

a) Maternity Leave

Paid Maternity Leave

Paid Maternity Leave consists of 18 weeks maternity leave at the full rate of pay. Staff qualify if they have a permanent appointment and have completed at least one year's paid service. They are also required to:

i) provide written confirmation that they intend to return to the Office after the pregnancy for a minimum of one calendar month.

ii) provide written confirmation of their pregnancy at least 21 days before Paid Maternity Leave starts.

Unpaid Maternity Leave

Staff qualifying for Paid Maternity Leave will also be entitled to an additional period of unpaid maternity leave. The total period of paid and unpaid maternity leave cannot exceed 52 weeks. However, it is possible for staff to take a career break of up to five years following maternity leave.

b) Maternity Pay

Maternity Leave on Full Pay

Staff qualify for 18 weeks full pay if they have a permanent appointment and have completed at least one year's paid service.

c) Paternity Leave

Fathers employed by the Office are entitled to take 10 days paid paternity leave. This need not necessarily be taken at the time of birth but may be taken during the weeks following the birth of the child if it is more helpful to the family.

d) Parental Leave

The statutory entitlement to Parental leave is available to all staff with at least one year's continuous service.

e) Flexible Working Hours

We operate a Flexible Working Hours scheme, participation in which is voluntary and open to full and part-time members of staff.

f & g) Part-time Work and Job Sharing

We have 72 part-time/job share staff (8.4%) and are always keen to extend these opportunities. Each request is considered on its merits.

h) Leave to care for sick children

Line management may grant up to 5 days paid special leave to enable a member of staff to deal with short-term domestic problems or to make satisfactory longer term arrangements for coping with them. Each application is considered sympathetically and on a case by case basis.

i) Home-Working

The Office is willing to consider home working arrangements where it is compatible with the work of the Office and interests of the individual concerned. Each application is considered on its merits.

j & k) Term-time/Annual Hours Contracts

There are no current provisions for term-time/annual hours contracts.

l) Child Care Allowances

Staff who are required to make a temporary change to their normal working routine (eg attending a residential training course or unavoidable late or early working periods for short periods) are eligible to claim the cost of any additional child care expenses that they incur.

We also subsidise staff whose children attend an on-site nursery. This is also the case with play schemes that are organised during the Easter and Summer holidays. All directly employed staff are eligible to apply for both initiatives.

m) Careers Leave

There is currently no provision for careers leave, however, paid study leave may be granted to staff undertaking approved Adult Further Education (eg GCSEs, A levels, degree and professional qualifications) for activities including tutorials, examinations or assessments and revision for them.

n) Career Breaks

The Office's Career Break Scheme is open to all permanent staff members who wish to take unpaid leave to assume home care responsibilities for a dependant providing they fulfil the following criteria:

i) have satisfactorily completed a probation period

ii) have an overall performance mark of Box 3 (performance fully meets normal requirements of the grade) in their last staff appraisal prior to joining the scheme; or a Box 4 (performance not fully up to requirements; some improvement necessary) where particular circumstances such as recent promotion, illness or domestic circumstances have contributed to a Box 4 marking;

iii) have a satisfactory attendance record;

iv) agree to undertake a minimum of two weeks paid work or development training in the Office each year.

The Office also has a provision for Special Leave without Pay which is also available to all permanent staff for pressing domestic needs such as looking after children (including adopted or fostered children). All cases are considered on an individual basis.

ACT

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the Government are taking to ensure benefit recipients avoid costs and bank charges arising from planned changes in the way benefits are paid to automated credit transfer. [110237]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

We have decided to move to automated credit transfer (ACT) from 2003 as a modern, more secure and efficient method of paying benefits. The Department has already begun discussions with the banking industry on issues surrounding benefit recipients, charges and other matters. These discussions will continue.

Charter of Pardon

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the status of the Charter of Pardon 1508; [110927]

(2) what assessment he has made of the applicability of the powers contained within the Charter of Pardon 1508. [110928]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

I have made no assessment of the status of, or the applicability of the powers contained in the 1508 Charter of Pardon, and have not been previously asked to do so.

HEALTH

Volunteering

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what resources have been made available to the consortium on opportunities for volunteering in the last two years; and if the third year's funding has been approved. [112315]

Mr. Hutton: The consortium on opportunities for volunteering received £2,889,000 in 1998–99 and £2,837,762 in 1999–2000. Decisions on funding for 2000–01 will be announced by Ministers shortly.

Dental Services

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to require dentists to notify patients of charges for all items of treatment. [112318]

Mr. Hutton: Dentists are required to display in a prominent position information about National Health Service charges. The information should include details of entitlement to exemption or remission from NHS charges. In addition, dentists who accept a person for continuing care and treatment are required at the time of the first examination, to provide a treatment plan and an estimate of the NHS charge where appropriate.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to introduce a recognised scale of fees for all dental treatment. [112317]

Mr. Hutton: The Statement of Dental Remuneration contains the scale of fees for all National Health Service dental treatment. Since 1995 a revised scale of fees has been published at least once a year. The latest edition is in the Library.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will calculate the rise in the cost of palladium-based precious metals used in dental appliances over the last 10 years; and if he will calculate the

percentage change in the palladium-based precious metals claimed for by dentists from the NHS over the last 10 years. [109581]

Mr. Hutton: The cost of palladium-based precious metals used in dental appliances depends on the prices negotiated in contracts between purchasers and suppliers. These will be affected by the price quotations in the metal markets. The average price for palladium in the London market in 1988–89 was about $130 or £75 and in 1998–99 was about $310 or £190. Palladium is only one constituent with fine gold and platinum in precious metal appliances.

Precious metal casting alloys for use in the General Dental Services must contain not less than 33 per cent. fine gold, platinum or palladium. The available data do not distinguish between the constituents of precious metal alloys and the incidence of precious metal dental appliances cannot therefore be broken down further.

Information on the number of incidences of the dental treatment item 1711, full or jacket crown cast in precious metal alloy and the comparable treatments 1705 and 1706 which were deleted from 1 December 1996, is shown for 1988–89 and 1998–99.

General Dental Services (GDS): Number of incidences England and Wales

Item number	*1988–89*	*1998–99*
1705	7,240	—
1706	154,180	—
1711	52,670	259,359
Total	214,090	259,359

The total number of incidences for the treatments shown increased by 21 per cent. between 1988–89 and 1998–99.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what system of control is operated by this Department to ensure that dental patients receive the dental appliances consisting of palladium-based precious metals claimed for by dentists from the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [109585]

Mr. Hutton: All dental materials used to manufacture dental appliances must be safe and fit for their purpose and must meet the requirements of the Medical Devices Regulations. Dental appliances must be manufactured in accordance with a dentist's instructions.

Regulations provide that a dentist shall not claim or accept any fee or other remuneration in respect of any treatment which has not been provided. There is a system by which restorations which are claimed to have been placed can be inspected by a Dental Reference Officer of the Dental Practice Board.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use of non-precious metals in dental appliances in the NHS; and if he will calculate the percentage change in the non-precious metals claimed for in the last 10 years. [109583]

Mr. Hutton: Both precious and non-precious metal alloys continue to have their place in restorative dentistry. The Statement of Dental Remuneration (SDR) sets out the conditions as to materials which may be used in the fabrication of appliances in the General Dental Services. The wide diversity of both precious and non-precious metal alloys to meet true clinical need is reflected in the SDR.

The SDR, including the conditions as to materials, is under continuing review with the representatives of the dental profession so as to reflect current best practice.

Information on the number of incidences of the dental treatment item 1712, full or jacket crown cast in non-precious metal alloy for 1988–89 and 1998–99, is shown in the table:

General Dental Service (GDS): number of incidences England and Wales

	1988–89	*1998–99*	*Percentage increase*
Number of incidences	5,520	28,217	411

The increase in the number of these incidences is affected by changes in the types of treatment available over the ten year period.

Children (Physical Punishment)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the results of the Office for National Statistics Omnibus Survey for April 1998 relating to the physical punishment of children. [111500]

Mr. Hutton: Results from this survey were published in our consultation paper "Protecting Children Supporting Parents: A Consultation Document on the Physical Punishment of Children" on 18 January. A separate statistical publication is not planned but further information about the survey and more detailed tabulations of the data are being placed in the Library.

Lancashire County Council

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on *(a)* the items on the agenda for discussions when members of the Social Services Inspectorate recently met Councillor Doreen Pollit and other representatives of Lancashire County Council, *(b)* the main points discussed, and *(c)* conclusions reached; and if those attending from Lancashire were instructed not to issue public comment on any or all of the items discussed. [111973]

Mr. Hutton: At my request, the Chief Inspector for Social Services met with councillors and chief officers of Lancashire County Council on 15 February. They discussed the key issues for Lancashire Social Services identified in the recently published social services inspectorate/ Audit Commission Joint Review Report and established the council's understanding of those issues and its ability to respond.

It was made clear to those attending the meeting that any decisions as to further action were for Ministers and, in the light of the Chief Inspector's assessment following the meeting, I have now written to Lancashire County Council requesting that they draw up an action plan

addressing the key issues identified in the joint report. This will be monitored regularly by the social services inspectorate.

NHS Direct

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what performance indicators and targets he has set for NHS Direct for 1999–2000. [112018]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct, as a new service, was not subject to explicit performance indicators and targets during 1999–2000. As the service develops, indicators on service responsiveness will be formalised through service level agreements, and NHS Direct sites will be budgeted to be able to handle a forecast number of calls each year.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what budget for NHS Direct was originally set by his Department; and what the expected out-turn is for the financial years 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [112017]

Ms Stuart: The 1999–2000 budget for "NHS Direct" was £54 million. The budget for 2000–2001 is not yet known. Final out-turn figures for the current financial year will not be available until the summer.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum per capita management allowances for 1999–2000 paid to primary care groups in England. [99875]

Mr. Denham: Management cost allocations to primary care groups range from £7.10 per head to £1.51.

Information on per capita management cost allocations has been placed in the Library.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those primary care groups which have formally applied to seek or have already received trust status; and if he will list in each cast the distance from target in the current year of *(a)* baseline and *(b)* actual allocation. [107755]

Mr. Denham: The baselines, allocations, targets and distances from target for 1999–2000 for those primary care groups who have formally applied to seek, or have been established as primary care trusts are detailed in the following table.

PCG baselines, allocations, targets and distances from target

	Initial				*Final*			
PCG name	*Baseline (£000)*	*Target (£000)*	*DFT (£000)*	*(%)*	*Allocation (£000)*	*Current target (£000)*	*Current DFT (£000)*	*(%)*
Approved for PCT status								
North East Lincolnshire	96,869	100,804	−3,935	−3.90	103,673	106,320	−2,647	−2.49
Central Derby	59,015	63,038	−4,023	−6.38	64,810	67,381	−2,571	−3.82
Newark and Sherwood	63,178	63,985	−807	−1.26	67,229	68,277	−1,048	−1.53
Mansfield	55,977	54,765	1,212	2.21	59,427	58,439	988	1.69
Epping Forest	62,200	59,500	2,700	4.54	66,372	63,412	2,960	4.67
Tendring	77,329	86,391	−9,062	−10.49	82,269	92,070	−9,801	−10.65
Fenland	50,878	50,595	283	0.56	54,341	54,064	277	0.51
Peterborough North	60,381	61,544	−1,163	−1.89	64,738	65,763	−1,025	−1.56
Peterborough South	46,433	46,680	−247	−0.53	49,708	49,880	−172	−0.35
Southend	98,035	102,892	−4,857	−4.72	105,756	110,338	−4,582	−4.15
Nelson and West Merton	87,936	85,909	2,027	2.36	93,524	91,367	2,157	2.36
North Hillingdon[1]	53,031	53,559	−528	−0.99	56,455	56,983	−528	−0.93
Hayes and Harlington[1]	40,393	41,612	−1,219	−2.93	43,002	44,221	−1,219	−2.76
Uxbridge and West Drayton[1]	51,566	49,819	1,747	3.51	54,896	53,149	1,747	3.29
Poole Bay	49,229	53,045	−3,816	−7.19	52,431	55,954	−3,523	−6.30
Poole Central and North	48,204	46,885	1,319	2.81	50,710	49,458	1,252	2.53
Daventry and South Northants	44,106	44,398	−292	−0.66	46,963	47,238	−275	−0.58
Southampton East Healthcare	68,366	70,938	−2,572	−3.63	73,070	75,608	−2,538	−3.36
Manchester South	97,356	93,745	3,611	3.85	102,514	99,030	3,484	3.52
Hertsmere	50,000	51,170	−1,170	−2.29	52,839	54,435	−1,596	−2.93
West Norfolk	76,761	75,634	1,127	1.49	81,739	80,819	920	1.14
Applied for PCT status								
Airedale	68,146	64,708	3,438	5.31	72,680	69,242	3,438	4.97
Bradford City	83,966	85,306	−1,340	−1.57	89,944	91,284	−1,340	−1.47
Bradford North	53,404	53,608	−204	−0.38	57,160	57,364	−204	−0.36
Bradford South and West	85,831	87,725	−1,894	−2.16	91,978	93,872	−1,894	−2.02
Sunderland West	65,343	63,311	2,032	3.21	69,660	67,494	2,166	3.21
North Lincolnshire	91,937	88,002	3,935	4.47	95,466	92,819	2,647	2.85
Doncaster Central	61,449	63,818	−2,369	−3.71	65,560	68,087	−2,527	−3.71
St. Albans	48,184	47,323	861	1.82	51,504	50,343	1,162	2.31
Colchester	79,790	84,748	−4,958	−5.85	84,960	90,319	−5,359	−5.93
Thurrock	75,088	74,430	658	0.88	80,396	79,817	579	0.73
Basildon	60,569	59,246	1,323	2.23	64,809	63,534	1,275	2.01
Lowestoft	43,343	43,471	−128	−0.29	45,569	45,858	−289	−0.63
Greater Yardley	49,811	47,577	2,234	4.70	52,956	50,669	2,287	4.51
Birmingham North East	46,204	45,528	676	1.48	49,176	48,486	690	1.42
Herefordshire	92,730	92,730	0	0.00	98,713	98,713	0	0.00
Stoke North	63,384	65,647	−2,263	−3.45	67,941	70,265	−2,324	−3.31
Bexley	120,649	123,755	−3,106	−2.51	127,208	130,315	−3,107	−2.38

PCG baselines, allocations, targets and distances from target

PCG name	Initial				Final			
	Baseline (£000)	Target (£000)	DFT (£000)	(%)	Allocation (£000)	Current target (£000)	Current DFT (£000)	(%)
Greenwich	153,449	150,343	3,106	2.07	161,831	158,724	3,107	1.96
Bournemouth North	51,094	49,486	1,608	3.25	53,738	52,199	1,539	2.95
Bournemouth South	55,099	54,565	534	0.98	57,936	57,558	378	0.66
Blackmore Vale	34,852	34,997	−145	−0.41	36,715	36,917	−202	−0.55
Torbay	88,532	90,246	−1,714	−1.90	93,395	95,207	−1,812	−1.90
South Hams and West Devon	59,822	57,688	2,134	3.70	63,110	60,859	2,251	3.70
Carrick	58,447	58,961	−514	−0.87	61,659	62,200	−541	−0.87
Southampton West/Test Valley South	64,789	64,567	222	0.34	69,189	68,817	372	0.54
Central Southampton	37,471	39,411	−1,940	−4.92	40,136	42,006	−1,870	−4.45
Milton Keynes	104,132	105,666	−1,534	−1.45	112,109	113,266	−1,157	−1.02
Ridgeway	34,882	37,100	−2,218	−5.98	37,774	40,270	−2,496	−6.20
Dartford	132,863	123,381	9,482	7.68	139,962	131,290	8,672	6.60
Mid Sussex	67,513	70,586	−3,073	−4.35	72,162	75,236	−3,074	−4.09
Blackburn with Darwen	91,799	96,027	−4,227	−4.40	97,823	102,336	−4,513	−4.41
Manchester East	80,711	85,164	−4,453	−5.23	85,352	89,964	−4,612	−5.13
Manchester West	57,467	61,069	−3,602	−5.90	60,902	64,510	−3,608	−5.59
Manchester North	94,560	90,116	4,444	4.93	99,930	95,194	4,736	4.98
Barrow	48,561	48,819	−257	−0.53	51,160	51,484	−324	−0.63
Lancaster	82,182	84,004	−1,822	−2.17	86,692	88,591	−1,899	−2.14
South Lakeland	64,335	62,256	2,079	3.34	67,878	65,655	2,223	3.39
Trafford South	73,730	70,886	2,844	4.01	78,204	75,406	2,798	3.71

[1] North Hillingdon, Hayes and Harlington and Uxbridge and West Drayton PCGs are combining to form Hillingdon Primary Care Trust

PFI Projects

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been spent since 1 May 1997 on consultants in respect of PFI projects, listed by project and consultant for each project. [101455]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* Information on the total amounts spent on advisers costs is collected centrally for major private finance initiative schemes (capital value of £25 million or above) which have reached financial close. The data are set out in the table:

NHS Trust	Costs (£)				As percentage of capital cost[1]
	Legal	Financial	Other	Total	
Bromley	1,710,000	1,759,000	743,000	4,212,000	3.5
Norfolk and Norwich	1,559,000	1,938,000	932,000	4,429,000	3.0
Hereford	2,500,000	1,200,000	900,000	4,600,000	7.2
Greenwich	1,169,000	676,000	351,000	2,196,000	2.4
South Manchester	1,224,000	888,000	1,051,000	3,163,000	4.8
Wellhouse	2,531,000	980,000	1,175,000	4,686,000	8.7
Carlisle	605,000	475,000	736,000	1,816,000	2.8
Calderdale	901,000	654,000	527,000	2,082,000	3.2
Dartford and Gravesham	1,215,000	960,000	180,000	2,355,000	2.5
South Buckinghamshire	1,653,000	780,000	169,000	2,602,000	5.8
North Durham	375,000	438,000	888,000	1,701,000	2.8
South Tees	1,706,639	938,407	310,000	2,955,046	2.4
South Durham	1,088,000	1,087,000	247,000	2,422,000	5.9
(Bishop Auckland)	—	—	—	—	—
Worcester	1,050,000	1,110,000	300,000	2,460,000	2.8
Swindon and Marlborough	1,135,000	680,000	1,730,000	[2]3,545,000	3.7
Totals	20,421,639	14,563,407	10,239,000	45,224,046	—

[1] Capital cost defined as: total capital cost to the private sector consortium which includes cost of land, construction, equipment and professional fees but excludes VAT, rolled up interest and financing costs such as bank arrangement fees, bank due diligence fees, banks lawyers fees and third party equity costs.

[2] The figures for Swindon and Marlborough are estimates; the scheme reached financial close in October and the figures for advisers costs have yet to be finalised.

Notes:

1. Before May 1997 nearly £18 million was spent on these 15 schemes, but none were delivered.
2. Since May 1997 we spent £27 million delivering 15 new hospitals.
3. This represents only 2.2 per cent. of total cost of these 15 schemes.
4. Detailed breakdown of the pre-May 1997 costs are in the table.

Advisers costs for 15 first wave major PFI schemes to May 1997

NHS Trust	OJEC Notice Date	Costs (£) Legal	Financial	Other	Total
Bromley	September 1995	354,000	716,000	118,000	1,188,000
Norfolk and Norwich	February 1995	900,000	300,000	500,000	1,700,000
Hereford	June 1995	661,979	442,201	247,104	1,351,284
Greenwich	March 1995	168,490	180,207	78,668	427,365
South Manchester	April 1995	454,000	541,000	427,000	1,422,000
Wellhouse	February 1995	423,446	465,543	407,675	1,296,664
Carlisle	January 1996	397,000	312,000	149,000	858,000
Calderdale	July 1995	253,708	354,103	272,754	880,565
Dartford and Gravesham	September 1995	1,094,000	896,000	57,000	2,047,000
South Buckinghamshire	January 1995	978,984	443,347	123,657	1,545,988
North Durham	December 1994	435,000	706,000	222,000	1,363,000
South Tees	March 1995	427,887	441,393	29,715	898,995
South Durham (Bishop Auckland)	December 1994	66,500	179,700	18,700	264,900
Worcester	July 1995	205,904	522,740	252,825	981,469
Swindon and Marlborough	October 1994	348,011	302,737	837,554	1,488,302
Totals	—	7,168,909	6,802,971	3,741,652	17,713,532

Health Authority Funding

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each health authority for the current financial year in both cash figures and as a percentage the actual allocation and the fair share or target allocation. [107756]

Mr. Denham: The table gives the information for 1999–2000.

1999–2000 allocations, targets and distances from targets

Health authority	Recurrent allocation £000	Target £000	Distance from target £000	Distance from target %	Total allocation £000
Avon	582,510	589,434	−6,924	−1.17	582,510
Barking and Havering	256,500	258,434	−1,934	−0.75	256,500
Barnet	209,057	204,463	4,594	2.25	209,057
Barnsley	156,058	160,844	−4,786	−2.98	156,588
Bedfordshire	312,569	324,996	−12,427	−3.82	312,909
Berkshire	431,001	446,620	−15,619	−3.50	431,001
Bexley and Greenwich	289,039	274,466	14,573	5.31	289,039
Birmingham	681,946	679,290	2,656	0.39	681,946
Bradford	311,762	317,304	−5,542	−1.75	312,844
Brent and Harrow	310,379	301,083	9,296	3.09	310,879
Bromley	183,609	184,106	−498	−0.27	183,609
Buckinghamshire	368,084	377,426	−9,343	−2.48	368,084
Bury and Rochdale	248,434	251,674	−3,241	−1.29	249,286
Calderdale and Kirklees	369,064	367,445	1,619	0.44	369,064
Cambridge and Huntingdon	233,706	236,369	−2,663	−1.13	233,706
Camden and Islington	320,052	313,103	6,949	2.22	320,971
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	316,160	309,707	6,454	2.08	317,079
County Durham	411,001	420,738	−9,737	−2.31	411,001
Coventry	200,882	208,064	−7,182	−3.45	200,882
Croydon	202,682	205,238	−2,556	−1.25	202,682
Doncaster	197,811	198,087	−276	−0.14	198,465
Dorset	446,631	436,860	9,771	2.24	446,631
Dudley	183,018	184,858	−1,840	−1.00	183,018
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	475,900	478,734	−2,835	−0.59	475,900
East and North Hertfordshire	290,037	292,156	−2,118	−0.73	290,037
East Kent	395,915	388,808	7,108	1.83	395,915
East Lancashire	349,892	352,280	−2,389	−0.68	349,892
East London and the City	490,031	514,148	−24,117	−4.69	491,634
East Norfolk	380,037	376,838	3,198	0.85	380,037
East Riding	359,056	361,453	−2,397	−0.66	360,233
East Surrey	244,052	239,039	5,013	2.10	244,052
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	505,366	494,731	10,634	2.15	505,366
Enfield and Haringey	323,495	321,764	1,731	0.54	323,495
Gateshead and South Tyneside	254,698	256,652	−1,954	−0.76	255,537
Gloucestershire	334,591	322,184	12,408	3.85	334,591
Herefordshire	98,713	98,652	61	0.06	98,713
Hillingdon	154,353	153,696	658	0.43	154,353
Isle of Wight	92,390	86,064	6,326	7.35	92,390
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	286,339	314,256	−27,917	−8.88	286,339
Kingston and Richmond	208,380	203,787	4,593	2.25	208,380

1999–2000 allocations, targets and distances from targets

Health authority	*Recurrent allocation £000*	*Target £000*	*Distance from target £000*	*Distance from target %*	[1] *Total allocation £000*
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	571,315	574,882	−3,567	−0.62	573,116
Leeds	467,788	466,585	1,203	0.26	469,356
Leicestershire	517,310	530,776	−13,466	−2.54	517,887
Lincolnshire	394,990	392,462	2,528	0.64	394,990
Liverpool	349,120	341,971	7,149	2.09	350,296
Manchester	348,698	340,940	7,758	2.28	349,914
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	422,995	413,443	9,553	2.31	422,995
Morecambe Bay	205,730	197,059	8,671	4.40	205,730
Newcastle and North Tyneside	332,729	330,977	1,752	0.53	333,829
North and East Devon	300,720	295,287	5,434	1.84	300,720
North and Mid Hampshire	291,934	288,021	3,913	1.36	291,934
North Cheshire	201,585	198,024	3,561	1.80	201,585
North Cumbria	198,290	198,179	111	0.06	198,917
North Derbyshire	228,364	228,939	−575	−0.25	228,364
North Essex	503,561	507,041	−3,480	−0.69	503,561
North Nottinghamshire	236,475	239,324	−2,849	−1.19	236,475
North Staffordshire	303,653	311,809	−8,156	−2.62	304,458
North West Anglia	250,526	255,274	−4,748	−1.86	250,526
North West Lancashire	321,635	322,992	−1,356	−0.42	321,635
North Yorkshire	434,879	436,615	−1,736	−0.40	434,879
Northamptonshire	326,245	321,398	4,847	1.51	326,245
Northumberland	196,014	196,339	−325	−0.17	196,638
Nottingham	390,375	400,526	−10,151	−2.53	391,712
Oxfordshire	327,812	337,381	−9,569	−2.84	327,812
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	330,353	331,271	−917	−0.28	330,353
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	296,944	283,560	13,384	4.72	296,944
Rotherham	159,162	160,241	−1,079	−0.67	159,696
Salford and Trafford	309,165	302,725	6,440	2.13	310,166
Sandwell	205,153	207,949	−2,795	−1.34	205,838
Sefton	192,028	190,041	1,987	1.05	192,610
Sheffield	366,097	360,678	5,419	1.50	367,283
Shropshire	247,650	248,555	−905	−0.36	247,650
Solihull	122,698	121,100	1,598	1.32	122,698
Somerset	290,097	287,231	2,866	1.00	290,097
South and West Devon	383,067	376,078	6,989	1.86	383,565
South Cheshire	405,696	403,528	2,168	0.54	405,696
South Derbyshire	340,745	347,813	−7,068	−2.03	340,745
South Essex	417,802	432,611	−14,809	−3.42	417,802
South Humber	199,138	192,513	6,625	3.44	199,138
South Lancashire	185,797	181,469	4,328	2.38	185,797
South Staffordshire	322,868	320,147	2,721	0.85	322,868
Southampton and South West Hampshire	327,774	327,461	312	0.10	327,774
St. Helen's and Knowsley	236,408	237,420	−1,013	−0.43	237,210
Stockport	176,374	175,572	802	0.46	176,374
Suffolk	397,601	391,148	6,452	1.65	397,601
Sunderland	200,533	202,063	−1,530	−0.76	201,223
Tees	369,278	372,959	−3,681	−0.99	370,553
Wakefield	211,183	210,413	771	0.37	211,891
Walsall	163,243	165,336	−2,093	−1.27	163,794
Warwickshire	293,422	285,805	7,616	2.66	293,422
West Hertfordshire	317,538	312,558	4,980	1.59	317,538
West Kent	562,935	559,299	3,636	0.65	562,935
West Pennine	297,286	302,185	−4,898	−1.62	297,286
West Surrey	371,000	362,469	8,531	2.35	371,000
West Sussex	467,090	470,645	−3,555	−0.76	467,090
Wigan and Bolton	373,322	385,390	−12,069	−3.13	373,322
Wiltshire	345,684	339,986	5,699	1.68	345,684
Wirral	226,212	221,847	4,365	1.97	226,913
Wolverhampton	160,226	162,577	−2,351	−1.45	160,766
Worcestershire	303,405	298,177	5,228	1.75	303,405
England total	31,162,915	31,162,915	—	—	31,192,915

[1] Includes additional £30 million non-recurrent funding for Health Authorities with HAZs

Infertility Treatment

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' third report on clinical guidelines for infertility treatment. [108209]

Yvette Cooper: I congratulate the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists on their hard work on the third and final set of comprehensive clinical guidelines on the treatment of infertility. I understand that the College will now be distributing the guidelines to all their members.

Hearing Equipment

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of his Department's guidance on services provided by local authority social services departments on equipment to assist deaf and hard of hearing people. [108788]

Mr. Hutton: The Department has made clear the benefits of appropriate equipment and adaptations as part of service provision for people with hearing impairment and have emphasised, most recently through 'Better Care, Higher Standards', the importance of speedy delivery of appropriate equipment to all disabled people. Service provision will be monitored through the Referrals, Assessments and Packages of Care Project with further information provided through the Performance Assessment Framework.

Tooth Whitening Products

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability to patients in dental surgeries of tooth whitening products. [109339]

Mr. Hutton: Products are available to patients for the whitening of teeth in dental surgeries. Products containing or releasing more than 0.1 per cent. hydrogen peroxide used for oral hygiene products are prohibited from supply under the European Council Directive on cosmetics products, 76/768/EEC.

NHS Professional Staff

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the number of *(a)* nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff and *(b)* members of professions allied to medicine who will qualify and join the NHS in each of the next five years. [109260]

Mr. Denham: The available estimations are shown in the table.

Training courses for nursing, midwifery and the professions allied to medicine are usually of three years in length and we are therefore only able to provide estimates of new qualifiers up to 2002–03 based on entrants to training in 1999–2000.

Health visitor training is in the main one-year post registration. The numbers of newly qualified health visitors up to 1998–99 is provided. Entrants to training in 1998–99 are subject to validation; entrants to training in 1999–2000 are still planned. However, we expect the trend of just under 600 new qualifiers each year to continue. Not all qualifiers necessarily take up employment in the National Health Service.

Estimated number of new qualifiers

	Nursing and midwifery	*Professions allied to medicine*	*Health visitors*
1997–98	9,416	3,100	583
1998–99	10,184	3,200	593
1999–2000	12,000	3,400	—
2000–01	13,200	3,600	—
2001–02	13,800	3,900	—
2002–03	14,500	4,300	—

Cancelled Operations

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish figures showing the index for patients with operations cancelled for non-medical reasons in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 for (i) England, (ii) East and North Hertfordshire, (iii) West Hertfordshire and (iv) the health authority in the prospering growth area with the (1) lowest figure and (2) highest figure. [109746]

Mr. Denham: The 1997–98 figures were published in "Quality and Performance in the NHS: High Level Performance Indicators" in June 1999. Figures for 1998–99 will be published later this year.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he proposes to take to clear the backlog of operations arising as a result of *(a)* cancellations over the Millennium holiday period and *(b)* the flu outbreak. [111374]

Mr. Denham: The seasonal rise in waiting lists is expected, reflecting the planned priority the NHS has given to emergencies. This is anticipated in our plans to achieve our manifesto waiting list target. Trusts will continue to work to ensure the target is achieved.

Amputations

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many healthy limbs have been amputated as part of treatment for a mental health problem in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [109587]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not collected centrally about how many healthy limbs have been amputated as part of treatment for a mental health problem.

Doctors' decisions about treatment and care for a patient are based on a thorough assessment of the individual's condition, taking account of the patient's needs and wishes, the evidence base for the effectiveness of treatment, and the resources available.

Rickets and TB

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many reported cases of *(a)* rickets and *(b)* tuberculosis there were in each of the past 10 years in each health authority area; [109765]

(2) if he will list, in descending order, the 10 health authorities with the highest incidence of *(a)* tuberculosis and *(b)* rickets over the past 10 years. [109764]

Yvette Cooper: Information on cases of tuberculosis is not collected by health authority but by local authority. A table giving the number of cases of tuberculosis notified in each of the past 10 years by local authority has been placed in the Library. The ten local authorities with the highest total number of notifications of tuberculosis over the past 10 years in England and Wales are given in the table. The table gives absolute numbers and not population based rates. Information on the incidence of rickets is not collected centrally.

The 10 Local Authorities in England and Wales with the highest number of tuberculosis notifications years 1989–1998

Local authority	*Year*										*Total*	*Average*
	1989	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*		
Birmingham	311	289	326	349	319	263	239	275	252	258	2,881	288.1
Newham	123	133	154	132	137	206	194	186	174	213	1,652	165.2
Brent	138	95	162	178	129	162	193	190	195	163	1,605	160.5
Bradford	152	150	191	143	164	124	158	142	144	133	1,501	150.1
Leicester	153	152	146	136	162	144	164	157	130	149	1,493	149.3
Ealing	93	87	96	109	125	117	127	130	162	212	1,258	125.8
Hackney	88	78	67	104	97	102	106	129	117	121	1,009	100.9
Tower Hamlets	80	94	88	99	109	103	97	87	136	104	997	99.7
Lambeth	68	77	85	97	118	94	104	110	94	102	949	94. 9

Source:
PHLS Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre.

NHS Trusts (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each year from 1992 to date the number of *(a)* nurses, *(b)* doctors and *(c)* consultants employed by NHS trusts in Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [110133]

Mr. Denham: Although the numbers of nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff in Shropshire declined over the years 1994–1997, the numbers have increased for 1998. The numbers of hospital medical doctors employed in Shropshire has steadily increased since 1993. However, as new classification methods were introduced in 1995, information for later years is not directly comparable with earlier years (see notes).

NHS hospital and community health services (HCHS): nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff and hospital medical staff, employed within Shropshire

	Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff [1,2]		*Hospital medical doctors*[3]	
	Whole time equivalents	*Numbers (headcount)*	*Numbers (headcount)*	*Of which Medical Consultants*
1992	2,330	2,930	220	—
1993	2,350	3,160	270	40
1994	2,370	3,040	360	130
1995	2,170	2,720	390	140
1996	2,130	2,680	420	140
1997	2,100	2,630	440	150
1998	2,190	2,770	460	160

[1] 1992, 1993 and 1994 figures include agency staff and exclude learners

[2] 1995 to 1998 figures exclude agency staff and learners

[3] Includes all hospital medical staff employed within the Shropshire Health Authority area (but before 1996, some doctors were employed directly by West Midlands Regional Health Authority, and are not included in these figures).

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10 and are as of 30 September every year. A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995. Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years.

Sources:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census
Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census

Waiting Lists (Durham)

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of patients on waiting lists have been waiting over one year in *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1989, *(c)* 1995 and *(d)* the latest date for which figures are available in Durham Health Authority; and how many patients this represented. [110225]

Mr. Denham: The information is given in the table.

	Waiting list
1979	No data available
1989	No data available
1995	49 out of 12,575 patients waiting as at the end of December
1999	141 out of 12,946 patients waiting as at the end of December

Notes:

1. Resident health authority based waiting times data were collected for the first time in Q1 1994–95 so data are not available for 1979 and 1989.

2. In December 1995 County Durham Health Authority did not exist. Up until April 1996 it was composed of North Durham District Health Authority and South Durham District Health Authority.

3. The figure for 1995 is for patients waiting at the combined North and South Durham District Health Authorities.

Source:
QFO1 Return

Learning Disabilities

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what revisions of continuing care agreements have taken place following the Coughlan Appeal Court decision and his Department's instructions that these agreements should be reviewed; and, in particular, what changes have been made in relation to health and social service provision for people with learning disabilities. [110173]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally. We have asked all health authorities to review their eligibility criteria for continuing health care following the Coughlan judgment. Where authorities revise eligibility criteria following any review, they should consider what action they need to take to reassess service users against the revised criteria contained in HSC

1999/180: LAC(99) 30. The guidance applies to all client groups including people with learning disabilities. Initial monitoring suggests that in only a few cases are there legal problems with these. We are continuing to monitor the situation.

Assaults (NHS Staff and Social Workers)

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what records he keeps centrally of assaults upon *(a)* hospital staff and *(b)* social workers. [110234]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Executive conducted a survey of violence in NHS trusts in 1998–99. The survey found that, on average, seven violent incidents were recorded each month per 1,000 staff. This is equivalent to approximately 65,000 violent incidents against NHS Trust staff each year. Details of the survey can be found in Health Service Circular 1999/229: "Managing Violence, Accidents and Sickness Absence in the NHS", copies of which are in the Library.

A cross-Government campaign, "NHS zero tolerance zone", was launched last October to tackle violence against staff working in the NHS. The campaign is underpinned by National Improving Targets for reducing incidents of violence against NHS staff by 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003.

Information about the number of incidents of violence against social workers is not collected centrally. However, we are determined to reduce substantially the incidence of violence towards everyone working in social care. We have set up a taskforce to produce a national action plan by November 2000 with recommendations and timescales for action to reduce violence against social care staff and to promote the safety and welfare of social care workers.

In particular, the taskforce will advise the Department on the setting of targets that social care employees will be set for the reduction of violence against social care staff, and the arrangements for monitoring of progress. They will also advise social care employers on the development, implementation and monitoring of strategies to reduce violence, to train the workforce in handling confrontational situations, and to support staff who have been the victims of violent incidents.

Stoma Services

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact on the availability of stoma nurses of a price reduction in stoma appliances. [110931]

Mr. Denham: None. Neither the Department nor the manufacturers of stoma appliances have proposed such reductions.

Elderly and Disabled People (Rural Areas)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to improve access to *(a)* day care, *(b)* residential care and *(c)* recreational clubs for the elderly in rural areas; [110780]

(2) what plans he has to improve access to *(a)* day care and *(b)* residential care for people with disabilities in rural areas. [110779]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to ensuring that access to social care services is not limited by where people live.

Last year the social services inspectorate published "Care in the Country", which reported on community care arrangements for older people and people with disabilities in eight rural shire counties. While the report highlights the ways in which rurality can sometimes make it difficult to deliver services it highlights many examples of good practice and offers councils key messages to consider and a checklist to use in evaluating their own services.

One of the aims of the Fair Access to Care Services guidance, which will be issued for consultation in the summer, will be to set out the principles authorities should follow when devising and applying eligibility criteria for social care services. This will ensure more consistency around the country in the way people are judged eligible for services.

London Ambulance Service

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what additional funding the London Regional Office of the NHS Executive plans to make to the London Ambulance Service to assist it to meet its performance targets; and if he will make a statement. [110696]

Ms Stuart: The National Health Service Executive, London Regional Office will be providing extra funding to the London Ambulance Service to assist it to meet its performance target. The London Regional Office is currently working with the health authorities and the London Ambulance Service to agree a plan for 2000–01 and beyond.

Chiropody Services (East Staffordshire)

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on adequacy of NHS chiropody services in East Staffordshire. [110731]

Mr. Hutton: There are no specific problems regarding access to chiropody services in East Staffordshire. A three month pilot scheme is currently taking place within my hon. Friend's constituency of Burton, which places greater emphasis on referral of patients on the basis of clinical priority and need, as opposed to age.

Carers

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to establish a 24-hour national helpline for carers. [110736]

Mr. Hutton: There are currently no plans to establish a 24-hour national help-line specifically for carers on a 24-hour basis. Information on National Health Service services is available through NHS Direct, and the Department is presently funding the Carers National Helpline.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he can report on the pilot projects which are evaluating digital hearing aids. [110814]

Mr. Hutton: Steps to finalise the details of project planning are currently taking place. We plan to write to National Health Service trusts and health authorities shortly, seeking applications to be involved in the project. The scheme is scheduled to start in April 2000.

Blood Transfusion

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many incidences there have been in NHS trusts of transfusions of the wrong type of blood to patients in the last 12 months for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [110832]

Mr. Denham: In 1997–98, the Serious Hazards of Transfusion scheme for the confidential audit of adverse transfusion incidents (SHOT) analysed 114 reports where a patient was transfused with an incorrect blood component. In 88 of these cases the patient survived with no ill effects, but two patients died and 20 patients suffered short term or continuing ill effects. Four patients were reported to have died from the underlying condition.

We have required NHS trusts to participate in SHOT, to ensure that hospitals transfusion committees are in place to oversee all aspects of blood transfusion, and to agree local transfusion protocols. We are determined to secure the highest standards across the country at all stages of the blood transfusion chain.

Mental Health

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) which local authorities have made representations to his Department on section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983 following the High Court judgment R *v.* London Borough of Richmond ex parte Watson and have been advised not to charge for section 117 services; [110981]

(2) what steps have been taken by his Department to ensure that local authorities follow the decision made in the High Court in R *v.* London Borough of Richmond ex parte Watson and other related cases; [110982]

(3) pursuant to his answer of 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 423W, on the Mental Health Act 1983, if there continues to be a variation in practice between local authorities; [110980]

(4) what research has been undertaken by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* local authorities to establish the cost if local authorities ceased to charge for residential care under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983, in line with the High Court judgment R *v.* London Borough of Richmond ex parte Watson. [110979]

Mr. Hutton: On 10 February 2000 the Department issued a circular to local authorities and health authorities in England drawing attention to the High Court judgment R *v.* London Borough of Richmond ex parte Wilson (HSC 2000/003: LAC (2000)3). Local authorities still charging for services provided as part of after-care under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983 are advised that they should immediately cease to do so. This is consistent with previous informal advice given by the Department and with the response to recent representations by the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) on this issue made on behalf of local authorities. We have no detailed information about which local authorities have continued to charge since the High Court judgment nor the cost to local authorities of ceasing to charge. I understand that ADSS has issued a questionnaire to local authorities on this issue but am not aware of the results of that survey.

East Midlands Ambulance Service

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on procuring improved control technology for East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust. [110897]

Ms Stuart: The process to approve the business case for the procurement of improved control technology is being progressed by East Midlands Ambulance Service Trust and the National Health Service Executive. The Trust has been working to address issues raised in the preliminary stages of the approvals process and is currently revising the final business case for submission to the NHS Executive. Once approval has been given and the scheme commissioned, the Trust's current estimate is that implementation of the new technology will be achieved in six months.

Crown Report

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will respond to the recommendations of the Crown report on prescribing. [111253]

Ms Stuart: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on 3 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 711W.

Influenza

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of the recent flu outbreak on *(a)* waiting lists, *(b)* elective operations and *(c)* progress towards Government targets for waiting lists. [111149]

Mr. Denham: Demand for National Health Service services this winter has been very high. The NHS has planned well for these critical months since the beginning of last year. A seasonal rise in waiting lists is expected, reflecting the planned priority the NHS has given to winter emergency admissions. This is anticipated in our plans to achieve our manifesto waiting list target. NHS trusts will continue to work to ensure the target is achieved.

GP Appointments

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many GP appointments were missed in *(a)* the Wigan and Bolton health authority and *(b)* nationally during 1999. [111594]

Mr. Denham: This information is not collected by the National Health Service.

Compensation Payments

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the NHS paid in compensation payments in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [111422]

Ms Stuart: Figures on how much the National Health Services spent on clinical negligence claims for the last five years for which figures are available are as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1993–94	117.9
1994–95	160
1995–96	173
1996–97	235
1997–98	144

It should be noted, however, that changes to accounting practice required by the National Audit Office mean that these data are not directly comparable.

Epilepsy

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of National Health trusts currently employ epilepsy specialist nurses. [111506]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the number of acute beds in National Health Service hospitals. [111324]

Mr. Denham: The latest figures show that there are 108,000 acute beds in the National Health Service. We are currently consulting through the National Beds Inquiry on the future number and balance of acute and other beds in the NHS system.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* general and *(b)* acute NHS hospital beds there were at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital in each year from 1992; and if he will make a statement. [111443]

Mr. Denham: The average daily number of available beds for the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital NHS Trust was:

Year	*Acute*	*General and acute*
1998–99	375	417
1997–98	354	393
1996–97	400	441
1995–96	384	424
1994–95	411	451

Note:
The earliest data available for the trust is 1994–95, and the latest available data are for 1998–99. 'General and Acute' is defined as Acute plus Geriatric.
Source:
Annual Körner return KH03 'bed availability and occupancy'

The data show annual fluctuations in the number of available beds. The most recent data show an increase in the number of available 'acute' and 'general and acute' beds in comparison to the previous year.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* general and *(b)* acute NHS hospital beds there were (i) nationally and (ii) in Shropshire in 1998 and 1999; and if he will make a statement. [111444]

Mr. Denham: Statistics on hospital bed numbers are published in the annual publication "Bed availability and occupancy—England", copies of which are in the Library. Latest figures are for 1998–99.

Dental Amalgams

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) on what date his Department first issued a warning against the use of mercury-based amalgams in treating the teeth of *(a)* pregnant women and *(b)* children; and if he will make a statement; [110481]

(2) what recent appraisal his Department has made of the toxic effects of mercury-based amalgams in dentistry; and if he will make a statement; [110485]

(3) for what reasons his Department warns against the use of mercury-based amalgams to treat the teeth of *(a)* women who are pregnant and *(b)* children; and if he will make a statement. [110479]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* In 1997, the Government's Advisory Committee on the Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) were asked to review the evidence relating to the toxicity of dental amalgam fillings. COT first considered dental amalgam in 1986 when they reported that the use of dental amalgam was free from risk of systemic toxicity, with only a very few cases of hypersensitivity occurring. COT's 1997 review included evidence in a recent report of an ad hoc working group of experts established by the European Commission to consider dental amalgam within the context of the Medical Devices Directive 93/42/EEC.

In their latest statement, published in April 1998, COT stated that the conclusions they had reached in 1986 remain unchanged. However, as a precautionary measure, COT advised that, while there was no evidence that the placement or removal of amalgam fillings during pregnancy was harmful it might be prudent to avoid, where clinically reasonable, the placement or removal of amalgam fillings during pregnancy. The Medical Devices Agency continues to monitor and evaluate the available evidence on the safety and performance of dental amalgam.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent studies his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned on the efficacy of non-toxic, non-metal amalgams in dentistry; and if he will make a statement. [110482]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The Department has not directly commissioned or undertaken any recent studies on the efficacy of non-metal dental fillings. Any well-founded research proposals in this area would be considered by the Department in relation to other priorities for research and development.

Health Service Expenditure (Wakefield)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the per capita expenditure on health services in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Wakefield District in the last year for which figures are available; and what was the equivalent average figure for EU member states. [111576]

Mr. Denham: In 1998–99, gross National Health Service expenditure per capita in England and Wales was £810. England alone was £807 and Wales was £867.

In 1998–99, healthcare expenditure per capita in Wakefield Health Authority was £854. It should be noted that this figure is not comparable with those given for England and Wales because it is taken from health authority summarised accounts, which do not include all NHS expenditure. The comparable figure for England using summarised accounts data is £720 per head.

The information on international comparisons is not collected by the Department. It is collected by the Office of Economic Corporate Development and can be obtained from the OECD 1999 health database.

MMR Vaccine

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the levels of MMR vaccine take-up among children aged 24 months in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Greater London in each of the last 15 years. [111284]

Yvette Cooper: Measles, mumps and rubella vaccine was first introduced into the United Kingdom childhood immunisation programme in 1988. The information available about the percentage of children receiving the MMR vaccination by their second birthday is contained in table 3 in the Statistical Bulletin "NHS Immunisation Statistics. England: 1998–99". This includes data for the London region and dates back to the introduction of MMR vaccine. Copies are available in the Library.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current stock of MMR vaccine ready for use; and how many people could be vaccinated using this stock. [111287]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* As at 17 February 2000, a total of 983,146 doses of measles, mumps and rubella vaccine were held by the National Health Service's vaccine distributor. This amount is in single doses, enough to immunise 983,146 people with a single dose of vaccine or half that number with two doses. Children are recommended to receive two doses of MMR, the first at around 12–15 months, the second before school entry at around 3 to 5 years of age.

Health Spending

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in rank order the levels of spending on health per head of population in each health authority in England in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99 and the estimated figures for 1999–2000. [111630]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Health authority spending on health per head of population by rank for 1996–97 to 1998–99 will be placed in the Library. Expenditure estimates for 1999–2000 are not available.

Expenditure figures are from health authority audited accounts. For 1997–98 and 1998–99 the Prescription Pricing Authority rather than individual health authorities have accounted for the majority of drugs expenditure. Health authorities do not account for the majority of General Dental Service expenditure.

Although estimates by health authority are available from the Prescription Pricing Authority for drugs expenditure and from the Dental Practice Board for general dental services gross fees, these are not audited figures and they do not agree with the national audited amounts included within the health authority summarised accounts.

Long-term Illness

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what Government initiatives there are to assist primary care groups experiencing higher than average rates of limiting long-term illnesses. [110361]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Primary care groups will develop their services to meet the needs of their community within the framework of their agreed Health Improvement Programme. The Health Improvement Programme will ultimately combine a range of nationally and locally set targets with particular emphasis on addressing areas of major health inequality in local communities.

As their committees, primary care groups will be supported and developed by their health authorities to take forward the responsibilities for delivering on the targets agreed locally. In addition, they can make full use of the primary care flexibilities, ie Section 36, local development schemes and Personal Medical Services pilots that have been developed nationally.

To further support health authorities and primary care groups a wide programme of national initiatives is being developed to support implementation of the National Service Frameworks, waiting lists and other priorities.

Artificial Limbs and Wheelchairs

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* artificial limbs and *(b)* wheelchairs were issued by the National Health Service in 1997–98. [102320]

Mr. Hutton *[pursuant to his reply, 15 December 1999, c. 221W]:* I regret that the information I gave in my previous reply was incorrect. It should read:

> The National Health Service issued 4,464 powered indoor/outdoor wheelchairs in 1997–98. Information on how many artificial limbs were issued is not available centrally.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Alternative Service Book

33. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what estimate the Commissioners have made of the cost of revising the liturgy consequent upon the expiry of the alternative service book. [110630]

Mr. Stuart Bell: It is the General Synod that is responsible for the revision and authorisation of the Church's liturgy and the Archbishops' Council that is responsible for publishing the new service books that will replace the ASB.

Ethical Investment

34. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent steps the Commissioners have taken to review their ethical investment policy; and if he will make a statement. [110631]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church of England's Ethical Investment Advisory Group has responsibility for reviewing the Church's Statement of Ethical Investment Policy which it commends to the central investment institutions of the Church, including the Commissioners.

The policy is kept under rigorous review to ensure it remains relevant and appropriate, and was most recently revised in the spring of 1999.

New Deal

35. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what use they have made to date of new deal initiatives in their employment policies. [110632]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Joint Staff Council of the national church institutions, of which the Church Commissioners are one, considered an internal paper, "New Deal—An Opportunity for the Church" in December 1998 and gave its support to the national Church institutions becoming involved. Matters have been taken forward subsequently with church representatives at national and diocesan level and with others concerned in this area.

Retired Clergy

37. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what is the average weekly value of SERPS payments to eligible retired clergy. [110635]

Mr. Stuart Bell: Retired clergy are not normally eligible for SERPS payments since the clergy pension scheme is Contracted out of SERPS. (For the purposes of National Insurance contributions the Church Commissioners have, since 1978, been deemed the Employers.) Some clergy may be eligible for some SERPS payments in respect of other work not covered by the clergy pension scheme.

Church Repairs

Miss McIntosh: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent representations he has received on value added tax on church repairs; and if he will make a statement. [110634]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church remains concerned at the heavy burden borne largely at parish level resulting from the continuing imposition of VAT on repairs and alterations. I am in regular touch with a group of Church staff who are handling the Church's continuing representations in this area. The Church as a whole continues to co-ordinate its efforts with other faiths and charitable organisations who share our view that the current VAT regime creates heavy costs for church communities and charities with limited resources and inhibits conservation and regular necessary repairs to church buildings.

Recent media reports indicating that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, may support an equalisation of VAT rates between new build and repairs are very encouraging. Such change would allow greater activity in the field of conservation repairs while demonstrating a sensible and prudent approach to the management of the public finances.

Clergy Stipends

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what steps are being taken to review clergy stipends; and if he will make a statement. [110633]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Commissioners' powers and responsibilities as Central Stipends Authority were transferred to the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council with effect from 1 January last year. The Archbishops' Council has commenced a review of clergy stipends. Among other things, the review will:

- examine the content of the clergy remuneration package (including stipend, housing and non-contributory pension)
- compare the remuneration of clergy with that of other groups;
- conduct a large-scale survey into the financial circumstances of clergy

It is hoped that the review will make an initial report of the General Synod in November 2000.

The working group set up by the Council to carry out the review has met three times to date, and is due to meet a further five times this year.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, how many *(a)* full-time clergy, *(b)* part-time clergy, *(c)* non-stipendiary clergy and *(d)* retired clergy are currently on the books of the Church of England; and what audit is carried out of the cost benefit of funding the training and pay of each group. [111115]

Mr. Stuart Bell: At the end of 1999, there were 9,520 full-time stipendiary parish clergy (8,459 men, 1,061 women), 156 part-time stipendiary parish clergy (66 men, 90 women), 2,031 Non-Stipendiary Ministers (1,335 men, 696 women), 298 Ordained Local Ministers (162 men, 116 women). At the end of 1999 there were 7,486 clergy and licensed lay workers in receipt of retirement pensions.

Clergy are self-employed and do not have formal job descriptions. They are encouraged to exercise their ministry in ways which are suited to their parishes. It would not be appropriate to conduct audits of the kind implied.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Football Task Force

14. **Ms Walley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the football task force. [110611]

Kate Hoey: The work of the Football Task Force has greatly benefited football in this country since May 1997. Many of the important recommendations of the Task Force's three previous reports on racism, disabled access and community involvement have been implemented. The Government are now discussing the final report, Football: Commercial Issues, with the football authorities and other interested parties.

Millennium Dome

15. **Mr. Hunter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future of the millennium dome after 31 December 2000. [110612]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government are determined to find a sustainable alternative use for the Dome when the Millennium Experience finishes at the end of 2000. In March last year, we launched a competition to invite bidders to come forward with proposals and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions announced a shortlist of six last month. Bidders are currently developing their proposals and bids. We intend to make a further shortlist and select the winning bid in the summer.

21. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what new measures are being taken to increase ticket sales to the dome. [110618]

Janet Anderson: The last week has seen record attendances at the Dome, with many visitors, including children on free education tours, and each day being sold out. The New Millennium Experience Company will continue to promote ticket sales through a range of advertising and other promotional activities. In particular, they will be working with the travel trade to increase uptake of the many excellent travel and accommodation packages.

24. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions his Department has had with sponsors of the dome about their contracts. [110621]

Janet Anderson: No such discussions have taken place. Contracts are a matter between NMEC and their sponsors.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will review his policy in respect of the release of information hitherto classified as commercially confidential relating to the Millennium Dome. [109910]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), which is responsible for all aspects of the Millennium Dome, is both a public sector body (by virtue of the issued shares being held by Lord Falconer of Thoroton on behalf of the Government) and a Companies Act company. NMEC is, therefore, required to operate according to non-departmental public body rules and guidelines and according to company law. The guidelines on openness and transparency, to which all public sector bodies are required to adhere, allow for information to be restricted for commercial reasons. In answering parliamentary questions, Ministers have always sought to question those cases where NMEC judges the information to be commercially sensitive. The policy is, therefore, under regular review. NMEC has provided information on a commercial-in-confidence basis to the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport throughout its life and will continue to do so.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reasons tickets to the Millennium Dome are not available for visits beyond March; and when such tickets will become available. [105246]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) released tickets for visits during April in late January. It has always been NMEC's declared policy to release tickets in tranches through the year. This policy enables the company to consider against the experience of previous months its ticketing strategy for future months and assists the management of seasonal peaks and troughs.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets were sold for the Millennium Dome in the first week during which it was open to the public. [104654]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* There were 99,453 visitors to the Dome in the first week of the Dome's opening. A copy of NMEC's press release of Friday 4 February, containing this information as well as other details of visitor attendance in January, was placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals he has evaluated for use of the Dome for sports after 2000; and if he will make a statement. [111098]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions gave on 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 255W. Of the six bids that were selected to go through to the next round of the Dome Legacy competition, one was specifically for sporting use. All six bidders are currently developing their proposals further. At this stage, we have no preference for the type of use for the Dome after 2000. However, each bid will be evaluated against the criteria specified for the competition, namely: commercial and environmental sustainability, regeneration benefits, innovation, cultural significance, consistency with the Government's transport strategy, and financial consideration.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the maximum number of tickets that the New Millennium Experience Company is allowed to sell for *(a)* any one-day session and *(b)* the evening session at the Millennium Dome. [111314]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The site capacity set out in the operating licence issued by Greenwich Council is 35,000 plus 2,000 staff at any one time. It is for the New Millennium Experience Company to decide, in the best interests of visitor management and satisfaction, how many tickets to release in any particular period up to the licence capacity.

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets for the Millennium Dome have been sold from outlets based in Wales. [110099]

Janet Anderson: Dome tickets can be purchased through National Lottery outlets, travel operators, the New Millennium Experience Company's website and a call centre. The total number of bookings made from Wales across all outlets is 17,927 to 6 February. It should be borne in mind, however, that when people purchase Dome tickets, particularly through the National Lottery outlets and call centre, their location at the time is not always an indication of their place of residence. Some people may buy a ticket when visiting Wales but do not reside there permanently; conversely, people resident in Wales may buy a Dome ticket when visiting other parts of the United Kingdom and their purchases will, therefore, not be reflected in Wales' figures.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many paying visitors to the Millennium Dome there have been in each of the weeks for which he has data. [108964]

Janet Anderson: There were 344,620 paying visitors to the Dome during January out of a total of 366,420. Weekly breakdowns for the total number of visitors (paying and non-paying) are as follows:

	Number
1 and 2 January	33,442
Week commencing 3 January	102,877
Week commencing 10 January	64,346
Week commencing 17 January	71,644
Week commencing 24 January	87,124
31 January	6,987

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the total amount of sponsorship money expected to support the Dome; how much has been received to date; and which sponsors have yet to hand over moneys agreed for sponsorship of the Dome. [109909]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The total value of sponsorship is approximately £160 million. A final and definitive figure will be confirmed when the New Millennium Experience Company's final accounts are audited. Where sponsorship has been received during the period 1 April 1999 to 31 December 1999, that will be confirmed in the company's accounts for that period, due to be published in June 2000. The timing of sponsorship cash receipts, and of the value attributable to value-in-kind contributions which replace a budgeted expenditure within the £758 million cash budget, is dependent on the terms of the contractual arrangements negotiated with each sponsor. In terms of cash payments, most contracts provide for an initial payment on signature followed by further payments subject to a range of contractual provisions. Two sponsors (Boots and BSkyB) have yet to sign their contracts but remain committed at Board level to the sponsorship agreement.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will break down the number of visitors to the Millennium Experience in January by category of ticket purchased, indicating in each case the price paid for each category of ticket. [109964]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* A total of 366,420 visitors visited the Dome in January. The percentage breakdown and price, by category of tickets is as follows:

	Percentage	*£*
Adult	53.4	20.00
Child[1]	5.6	16.50
Family Tickets	21.7	57.00
Student	4.5	16.50
Senior Citizen	6.4	18.00

[1] Under 5s go free

The remaining 8.4 per cent. of visitors were children who won tickets as part of the free ballot for schools and some who were on specially managed education visits at £8.00 per head.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about the meeting on Wednesday 2 February between Lord Falconer and sponsors of the Millennium Dome. [110076]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* In his capacity as Shareholder of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), Lord Falconer of Thoroton has attended, at the invitation of NMEC, a number of functions and events with Millennium Experience sponsors, including that organised by NMEC on 2 February as part of a regular sponsor group meeting. A range of issues, relevant to the Millennium Experience at the Dome and the linked National Programme, are covered at the sponsor group meetings.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those persons who collectively were responsible for the decisions *(a)* to discontinue the previous Chief Executive's involvement with the Millennium Dome and *(b)* to appoint the new Chief Executive. [110075]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* The appointment of the Chief Executive of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is a matter for the NMEC Board. The non-executive Board members are:

Robert Ayling (Chairman)
Sam Chisholm (Deputy Chairman)
Ian Ash
Sir Alan Cockshaw
Len Duvall
Michael Grade CBE
Sir Brian Jenkins
The hon. Mrs. Sara Morrison
David Quarmby

The Board was responsible for the recent appointment of Pierre-Yves Gerbeau to replace Jennie Page as Chief Executive. Lord Falconer of Thoroton, as Shareholder of NMEC, was kept fully informed about the decision and approved the terms of the appointment.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the *(a)* capital, *(b)* revenue and *(c)* opportunity costs of granting free admission to the dome for school children. [109728]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The capital cost of accommodating the Education Tour scheme, under which up to one million free tickets are available to schools, is approximately £2 million attributable to the reception building and equipment for the scheme on the dome site. The revenue cost, attributable to dedicated staff and administration of the ticketing process, is approximately £150,000. The opportunity costs are impossible to quantify but depend on a range of assumptions about ticket sales and categories of purchaser who might replace the free attendees within the licensed capacity limits of the dome site.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how, and by whom, Monsieur Pierre-Yves Gerbeau was identified as a potential new Chief Executive for the Millennium Dome; what checks were undertaken concerning his background and previous employment; and if he will make a statement. [110074]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* Pierre-Yves Gerbeau was appointed as Chief Executive of NMEC by its Board. They were responsible for identifying him as a candidate and undertaking any appropriate checks.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets were sold for the Millennium Dome on each day of the first two weeks of February. [110521]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* Attendance for the week commencing 31 January was 104,705 (including 16,545 free education tour visits). For the week commencing 7 February, attendance was 112,788 (including 20,965 free education tour visits).

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what average attendance figures at the Millennium Dome were for the first 12 days of January. [104895]

Janet Anderson: There was an average of 12,935 visitors to the Dome for the first 12 days of January. A copy of NMEC's press release of Friday 4 February, containing this information as well as other details of visitor attendance in January, was placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many Dome tickets have been sold *(a)* overseas, *(b)* via the Internet, *(c)* at post offices, *(d)* by telephone and *(e)* in small local shops. [107276]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 31 January 2000]:* The information is not available in the form requested. However, of the 366,420 people who visited the Dome in January the sources of purchase were:

	Percentage
Camelot	26.1
Ticket line	23.4
Website	6.7
Travel trade	13.6
Education	9.0
Hospitality	9.6
Door sales	11.6

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets to the Dome have been sold so far to *(a)* adults, *(b)* children, *(c)* students, *(d)* old age pensioners, and *(e)* people with disabilities. [107277]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 31 January 2000]:* The information is not available in the precise form requested. However, a breakdown of the 366,420 visitors in January, by category of ticket, is as follows:

	Percentage
Adult	53.4
Child	5.6
Student	4.5
Senior citizen	6.4
Family tickets	21.7

The remaining 8.4 per cent. of visitors were children who won tickets as part of the free ballot for schools and some who were on specially managed education visits at £8.00 per head.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the schedule for maintenance and repairs of the roof of the Millennium Dome in 2000. [110935]

Janet Anderson: Repairs to the roof are dealt with as soon as they arise. NMEC holds a stock of spare materials and has specified a four-hour response time by the repair team as part of the maintenance contract. In addition trained personnel visually inspect the roof on a monthly basis.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the names of the operators of the contracted catering outlets that operate in and around the Millennium Dome at Greenwich; and what style of food they were contracted to supply. [110504]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* Catering and supply contracts have been awarded to the following:

Catering contracts	
Bakers Oven	baked foods
Costa	coffee bar
Aroma	coffee bar
AMT Espresso	coffee bar
New Covent Garden Soup Company	soup bar
Great American Bagel Company	bagel bar
OpaJohns	filled pancake style bar
Simply Internet	cyber café
Granada Food Services	NMEC controlled public catering
Compass plc	NMEC controlled hospitality and staff catering
McDonalds	fast food restaurant

Catering contracts	
Coca Cola	soda bar
Birds Eye, Wall's	ice cream parlour
Premier Brands	tea bar
Yo Sushi	sushi restaurant
Regents Inn plc	NMEC controlled pub

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for what reason the maximum daily number of visitors to the Millennium Dome is set at 20,000; and when it will be increased to 35,000. [105245]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* There is no maximum of 20,000. The site capacity set out in the operating licence issued by Greenwich Council is 35,000 plus 2,000 staff at any one time.

New Millennium Experience Company

16. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the management of the New Millennium Experience Company. [110613]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), which has responsibility for running the Millennium Experience; the Dome and the associated National Programme, considers that the management team now in place has the right experience and expertise to deliver the project successfully.

18. **Mr. Brooke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the Millennium Commission's recent loan to the New Millennium Experience Company. [110615]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 6.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people were employed by the New Millennium Experience Company on *(a)* 31 December 1999 and *(b)* 31 January 2000. [110965]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* On both 31 December 1999 and 31 January 2000, the New Millennium Experience Company employed 2,077 people.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from employees of the New Millennium Experience Company in respect of *(a)* the replacement of the Chief Executive and *(b)* the timing of overtime payments due. [109912]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* None.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out the terms under which Pierre-Yves Gerbeau has been employed as Chief Executive of the Dome, including the targets which have to be met for M. Gerbeau to qualify for bonus payments, and place a copy of his contract in the Library. [109958]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) employed Pierre-Yves Gerbeau with effect from 7 February on a total salary of £100,000 plus 15 per cent. in lieu of pension. In addition, he is eligible, at the sole discretion of the Board, to a performance bonus of up to £100,000. His detailed performance targets are a matter for the Board of NMEC but the key target is to deliver the project over its lifetime within the £758 million cash limited budget. It is not NMEC's policy to publish contract documents between the company and its employees; to do so would breach employee and employer confidentiality.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to introduce *(a)* a reduced two day and *(b)* a weekend entrance fee for the Millennium Experience. [106981]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 27 January 2000]:* The ticket pricing structure is a matter for the New Millennium Experience Company which, under the terms of its Lottery grant from the Millennium Commission, must consult and obtain the agreement of the Commission to any in-year changes in ticket pricing.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will provide details of *(a)* advances, *(b)* loans and *(c)* grants agreed to be made to the New Millennium Experience Company from the Millennium Commission since 1 January, and of provisions for (i) their repayment and (ii) the security provided for them. [110435]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* The Millennium Commission has approved an additional grant of up to £60 million to assist the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) with its cashflow. The precise amount of additional grant payable up to that maximum will have to be demonstrated by NMEC, to the Millennium Commission's satisfaction, on the basis of need—so far, £32 million has been released by the Commission. As with the original grant of £449 million (gross), this additional grant is repayable from any operating or disposal surplus.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the contractual liabilities are of sponsors of the New Millennium Experience Company; and whether such sponsors have given undertakings enforceable at law to provide, in cash or kind, the amounts pledged. [110463]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* Each of the contracts between the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) and the Millennium Experience sponsors is unique. The contractual obligations of the sponsors to NMEC cover a range of areas depending on the specific circumstances of the sponsorship agreement, for example the provision of cash, value in kind, discounted products and services and marketing support. Where sponsors have signed agreements with NMEC (as is the case with the majority of sponsors), these obligations are contractually enforceable.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what amount of sponsorship funds has been provided to date to the New Millennium

Experience Company; and what *(a)* proportion and *(b)* amount of such funds has been provided in (i) cash and (ii) kind. [110442]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* Details of sponsorship income will be included in the New Millennium Experience Company's audited Annual Report and Financial Statements. Those for the period 1 April 1999 to 31 December 1999 will be published in June 2000.

Lottery (Unclaimed Prizes)

17. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the total amount of lottery prizes unclaimed in the past 12 months; and what was the highest individual unclaimed prize. [110614]

Mr. Chris Smith: In the 12 months to the end of January 2000, the total value of unclaimed prizes paid to the good causes was £69,649,609; the largest unclaimed prize in this period was £1,234,612.

Jazz

19. **Mr. Hopkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to increase support for jazz. [110616]

Mr. Alan Howarth: It is important that the arts funding system should reflect the full diversity of musical genres including jazz. Under the arm's length principle, however, decisions on funding for individual art forms and organisations are for the Arts Council of England or the 10 English regional arts boards.

Arts Council

20. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what benefit he expects to secure for the public from the new funding agreements with the Arts Council of England. [110617]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Funding Agreement with the Arts Council of England enables the Department to ensure that grant in aid is spent in accordance with the Government's goals for the arts. Under the arms length principle, the Department do not interfere in funding decisions for individual art forms and organisations.

Heritage Lottery Fund

23. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what benefit he expects to secure for the public from the new funding agreement with the heritage lottery fund. [110620]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Heritage Lottery Fund is not subject to a funding agreement since it does not receive money voted by Parliament.

Free Television Licences

25. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many families in Aberdeen will benefit from the introduction of free television licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [110622]

Mr. Chris Smith: This information is not available. 1991 Census information is out of date and no household survey has a sample size sufficient to make reliable estimates of qualifying households at a constituency or local authority level.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will make a statement on the procedure for people over 75 to receive a free television licence; [111095]

(2) if he will ensure that arrangements put in place for providing free television licences to pensioners aged over 75 years take account of the needs of housebound pensioners; [111514]

Janet Anderson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 21 February 2000 that free television licences for people aged 75 or over will come into effect from 1 November this year. The main details of the scheme, which will be administered by TV Licensing as agent for the BBC, have also been via a news release issued by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Further details will be published by TV Licensing, who will also write to all households in good time before 1 November, with an application form to be completed and returned if a member of the household is 75 or over. The BBC have indicated that appropriate arrangements will be included for claimants who are housebound.

Lottery (Sports Safety)

27. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when funds will be made available from the lottery for safety improvements at *(a)* rugby league, *(b)* rugby union and *(c)* cricket grounds. [110624]

Kate Hoey: A new funding package for safety improvements at rugby league, rugby union, cricket and non-league football grounds was announced on 12 April 1999. That package is worth £7.5 million over three years, and the administrative arrangements for its distribution have recently been finalised. A new committee of Sport England's Lottery Panel will shortly take over the work of the Sports Ground Initiative in channelling public funding for safety improvements in these sports.

National Foundation for Youth Music

28. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many schools he expects to benefit from the National Foundation for Youth Music in its first year. [110625]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The National Foundation for Youth Music's remit is to support activities for children and young people that take place outside the formal education sector. The number of schools which benefit during the Foundation's first year of Lottery funding will depend to a large degree on the number of applications made to the Foundation's programmes, the first of which—Music Maker—is currently welcoming applications, with other programmes due to be announced in the next few months. The Foundation will report publicly at the end of its first year of distribution of Lottery funds, on the number of children, young people and schools who have benefited from its support.

National Lottery Distribution Fund

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to ensure that money spent on lottery tickets in a particular area is applied mainly to projects in that area. [110619]

Mr. Chris Smith: It would not be right to seek a direct correlation between the numbers of tickets bought in a constituency and value of Lottery awards made as Lottery funding should be distributed according to need. The Government are, however, committed to ensuring that Lottery funding is distributed fairly both geographically and across all groups of society. This is reflected in the changes made to Lottery distribution through the National Lottery Act 1998, and through the revised Policy Directions which I issued in summer 1998.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money was spent by the National Lottery on each of the various sectors of activity which it supported during 1999. [111805]

Kate Hoey: The amount of National Lottery money drawn down from the National Lottery Distribution Fund for expenditure on grants and administrative costs during 1999 was as follows:

	£
Arts	287,109,753
Charities	355,530,515
Heritage	256,505,732
Millennium	559,325,000
Sport	410,416,825
Health, Education and the Environment	31,304,340
Total	1,900,192,165

Nazi Art Thefts

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which national museums and galleries have conducted in the last two years a review of their holdings of art and cultural objects to identify works which might have been looted during the Nazi era; how many items have been identified to date by each museum and gallery; and if he will make a statement. [111642]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* In December 1998 the National Museum Directors' Conference (NMDC) published a Statement of Principles and Actions relating to the Spoliation of Art during the Holocaust and World War II, making a commitment for 23 national museums, galleries and libraries to consider what research should be undertaken into the provenance of works of art in their collections for the period 1933–45.

The plans for such research were published in April 1999 (and a copy was subsequently placed in the Library of the House)—see written answer for 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 230W, in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright).

I understand that it is the intention of the NMDC to publish the results of this research on Tuesday 29 February on the Internet.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to encourage the owners of privately-owned art and cultural collections to examine their collections for items which might have been looted during the Nazi period. [111641]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* I hope that the announcement of the Panel will encourage owners to examine the provenance of relevant items in their collections. I have no powers to require them to do so, as stated in the Terms of Reference published in reply to my hon. Friend's Question on 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 627–29W. The Panel will be available to advise about any claim for an item in a private collection at the joint request of the claimant and the owner.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what powers will the Spoliation Advisory Panel have in the event of a dispute between a person or body holding art or cultural objects which are suspected of having been looted by the Nazi regime, and a person or body claiming ownership of the item or items concerned; and if he will make a statement. [111646]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 627–29W, and the Terms of Reference of the Panel. If such a situation arises it will be for the Panel to recommend what they consider to be the appropriate action.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what consultations have been held, what representations have been received to date and what further consultations he plans to hold in respect of the membership of the Spoliation Advisory Panel; and if he will make a statement; [111644]

(2) what steps he plans to take to ensure that the Spoliation Advisory Panel includes persons who have knowledge and understanding of the *(a)* circumstances in which the Nazi regime looted art treasures, *(b)* the type of art and cultural objects which were looted by the Nazi regime, *(c)* the art market in the 1930s to the 1950s in continental Europe and *(d)* the organisation and modus operandi of the Nazi regime; and that they are representative of the communities victimised by the Nazi regime; [111645]

(3) what procedures he proposes to adopt in making appointments to the Spoliation Advisory Panel; and if places on the Panel will be advertised; [111640]

(4) when he will complete the appointments to the Spoliation Advisory Panel; and when he expects it to commence work. [111639]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Department's normal appointments procedures, which comply fully with the Commissioner for Public Appointments' guidance, are being followed. These procedures include: specification of the knowledge and skills required in members of the Panel; independent scrutiny and the identification of candidates from a range of sources, including inviting nominations from interested groups; and searches of the Department's and the Cabinet Office's databases of potential candidates for appointment. I have not judged public advertisement to be

necessary in this case. I expect to be able to announce the full membership of the Panel within a very few weeks and for the Panel to commence work during March.

Austria (Bilateral Meetings)

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many bilateral meetings were held between his Department and its Austrian counterpart in each of the last five years; and what was discussed at each meeting since May 1997. [109871]

Mr. Chris Smith: My hon. Friend the Minister for Arts met Frau Elizabeth Gehrer, the Austrian Minister for Education and Culture, on 9 October 1998. The meeting covered a wide range of cultural issues on topics in my hon. Friend's area of responsibility such as museums, galleries and the historic environment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), the then Minister for the Arts, met Dr. Peter Wittman, the then Austrian Culture Minister, on a number of occasions (11 June 1997, 15 October 1997, 23 February 1998, 8 June 1998) to discuss various issues, including the future of the EU's cultural programme, the 2001 City of Culture, cross-border book pricing, cultural aspects of enlargement, the Birmingham Audio-visual Conference and Austria's priorities during the Presidency. He also met Mrs. Ferrero Waldner, the then Austrian Deputy Foreign Minister (now Foreign Minister) on 30 march 1998 to discuss similar issues. Agenda 2000 and plans for the Global Summit in Vienna were also discussed at that meeting.

Ministers and officials may have had some further bilateral contacts with their Austrian counterparts in the margins of international or EU meetings, but have not held bilateral meetings outside that context. My Department does not routinely keep records of such contacts.

I have not been able to identify any records of bilateral meetings held by Ministers or officials under the previous administration.

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those previously planned meetings and their subject, between his Department and its Austrian counterpart which have been cancelled since the formation of the new Austrian Government. [109897]

Mr. Chris Smith: None. My Department had not planned any recent or forthcoming bilateral meetings with its Austrian counterpart.

Lottery Grants

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W, on lottery grants by organisations in *(a)* Gloucestershire and *(b)* Tewkesbury, what was the total value of National Lottery grants applied for. [111433]

Kate Hoey: The total value of Lottery applications from Gloucestershire is £163,111,886; the total value of applications from Tewkesbury is £22,987,247. These figures exclude applications to the Millennium Commission and the New Opportunities Fund, and the figure for Tewkesbury also excludes applications to the Arts Council of England, as these bodies do not hold information in the form requested.

Film

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the roles of the Film Council and the British Film Institute in supporting the national and regional development of film and moving image exhibitions, education and archives. [111365]

Janet Anderson: From April 2000, Government funding to support film and moving image culture will flow through the Film Council. The Film Council will develop a cultural strategy in close consultation with the British Film Institute, and agree broad objectives with the BFI arising from the strategy. The BFI will then develop detailed plans for the delivery of those objectives in its specialist areas, education, exhibition and collections. The BFI and the Film Council will also work closely with regional partners to ensure wide access to the benefits of Government support.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111595]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Department's current Green Housekeeping Strategy and Action Plan requires for paper usage:

To use recycled paper containing 80 per cent. post consumer waste for all non-specialist printing, copying and stationery needs—specifying that the virgin pulp (if any) and the recycling process is chlorine free.

This target is regularly exceeded as paper containing 100 per cent. post consumer waste is used for all non-specialised printing and copying within the Department. We also specify in contracts to our consultants and contractors that, wherever possible, their documents and reports meet the same standards.

All waste paper within the Department is collected separately for recycling.

Foreign Film Companies

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what levels of inward investment have resulted from the activities of foreign-owned film companies in the United Kingdom in each of the past 10 years. [110825]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Information on the levels of inward investment into the UK by foreign-owned film companies is available only from 1992. The figures are as follows:

Total film inward investment

Year	*£ millions*
1992	58.50
1993	127.74
1994	182.65

Total film inward investment

Year	*£ millions*
1995	216.45
1996	387.1
1997	261.90
1998	214.20
1999	336.37

Note:
The figures cover the total cost of films made in the UK by foreign-owned companies, not just the expenditure in the UK. However, this will be offset by expenditure in the UK on post-production of films shot outside the UK.
Source:
British Film Commission.

Tourism Summit

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport where the Tourism Summit will be held. [112081]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Summit will be held at the conference facilities of The Globe Theatre in London.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many representatives of small business have been invited to the Tourism Summit. [112084]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have encouraged small businesses, and all tourism businesses, to participate fully in the Tourism Forum. As our strategy, Tomorrow's Tourism, promised, it is through the Forum that the industry reports on progress made with the strategy, and it is to the Forum that I will report back the achievements of the Tourism Summit in April.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Tourism Summit will discuss Government funding of tourism. [112082]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government set out their public expenditure plans, including the plans for tourism, in 1998. These are plans for a period of three years and, as with other public expenditure plans, will be reviewed during the course of this year.

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 537W, if he will place a copy of the standard research contract currently in use by his Department in the Library. [111674]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have placed a copy of the draft contract in the Library of the House.

Sporting Events

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps are being taken to ensure that major United Kingdom and international sporting events hosted in the United Kingdom benefit all the regions and nations of the United Kingdom. [110605]

Kate Hoey: This Government place great importance on a fair geographical spread of major international events so that all of the UK may enjoy the sporting and wider benefits from staging such events. Last year, for example, matches in the Rugby Union World Cup and the Cricket World Cup were played throughout the UK. To ensure a fair distribution, UK Sport is now a Lottery distributor and funding is available on an equal basis to events throughout the UK. Indeed, in 1999 and 2000, Lottery funding was allocated or will be allocated for some 13 major events in all four home countries.

Museum Admission Charges

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the Government's policy regarding admission charges for museums. [110604]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Funds have been made available to permit free access for children since April 1999 and free access for pensioners from April 2000 to the currently charging national museums funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We are continuing to assess the most effective ways of extending access in 2001. However, decisions will ultimately be taken by the Trustees.

26. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make the provision of free and concessionary tickets for young people for admission to museums and galleries a condition of funding by his Department. [110623]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Funds have been made available to permit free access for children (defined as 16s and under) since April 1999, to the currently charging national museums funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

BBC

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the written submissions made to *(a)* The Peacock Committee on financing the BBC, *(b)* the 1988 White Paper "Broadcasting in the Nineties" and *(c)* the Davies Inquiry into BBC funding. [109994]

Janet Anderson: The organisations which submitted evidence to the Peacock Committee and to the Davies panel are listed in Annexe B and Annexe 4 of the respective reports, copies of which are in the Libraries of the House. The Government have published a list of the organisations which responded to the public consultation on the Davies panel's report when it announces its decisions on the panel's recommendations. This information for the 1988 White Paper, "Broadcasting In The Nineties", is not available.

Paper and Timber Products

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will ensure that paper and timber products purchased by his Department are independently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as coming from a sustainable source. [110193]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Forest Stewardship Council label is accepted by buyers as demonstrating that timber and timber products have come from sustainably managed sources. However, it is a voluntary scheme and there are other, equally valid verification schemes. Consequently, it is not practicable to require that all paper and timber

products purchased by the Department are certified solely by the FSC because this might discriminate against other products and therefore be contrary to public procurement rules. It might also result in the Department failing to meet its full requirements as currently only a small proportion of timber products are FSC certified.

The Department's Green Housekeeping Strategy includes as its first aim the conservation of energy, water, wood, paper and other resources, particularly those that are scarce or non-renewable. For timber products, the accompanying Action Plan requires the Department to:

To purchase sustainably produced timber and timber products which, as far as possible, come from forests and plantations that have been independently verified as well managed with the trees grown and harvested in a way which maintains biodiversity, productivity and vitality and prevents harm to other eco-systems and any indigenous people or forest-dependent people; and to consider buying reclaimed or products made from reclaimed timber where cost effective and practicable to do so.

For paper and paper products, the Action Plan requires the Department

To use recycled paper containing 80 per cent. post consumer waste for all non-specialist printing, copying and stationery needs—specifying that the virgin pulp (if any) and the recycling process is chlorine free.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he has taken to ensure that paper and timber products purchased by his Department come from a sustainable source. [110192]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Department's Green Housekeeping Strategy includes as its first aim the conservation of energy, water, wood, paper and other resources, particularly those that are scarce or non-renewable. For timber products, the accompanying Action Plan requires the Department

To purchase sustainably produced timber and timber products which, as far as possible, come from forests and plantations that have been independently verified as well managed with the trees grown and harvested in a way which maintains biodiversity, productivity and vitality and prevents harm to other eco-systems and any indigenous people or forest-dependent people; and to consider buying reclaimed or products made from reclaimed timber where cost effective and practicable to do so.

For paper and paper products, the Action Plan requires the Department

To use recycled paper containing 80 per cent. post consumer waste for all non-specialist printing, copying and stationery needs—specifying that the virgin pulp (if any) and the recycling process is chlorine free.

The Department pursues these aims by requesting that suppliers provide relevant evidence (independently verified if necessary) that such products come from sustainable sources. An example of this is the Forest Stewardship Council's "kitemark". In addition, we check requirements against the DETR publication "Green Guide for Buyers—a Checklist".

Departmental Secondees

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many staff were seconded from the private sector to his Department in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to the latest date for which figures are available, stating in each case the companies from which staff have been seconded. [109292]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 9 February 2000]:* In my Department, secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative, which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. All sectors of the economy are involved: Voluntary, Education, Health, Public and Private. Interchange is a key component of the reform agenda. The Modernising Government White Paper committed us to increasing interchange, in particular by bringing in more people on secondment and sending more of our people out.

The staff seconded from the private sector to my Department are as follows:

(a) One secondment for the period May 1997 to April 1998 from Trench Farrow and Partners, who left in December 1998. One specialist from the music sector was employed on a short term contract during this period and this arrangement continues.

(b) There were no new secondments during the period May 1998 to April 1999. One specialist from the music sector was employed on a short term contract during this period and this arrangement continues.

(c) There have been no new secondments from the private sector since May 1999 but two specialists from the tourism and sports sectors have been employed on short term contracts and these arrangements continue.

National Lottery Grants (Burton)

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many applications for National Lottery grants have been received to date from organisations within the Burton constituency; and how many have been successful. [110741]

Kate Hoey: 188 applications for National Lottery grants have been received to date from organisations in the Burton constituency. Of these, 71 applications have been successful. The total number of applications and the number of successful awards exclude figures from the Millennium Commission which does not hold the information in the form requested.

Sports Action Zones

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has for funding local community sports areas to serve housing estates *(a)* within Sports Action Zones and *(b)* outside designated Sports Action Zones. [111113]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Sport England will allocate at least two-thirds of the planned budget of the Lottery Sports Fund of £200 million per year over the next 10 years to the Community Projects Fund supporting community sports provision for all. As a priority, it will ensure that at leat 50 per cent. of this money is invested in projects which will benefit communities in areas of deprivation such as Sport Action Zones.

Broadcasting and Telecommunications

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if his Department is the lead department in respect of the forthcoming paper on broadcasting and telecommunications issues. [111497]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Trade and Industry are assuming joint and equal responsibility for the preparation of the White Paper on the reform of broadcasting and communications legislation.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people from ethnic minorities have been recruited to each of the services for which his Department has set recruitment targets since the targets were established; how many personnel from ethnic minorities have left, prior to normal retirement age, each of these services in the same period; and if he will make a statement. [111319]

Mr. Straw: I published on 28 July 1999 targets for the employment of ethnic minority staff in the Home Office and its service areas, that is the police, fire, prison and the probation services. The purpose of these race equality employment targets is to help ensure that these organisations are representative of the communities they serve, and thereby better able to serve them.

In the targets publication a commitment was given to report on progress annually. It is expect that the first report will be published in October this year. This is the date by which up to date information on progress within the financial year 1999–2000 on the targets from all the services will be available; such information is not readily available at the moment.

Advertising Budget

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average cost of issuing a media release from his Department in 1999. [110275]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 16 February 2000]:* Some 450 press releases were issued in 1999. The primary cost of issuing press releases relates to their electronic distribution which is carried out through the Central Office of Information, and postage. Electronic news distribution charges amounted to £21,095 and postage approximately £12,000 for the financial year 1999–2000. No central record of other costs which might be involved (eg faxing, e-mail) is available. The variation in the distribution and length of press releases and in their preparation, combined with the fact that many include accompanying documents, makes the calculation of a robust average charge an exercise which would be disproportionately costly.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his Department's advertising budget for *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [110262]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 16 February 2000]:* The Home Office advertising budget for financial year 1999–2000 is £5.9 million.

The Home Office advertising budget for financial year 2000–01 has not yet been decided.

Police (Port Duties)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers are employed specifically on port duties at each of the major ports in England and Wales. [110469]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Operational deployment of police officers is a matter for the Chief Constable. Details of the number of police based at each port in England and Wales is not collated centrally.

Grants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the initiatives launched by his Department since May 1997 under which specific grants are allocated, indicating in each case and for each financial year the funding provided by central Government. [109318]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 10 February 2000]:* The information requested for the three financial years 1997–98 to 1999–2000 is provided in the following table. The figures for 1999–2000 are estimates. The figures do not take account of any locally funded initiatives undertaken by individual prisons nor all those funded by Non-Departmental Public Bodies, as such details could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The table does not include specific grants to bodies where these were first initiated before May 1997.

£000

New initiative receiving grant funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000* [1]
Crime reduction programme			
Crime reduction partnership training and support	—	—	800
Reducing burglary	—	—	600
Targeted policing	—	—	600
On track	—	—	200
Work with offenders	—	—	900
Intervention in schools	—	—	600
Youth inclusion schemes	—	—	100
Sentencing and restorative justice	—	—	200
Design against crime	—	—	400
Development of arrest referral schemes	—	—	700
Council for the registration of forensic practitioners	—	—	200
CCTV initiative	15,000	1,500	3,600
Support for victims			
Payment of grant to the 'support after murder and manslaughter' charity	—	43	100
Community support grants			
Active community initiatives	—	—	700
Older volunteers initiative	—	—	788
Regional voluntary sector networks	—	—	573

£000

New initiative receiving grant funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000 [1]
Support for community self-help	—	—	420
Business partnerships	—	—	137
Drugs prevention advisory service			
National drugs users network	—	—	25
Family support grant			
National family and parenting institute	—	—	200
Family support grant	—	—	1,000
ParentLine	—	—	333
Fire service youth training association	25	0	25
Reception and resettlement of refugees			
Montseratt community support trust	723	511	537
Kosovan evacuees (support for local authorities)	—	—	45,000
Kosovan evacuees: support for voluntary bodies	—	—	9,612
National asylum support services (NASS)			
Refugee council	—	—	930
Central services team	—	—	160
Refugee council offices	—	—	54
Migrant helpline	—	—	294
Refugee arrivals project	—	—	293
Refugee action	—	—	304
Scottish refugee council	—	—	128
Welsh refugee council	—	—	35
Youth justice board			
Grants for the development of good practice in work with young offenders and those at risk of offending	—	—	30,800
Grant to the women's aid federation (England)	—	—	12
Prison service initiatives			
Partners of prisoners' support groups	—	27	—
Federation of prisoners' families support groups	—	19	—
Institute of linguists educational trust	—	3	—
Prisoners' community liaison	—	9	—
Female prisoners' welfare project	—	20	—
The new bridge to support rehabilitative projects	—	20	20
Prisons video trust	—	—	70
Literacy and black incarceration project	—	—	7

[1] The funding for 1999–2000 is estimated as final figures cannot be provided until the end of the current financial year

Police Officers (Insurance)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers *(a)* in each police authority and *(b)* as a percentage of officers employed do not hold (i) occupational accident and (ii) ill-health insurance. [110930]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

Although there is no requirement for police officers to obtain ill health or accident insurance, or for police authorities to provide such cover, I understand that some forces have set up their own contributory health trusts and that others encourage police officers to take out private health insurance. All forces also offer medical support services and can provide additional specialist medical treatment for police officers where necessary.

The Police Pension Scheme provides a range of benefits in respect of police officers who become disabled or die in service.

Prison Service (Disability Legislation)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the application of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Disability Rights Commission Act 1999 to the Prison Service. [112123]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has recognised the responsibilities placed on it by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and has already adopted good practice in the areas of recruitment, training and promotion of staff. It welcomes the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission and the role it will play in protecting the rights of disabled people. As a disability symbol user it demonstrates the importance it places on achieving equality of opportunity for people with disabilities.

The Prison Service has a duty of care to all prisoners and its policies towards disabled prisoners have been developed to meet the requirements of Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Goods, Facilities and

Services). These policies require that disabled prisoners have equality of opportunity to access a range of facilities such as work, education and programmes.

Gammahydroxybutyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to reclassify gammahydroxybutyrate as a drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971; [111876]

(2) if he will reclassify gammahydroxybutyrate as a drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971; and if he will make a statement; [111721]

(3) what plans he has for an announcement about the reclassification of GHB from a medicine to a drug. [111161]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Gammahydroxybutyrate (GHB) is not licensed as a medicinal product in the United Kingdom but is regarded as an unlicensed "medicinal product" under the provisions of the Medicines Act 1968. The Medicines Control Agency investigates reports of the unlawful manufacture, advertising sale and supply of GHB in the United Kingdom and has brought a number of successful prosecutions in the last few years.

With regard to the question of the classification of GHB under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon, South (Ms Drown), on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 95W.

Correspondence

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Cotswold will receive a definitive reply from the Immigration and Nationality Department to his letters of 2 August 1999, 2 September 1999 and 9 October 1999, in the case of Mr. Resal Cerikan and leave to remain in the UK (IND Ref: Cl000625 (S) (C449744)). [111792]

Mrs. Roche: A reply was sent to the hon. Member on 24 February. I am sorry for the delay.

Women Prison Officers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women prison officers were working in segregation units of prison in England and Wales on 1 February. [111934]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The total number of women prison officer grades working in public sector prisons in England and Wales on 1 February was 3,543.

It is not possible to provide data for those working solely in segregation units as staff may be deployed to any part of the prison at any time and records are not available centrally for specific units or wings.

Smoke Detectors

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to encourage people to install smoke detectors in their homes. [112316]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Smoke detectors make a significant contribution to the protection of life and property from fire and we would want all households to have them.

Current Building Regulations require all new dwellings in England and Wales to have a smoke detector system installed. Publicity and education have in recent years helped raise smoke alarm ownership levels from less than 10 per cent. of households in 1987 to over 80 per cent. But we are determined to increase this further and the Home Office National Community Fire Safety Centre will be running a fresh campaign with the fire service later this year to reaffirm the value of smoke detectors in giving early warning in the event of fire.

Hillsborough Inquiry

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 259W, on the Hillsborough inquiry, *(a)* when the material is to be loaned to the designated library and *(b)* to which library it is to be loaned. [111718]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that the House Library hopes to finalise arrangements shortly for the papers to be sent to the Liverpool Record Office at the Liverpool Central Library.

Supporting Families

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to what uses *(a)* ParentLine and *(b)* the National Family and Parenting Institute have put grant given to them from public funds since publication of the consultation document, Supporting Families; and if he will make a statement. [111806]

Mr. Straw: In the first year of their three year grant from the Home Office; ParentLine has launched a new national freephone number, with expanded operating hours. ParentLine has expanded its call taking capacity by taking on and training volunteers, and has developed a national structure, training, standards and call data analysis. ParentLine has expanded its call-taking capacity from 12,000 to 80,000, and will reach its eventual target of 500,000 calls per year by April 2002.

The National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) was formally incorporated as a company with a board of trustees in April 1999. The first Chief Executive, Mary McLeod, was appointed in September and started work in October. Government funding for the NFPI began in October 1999. Since then, the Institute had its official launch in November, and has been engaged in recruiting staff, locating premises, and building a strategy and corporate plan. A key focus for these first months is developing awareness of the role and vision of the NFPI, and raising the profile of parenting and family issues in the media.

The Institute has also started on some major pieces of work that will be completed by the end of this year. For example, the Institute has begun an exercise to map

the support available to families at local level across the country. They will also take forward a face to face survey of parents to ask them about the support they want.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will state in respect of each of the last five years *(a)* the number of asylum decisions taken broken down by the nationality of claimants and *(b)* the number of claimants of each nationality who were (i) accepted as refugees, (ii) refused refugee status and (iii) granted exceptional leave to remain; [111886]

(2) if he will list for each of the last five years the number of asylum claims in the United Kingdom broken down by the nationality of the claimant. [111887]

Mrs. Roche: Information regarding asylum applications, by nationality, for each of the years 1995 to 1998, is given in Table 2.2 of the Home Office statistical bulletin "Asylum Statistics United Kingdom, 1998". Information on asylum decisions made, by type and nationality during this period is given in tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 of the same publication, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Information on asylum applications made in 1999, by nationality, is given in the table. Similar information on decisions made, by nationality, is not yet available. Figures for total asylum decisions made in 1999 can be accessed via the Internet at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm.

New asylum applications [1,2] received in the United Kingdom, 1999

	Year to December
Europe	
Bulgaria	80
Cyprus	20
Poland	1,860
Romania	1,985
Former USSR	4,105
Turkey	2,850
Former Yugoslavia	14,180
Others	3,200
Total	28,280
Americas	
Columbia	1,000
Others	1,025
Total	2,025
Middle East	
Iran	1,320
Iraq	1,800
Lebanon	240
Others	805
Total	4,165
Africa	
Algeria	1,385
Angola	545
Cameroon	245
Democratic Republic of Congo	1,240
Ethiopia	455
Gambia	30
Ghana	195
Ivory Coast	190
Kenya	485
Liberia	65
Nigeria	945
Rwanda	820
Sierra Leone	1,125
Somalia	7,495
South Africa	90
Sudan	280
Tanzania	80
Togo	60
Uganda	420
Zimbabwe	230
Others	2,045
Total	18,435
Asia	
Afghanistan	3,975
Bangladesh	530
China	2,625
India	1,365
Pakistan	2,615
Sri Lanka	5,130
Others	1,225
Total	17,465
Other and unknown nationalities	785
Grand Total	71,160

[1] Excluding dependants

[2] Figures rounded to the nearest 5

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers left the United Kingdom in each of the last five years *(a)* voluntarily, *(b)* through administrative removal, *(c)* through deportation and *(d)* following enforcement action; and if he will make a statement. [111888]

Mrs. Roche: The available information, relating to removals and voluntary departures of persons who have applied for asylum at some stage, is given in the table. Failed asylum seekers are removed only once all their rights of appeal in the United Kingdom have been exhausted. It should be noted that the figures include those removed on a third country basis and may include some persons who withdrew their asylum application or appeal before a decision or determination had been reached. Section 10 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, which provides for the administrative removal of certain categories of persons currently liable to deportation, has yet to be brought into force.

Removals and voluntary departures of asylum applicants, excluding dependants, 1995 to 1999 [1]

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999 [1]*
Removals under port procedures					
Refused and Removed	1,890	2,695	4,100	3,460	4,895
of which:					
Voluntary departures [1]	615	715	1,090	1,105	[2]—

Removals and voluntary departures of asylum applicants, excluding dependants, 1995 to 1999 [1]

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999* [1]
Removals under enforcement procedures					
Deportation removals	225	405	455	350	140
Of which:					
Voluntary departures[4, 5]	50	95	135	100	[2]—
Illegal entry removals	1,065	1,740	2,605	3,090	2,610
Of which:					
Voluntary departures[4, 5]	240	330	580	620	[2]—
Total asylum removals	3,180	4,840	7,160	6,900	7,645
Of which:					
Voluntary departures[3, 4, 5]	905	1,140	1,805	1,825	[2]—

[1] Figures are provisional

[2] Not available

[3] Includes voluntary departures up to and including notification of the decision on the asylum application for port applicants

[4] Includes only those voluntary departures taking place after the initiation of enforcement action for in-country applicants

[5] 1998 voluntary departures are estimated

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest five.

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to use Adamton House at Prestwick for accommodation for asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [111989]

Mrs. Roche: A general invitation to tender for the provision of accommodation and related services as part of our new support arrangements for asylum seekers was issued last November. We are currently holding discussions with prospective suppliers aimed at enabling contracts to be awarded very shortly. Information provided by suppliers within the tender process, including property details, is commercially confidential.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers entered the United Kingdom during 1999; and how many have been placed in accommodation in *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [111308]

Mrs. Roche: Total asylum applications in 1999 were 71,160. Information is not held centrally on where these asylum seekers have been accommodated.

Under the interim dispersal scheme which started on 6 December 1999, a total of 1,288 asylum applicants to date have been dispersed from London and the South East to other areas of the country. All of these were dispersed to areas in England. Scotland and Northern Ireland are not included in the interim scheme.

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library copies of the correspondence between himself and the Committee on Standards in Public Life relating to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill since the first reading of the Bill. [111919]

Mr. Straw: Yes. I wrote to the noble Lord, Lord Neill, on 22 December 1999 and 17 January 2000, and he replied to the second of my letters on 4 February 2000. Copies of the three letters have been placed in the Library.

Metropolitan Police (Recruitment)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the policy of the Metropolitan Police Service with regard to the *(a)* reviewing of applications, *(b)* re-interviewing of applicants and *(c)* employment of applicants for recruitment in cases where applications have been declined after an interview. [111813]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the Metropolitan Police are reviewing their recruitment process. As part of this, about 1,000 applications which were rejected in the last half of 1999 are being reviewed. Where, as a result, applicants might now appear suitable, they are being asked whether they wish to pursue their original application.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many recruits to the Metropolitan Police Service have been employed notwithstanding the fact that their applications were initially declined after an interview in each of the years *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date. [111814]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is not recorded centrally.

Criminal Records Bureau

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 409W, on the Criminal Records Bureau, if he will list the members of the SERCO-led consortium. [111097]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In the e.Cres consortium, the prime contractor is SERCO, with DeLoitte Consulting and ICL as sub-contractors.

British Citizenship

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he has involved the Family Policy Division of the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Legal Visitor of the Court of Protection in the review by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate of the full capacity requirement for renunciation of British citizenship and applications for it under the British Nationality Act 1981; [111409]

(2) when he will publish the report of the review by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate of the full capacity requirement for renunciation of British citizenship and applications for it under the British Nationality Act 1981; and whether he will consult *(a)* MIND, *(b)* SANE, *(c)* NSF, *(d)* the Zito Trust and *(e)* other organisations concerned with mental health before deciding finally on any changes to the law or regulation. [111408]

Mrs. Roche: It is not possible to say when the review will be completed. It is being conducted as other priorities permit. I shall, of course, take note of my hon. Friend's suggestions as to who might be consulted.

Prison Nursing Service

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce prison nursing services run jointly with the local NHS trust hospital in the area of the prison; and if he will make a statement. [111465]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Improvements to the way nursing services are organised and delivered in prison are an essential part of the reforms to prison healthcare now underway following the Government's acceptance of the recommendations in the joint Prison Service/ National Health Service Executive report, 'The Future Organisation of Healthcare' published in March 1999.

Prisons and health authorities are jointly assessing prisoners' health needs at establishment level in order to identify, among other things, ways of delivering nursing services which both meet those needs and are integrated with local provision. One particular objective will be to ensure that nursing staff who work in prisons enjoy the same level of professional involvement, clinical supervision and training as their colleagues who work in the National Health Service. To assist this my right hon. Friend, the Minister of State for the Home Office asked Ms Liz Haggard of the Office of Public Management to chair a working group to consider the development of the prison nursing workforce, with particular reference to healthcare officers, and report, with recommendations, by mid-March 2000.

Prison Segregation

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were being held in segregation units of prisons in England and Wales on 14 February. [111464]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 14 February 2000, there were 1,433 men and 13 women recorded as being held in segregation units in prisons in England and Wales.

Prisons (Disabled People)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many disabled people were in prison in England and Wales on 14 February; [111467]

(2) how many disabled *(a)* men and *(b)* women who were confined to wheelchairs were being held in prisons in England and Wales on 14 February. [111466]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally.

Prisoners (Controls and Constraints)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the control and constraints that are permitted to be used on inmates in prisons in England and Wales; what records the prison authorities must keep of their use; what obligation there is for the governor of the prison to be informed immediately of the use of such restraints; and if he will make a statement. [111141]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The various control and restraint techniques and the authority for their use on prisoners in England and Wales are contained in Prison Service Order 1600 (Use of Force) and Standing Order 13 (Health Matters), copies of which are in the Library. The Orders make clear that only reasonable force may ever be used and that on every occasion that it is a formal record must be made and kept. Whenever the use of force is planned it is authorised by the governor. However, officers may use force in immediate response to violent incidents when it is impractical to obtain the prior authority of the governor.

Prison Boards of Visitors

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many board of visitors annual reports for 1999 have been received by his Department; and if he will list the boards of visitors and the prisons for which they are responsible. [111463]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Annual reports to my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary for 1999 had been received from the 80 Boards of Visitors listed in the table as at 18 February 2000. Reports from the remaining 53 boards due to submit their annual report for 1999 should be received by 31 March 2000.

Of the 80 Boards of Visitors only one—Grendon/ Springhill—has responsibility for more than one establishment.

1999 Annual Reports received from Boards of Visitors

Establishment

Acklington
Albany
Aldington
Altcourse
Ashwell
Askham Grange
Aylesbury
Bedford
Belmarsh
Birmingham
Blakenhurst
Blantyre House
Blundeston
Brinsford
Bristol
Brixton
Brockhill
Buckley Hall
Bullingdon
Bullwood Hall

Camp Hill
Canterbury
Cardiff
Chelmsford
Coldingley
Cookham Wood
Dartmoor
Deerbolt
Doncaster
Dorchester
Dover
Downview
Drake Hall
Durham
East Sutton Park
Eastwood Park
Elmley
Erlestoke
Everthorpe
Exeter
Featherstone
Feltham
Ford
Foston Hall
Frankland
Full Sutton
Garth
Gartree
Glen Parva
Gloucester
Grendon/Springhill
Guys Marsh
Haslar
Hatfield
Haverigg
Hewell Grange
High Down
Hindley
Hollesley Bay
Huntercombe
Kirkham
Kirklevington
Lancaster Farms
Latchmere House
Leeds
Lewes
Leyhill
Lindholme
Liverpool
Maidstone
Manchester
North Sea Camp
Northallerton
Portland
Ranby
Reading
Risley
Rochester
Send
Shepton Mallet.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111602]

Mr. Straw: Records on the volume of documentation or the percentage of paper recycled in my department are not kept. Trials are being undertaken into various types of recycled paper to establish the practicalities of committing to a policy that stipulates the use of recycled paper. All offices in my department's Central London headquarters buildings have green bins for recycled paper and most of the key buildings across the estate have paper recycling schemes. The department will shortly be undertaking pilot waste minimisation schemes in three different buildings on the estate with the aim of reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill.

The Prison Service has recently set up a Service wide waste management project. The project will identify areas where wastage can be reduced and will address the efficient and effective disposal of prison waste and the recycling of usable waste. Recyclable materials, such as paper will be reprocessed.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilian employees were employed in the Kingston Division of the Metropolitan Police in each of the years 1992 to 2000; and if he will make a statement. [111305]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is in the following table, provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis :

Kingston Police Division

Year	*Police officers*	*Civilian staff*
1992	403	61
1993	375.4	63
1994	395.7	66
1995	373	85
1996	393.3	97
1997	362	87
1998	335	83
1999	313	78
2000	323	73.5

Note:
Figures reflect the position at 31 January of each year.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police station front offices closed to the public in *(a)* the Kingston Division and *(b)* the Metropolitan Police area in each of the years 1992 to 2000; and if he will make a statement. [111306]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis Police informs me that following a review of demand and after consultation with the community, one police station front counter was closed in the Kingston Division in each of the years 1995, 1998 and 1999. There was no such closure in any other year from 1992. Details of police station front counter closures for the entire Metropolitan Police District are not recorded centrally.

and cannot readily be obtained from local records because of the extensive reorganisation of territorial commands in the period concerned.

Special Constables

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many special constables were recruited by each of the police forces in England and Wales between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999; [111474]

(2) how many special constables left each of the police forces in England and Wales between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999. [111472]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The numbers of special constables who were recruited to and left each of the police force special constabularies in England and Wales between 1 October 1998 and 30 September 1999 is set out in the table.

Force	*Recruited*	*Left the special constabulary*
Avon and Somerset	50	152
Bedfordshire	14	40
Cambridgeshire	62	62
Cheshire	18	51
City of London	16	19
Cleveland	33	32
Cumbria	20	36
Derbyshire	30	82
Devon and Cornwall	162	136
Dorset	46	45
Durham	47	30
Dyfed-Powys	28	41
Essex	67	118
Gloucestershire	18	33
Greater Manchester	82	151
Gwent	13	18
Hampshire	176	203
Hertfordshire	34	63
Humberside	125	54
Kent	119	200
Lancashire	47	87
Leicestershire	18	66
Lincolnshire	31	42
Merseyside	105	13
Metropolitan police	[1]—	73
Norfolk	55	88
Northamptonshire	22	66
Northumbria	68	79
North Wales	29	86
North Yorkshire	16	104
Nottinghamshire	38	74
South Wales	43	54
South Yorkshire	56	101
Staffordshire	20	82
Suffolk	103	93
Surrey	21	41
Sussex	47	90
Thames Valley	65	101
Warwickshire	20	95
West Mercia	84	33
West Midlands	119	175
West Yorkshire	137	149
Wiltshire	37	28
Total	2,341	3,386

[1] The number of special constables recruited to the Metropolitan police during the period is not yet available

Source:

Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office

DNA Database

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of the national DNA database in identifying offenders. [111483]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Since it began operating in April 1995, the National DNA Database, operated by the Forensic Science Service on behalf of the police, has proved a highly effective intelligence tool in the fight against crime.

The Database identifies possible suspects of a crime through matching DNA from unsolved crime scene stains with DNA profiles of convicted or suspected people held on the Database. The average match rate is more than 40 per cent. and approximately 500 matches are reported each week to the police for investigation.

PR and Marketing Consultants

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the *(a)* reasons for and *(b)* cost of the use of public relations and marketing consultants by his Department since 1997. [111510]

Mr. Straw: Public relations and marketing consultants are used only where new knowledge and experience is needed which adds value to the Home Office's activities and where the expertise is not available in house or from another source. Cost for the period since 1997 is £111,919.00.

Police Station Closures

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police stations have closed to the public in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999 (i) in each police force area save the Metropolitan Police area and (ii) in the Metropolitan Police area. [111449]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Decisions on the siting and need for police stations are matters for the Chief Officer's operational judgment within the resources available.

Rural Policing

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will take into account the recommendations resulting from his Department's research into the cost of policing in rural areas in deciding the police funding formula for 2001–02; [111515]

(2) what plans he has to implement the recommendations resulting from his Department's research into the cost of policing in rural areas. [111451]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The findings of the independent research report on policing sparsely populated rural areas were considered by a Home Office chaired Working Group, which included representatives of the police service, police authorities and local authorities, last summer. There was no single view within the Working Group on the conclusions of the report. There was general agreement that a sparsity factor had been detected, but less agreement about how to include it appropriately in the police funding formula.

We have also taken into consideration the need for stability in the police funding system to enable police authorities to plan ahead. In the July 1998 White Paper, "Modern Local Government—In Touch With the People", my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said that we would not expect to make fresh changes to the method of calculation of Standard Spending Assessments (SSA) while a fundamental review of the local government grant distribution system is being conducted. This applies equally to the method of police grant distribution, as a common formula is used for distribution of police grant and SSA.

In the light of these factors we have not made any changes to the method of police grant distribution for 2000–01. The Government do not intend to make substantive changes to the funding formula during the more general review of the local government grant distribution system that is being taken forward in consultation with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities.

Rural police forces will continue to benefit from the existing 'sparsity' element of the funding formula. This element allocates 0.5 per cent. of the available funding (about £35 million) on a judgmental basis.

Public Safety Radio Communications Service

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police authorities have signed an initial letter of consent to take the Public Safety Radio Communications Service; and if he will list them. [111471]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Thirty nine out of the 43 police authorities in England and Wales have written, to date, to the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO), which is responsible for the Public Safety Radio Communications Project (PSRCP) to confirm their intention of taking up the Public Safety Radio Communications Service. These authorities are listed as follows:

Police authorities which have notified PITO of their intention to take up the Public Safety Radio Communications Service

Avon and Somerset
Bedfordshire
Cambridgeshire
Cheshire
City of London
Cumbria
Derbyshire
Devon and Cornwall
Dorset
Durham
Dyfed-Powys
Essex
Gloucestershire
Greater Manchester
Gwent
Hampshire
Hertfordshire
Humberside
Kent
Lancashire
Leicestershire
Lincolnshire
Metropolitan
Norfolk
North Wales
North Yorkshire
Northamptonshire
Northumbria
Nottinghamshire
South Wales
South Yorkshire
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Surrey
Sussex
Thames Valley
Warwickshire
West Mercia
Wiltshire.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on whether the implementation of the Public Safety Radio Communications Service is dependent on the number of police authorities who sign up to the project. [111470]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The overwhelming majority of police authorities in England and Wales, 39 out of 43, have already indicated that they intend, subject to satisfaction with the terms, to sign service contracts for the Public Safety Radio Communications Service (PSRCS). On the basis of their support, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is prepared to authorise signature of the Framework Arrangement by the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO), which is responsible for managing the Public Safety Radio Communications Project, provided negotiations are satisfactorily concluded and the necessary approvals secured.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of the cost of the Public Safety Radio Communications Project will be met by police authorities. [111379]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The cost of the core service for the Public Safety Radio Communications Project represents approximately 80 per cent. of the total service charges for police forces in England and Wales. This is to be funded centrally by means of deduction from total police grant provision.

The cost of services additional to the core service, the so called 'menu services', which all forces will purchase according to their own requirements, accounts for the remaining 20 per cent.

Separately from the core and menu service charges, forces will need to purchase control room and radio terminal equipment along with system integration services. Based upon our understanding of the police service's overall requirements, it is estimated that the initial purchase and subsequent replacement costs total around £300 million in Net Present Cost terms over the Public Safety Radio Communications Service life.

Police Officers

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police officers were available for ordinary duty, by rank, for each of the police forces in England and Wales on 30 September 1999; [111513]

(2) what was the total number of constables available for ordinary duty on 30 September 1999 for each of the police forces in England and Wales. [111476]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested details are given in the table as full-time equivalents.

Police strength in England and Wales—total strength for ordinary duty as at 30 September 1999

	All ranks[1]							
Police force	*Chief Constable*	*Assistant Chief Constable*	*Superintendent*	*Chief Inspector*	*Inspector*	*Sergeant*	*Constable*	*Total police ranks*[1]
Avon and Somerset	1.0	3.0	23.0	36.0	147.6	452.4	2,325.7	2,988.7
Bedfordshire	1.0	2.0	13.0	10.0	54.8	141.5	826.1	1,048.4
Cambridgeshire	1.0	2.0	14.0	13.0	61.3	203.5	977.4	1,272.2
Cheshire	1.0	3.0	19.0	30.0	98.0	328.0	1,564.6	2,043.6
City of London	1.0	2.0	8.0	12.0	46.0	100.8	574.8	744.6
Cleveland	1.0	1.0	24.0	2.0	60.0	196.0	1,088.6	1,372.6
Cumbria	1.0	2.0	10.0	19.0	51.0	170.0	839.9	1,092.9
Derbyshire	1.0	3.0	23.0	28.0	94.0	289.0	1,325.6	1,763.6
Devon and Cornwall	1.0	4.0	33.0	45.0	133.0	422.8	2,222.3	2,861.1
Dorset	1.0	2.0	17.0	22.0	66.0	204.1	964.1	1,276.1
Durham	1.0	2.0	18.0	24.0	77.0	208.7	1,224.0	1,554.6
Dyfed Powys	1.0	2.0	15.0	18.0	46.0	179.0	787.6	1,048.6
Essex	1.0	3.0	24.0	46.0	124.0	446.4	2,190.3	2,834.7
Gloucestershire	1.0	2.0	10.0	15.0	55.0	162.2	852.8	1,098.0
Greater Manchester	1.0	6.0	79.0	89.0	337.3	999.6	5,298.4	6,810.3
Gwent	0.0	0.0	14.0	16.0	54.0	200.0	977.3	1,261.3
Hampshire	1.0	3.0	39.4	36.0	164.8	531.4	2,635.2	3,410.8
Hertfordshire	1.0	3.0	20.0	23.0	96.0	259.3	1,357.7	1,760.0
Humberside	1.0	2.0	20.0	26.0	103.0	279.6	1,494.6	1,926.2
Kent	1.0	4.0	26.0	38.0	142.0	473.4	2,572.3	3,256.7
Lancashire	1.0	3.0	34.0	36.0	164.0	519.1	2,464.4	3,221.4
Leicestershire	1.0	3.0	16.0	19.0	95.0	271.4	1,592.1	1,997.5
Lincolnshire	1.0	2.0	11.0	17.0	65.0	185.5	829.3	1,110.8
Merseyside	1.0	3.0	50.0	55.0	176.0	615.8	3,170.1	4,070.8
Metropolitan police[2]	7.0	29.0	214.0	388.6	1,208.5	4,050.9	19,986.5	25,884.5
Norfolk	1.0	2.0	17.0	22.0	73.0	203.4	1,063.2	1,381.5
Northamptonshire	1.0	2.0	12.0	10.0	50.6	174.1	880.3	1,130.0
Northumbria	1.0	4.0	36.0	56.0	183.8	532.9	2,986.4	3,800.1
North Wales	1.0	1.0	16.0	29.0	71.0	232.0	1,049.0	1,399.0
North Yorkshire	1.0	1.0	12.0	12.0	53.0	215.5	999.2	1,293.7
Nottinghamshire	1.0	3.0	21.0	19.6	117.0	328.0	1,737.4	2,227.0
South Wales	1.0	4.0	30.0	36.0	159.0	442.0	2,311.0	2,983.0
South Yorkshire	1.0	4.0	38.0	46.0	168.0	485.8	2,422.2	3,165.0
Staffordshire	1.0	3.0	21.0	27.0	112.0	337.7	1,704.3	2,206.0
Suffolk	1.0	2.0	13.0	15.0	55.0	171.4	902.6	1,160.0
Surrey	1.0	3.0	16.0	19.0	76.5	261.8	1,343.9	1,721.1
Sussex	1.0	4.0	27.0	38.0	152.4	466.0	2,221.0	2,909.3
Thames Valley	1.0	3.0	43.0	28.0	194.0	565.4	2,915.2	3,749.5
Warwickshire	1.0	1.0	10.0	8.0	47.0	124.5	724.2	915.7
West Mercia	1.0	3.0	18.0	30.0	99.0	299.7	1,528.7	1,979.4
West Midlands	1.0	4.0	59.0	46.0	307.0	987.4	5,892.0	7,296.4
West Yorkshire	1.0	4.0	45.0	75.0	238.0	669.4	3,840.6	4,873.0
Wiltshire	1.0	2.0	14.0	18.0	62.0	177.9	875.3	1,150.2
NCS	1.0	5.0	17.0	33.0	85.0	252.0	943.0	1,336.0
NCIS	1.044	2.0	7.0	16.0	20.0	62.0	131.0	239.0
Total all forces	50.0	148.0	1,246.4	1,647.2	6,042.5	18,878.8	96,611.9	124,624.7

[1] Full-time equivalents
[2] The Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioners are counted as Chief Constables

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of police officers who will be diverted from public duties to statistical operations as a result of new Home Office targets. [111452]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The deployment of police officers is the operational responsibility of Chief Constables. However, the introduction of best value into the police service from April this year and the requirement that year on year efficiency savings of 2 per cent. must be recycled into front line policing should allow Chief Constables to allocate more officers to the essential job of reducing crime. Information Technology systems being delivered under the National Strategy for Police Information Systems and new radio technology for the police being provided as part of the Public Safety Radio Communications Strategy, will also do much to free officers from administrative burdens.

Police authorities already set a wide range of targets for existing performance indicators. The new arrangements for crime targets are a refinement of this. The recently announced proposed targets for domestic burglary, vehicle crime and, for five police authorities, robbery, demonstrate the police service's commitment to setting challenging, but realistic five year reduction targets for the crimes which are of most concern to the public.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers from ethnic minorities *(a)* have completed the police service accelerated promotion scheme and *(b)* are currently on the accelerated promotion scheme. [111481]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Three ethnic minority police officers have successfully completed the Accelerated Promotion scheme since its inception in 1992, and five are currently on the Scheme. These include two officers who were recently selected through an in-service competition to attend this year's Accelerated Promotion Course, which is an integral part of the Scheme.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the registration of police officers who are freemasons. [111477]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 1 April 1999, the Home Office wrote to the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) requesting that ACPO write to each Chief Constable in England and Wales to ask them to set up voluntary, internal registers of freemasonry membership among their police officers and civilian staff. ACPO duly wrote to each Chief Constable on 7 April 1999. As a result, 34 forces in England and Wales have established voluntary registers.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that there should be more police officers in England and Wales at the end of this parliament than at the start; and if he will make a statement. [110744]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Following the passage of the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994, the actual numbers of police officers at any one time is a matter for Chief Constables to determine. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out his policy on the number of police officers, in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 172–74W.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the implementation of targets for recruitment from ethnic minorities by police forces in England and Wales. [111571]

Mr. Charles Clarke: At the National Conference for the Recruitment, Retention and progression of Black and Asian Police Officers (Dismantling Barriers) in April 1999, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out what the police service targets would be. All forces in England and Wales were set individual targets to reflect their local ethnic minority population within 10 years.

The targets and Dismantling Barriers Action Plan were published in August last year. The 25 point strategic plan was published as part of the Dismantling Barriers programme. The programme aims to remove discriminatory practices in the Police Service and to make it more attractive to all groups that are currently underrepresented in the service.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has also set employment targets for recruitment, retention and progression for the Home Office and all its service areas, that is, police, fire, probation and prison services. These targets were published on 28 July 1999.

Change will not happen overnight and that is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set a 10-year agenda. The use of milestones and regular monitoring will allow the existing momentum to be maintained over the 10-year period. A Targets Working Group, chaired by the Home Office Race Equality Unit has been established to take forward the implementation of the targets. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will also produce a report on progress annually.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police officers were recruited by each of the police forces in England and Wales between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999; [111473]

(2) how many police officers left each of the police forces in England and Wales between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999 due to *(a)* retirement, *(b)* resignation or *(c)* other reasons. [111475]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The details requested are given in the table and are based on numbers of officers rather than full-time equivalents.

Officer recruitment and wastage—October 1998 to September 1999

Police force	*Number of officers*			*Other wastage*
	Recruited	*Retiring*	*Resigning*	
Avon and Somerset	153	76	20	7
Bedfordshire	55	44	8	8
Cambridgeshire	40	46	13	3
Cheshire	81	62	9	3
City of London	11	29	8	17
Cleveland	9	63	12	7
Cumbria	22	48	12	6
Derbyshire	49	40	7	7
Devon and Cornwall	68	100	9	7
Dorset	34	49	13	13
Durham	51	31	11	6
Dyfed Powys	67	27	5	2
Essex	88	116	25	17
Gloucestershire	60	42	9	1
Greater Manchester	229	264	36	22
Gwent	62	46	11	10
Hampshire	106	106	25	43
Hertfordshire	133	55	30	10
Humberside	57	74	9	16
Kent	169	75	33	15
Lancashire	106	74	16	4
Leicestershire	90	49	22	13
Lincolnshire	1	47	8	1
Merseyside	164	144	17	9
Metropolitan Police	1,329	882	329	293
Norfolk	33	38	11	5
Northamptonshire	24	20	21	13
Northumbria	190	86	12	29
North Wales	78	63	1	4
North Yorkshire	1	39	15	4
Nottinghamshire	55	80	11	14
South Wales	198	156	12	12
South Yorkshire	133	90	26	15
Staffordshire	32	51	21	8
Suffolk	31	39	8	6
Surrey	165	58	18	5
Sussex	110	116	51	26

Officer recruitment and wastage—October 1998 to September 1999

Police force	Number of officers Recruited	Retiring	Resigning	Other wastage
Thames Valley	134	97	53	7
Warwickshire	44	30	9	7
West Mercia	55	70	23	6
West Midlands	405	187	68	61
West Yorkshire	4	146	29	24
Wiltshire	39	28	14	1
NCS	255	0	0	281
NCIS	36	2	0	30
Total all forces	5,256	3,985	1,100	1,098

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of possible cultural bias in the testing procedures for promotion to the senior ranks of police. [111450]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An equal opportunities audit is at present under way of the Extended Interview (EI) process by which officers are selected to attend the Strategic Command Course at National Police Training Bramshill. Successful completion of the Course is a requirement for promotion to the rank of Assistant Chief Constable or Commander. The audit will provide an independent assessment of the fairness of the process and will identify areas for further improvement.

The EI process involves a wide range of tests and exercises, designed to give every candidate maximum opportunity to demonstrate his or her competencies and also to promote maximum objectivity in assessment. All assessors receive training from the Home Office Assessment and Consultancy Unit for this task, and the Director and Co-Directors of Police Extended Interviews monitor the process to ensure consistent standards and fairness. Every effort is made to ensure that the questions and tests used are not unfair to any group of candidates.

Police Buildings

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the maintenance costs of police buildings and the projected costs of repairs in 2000–01 and 2001–02. [111482]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, the Audit Commission, in their report "Action Stations—improving the management of the police estate", published in March 1999, stated that in the two thirds of forces able to estimate the expenditure required to bring existing buildings up to a satisfactory state of repair, the maintenance backlog amounted to £205 million.

Crime Tackling Priorities

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the priorities which have been set for tackling different categories of crime in England and Wales. [111480]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have made it clear that our priorities are to reduce domestic burglary, vehicle crime, and violent crime.

Crime Reduction Targets

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when the first assessment of police forces' progress against the crime reduction targets for vehicle crime and burglary will be completed; and if it will be published; [111478]

(2) what mechanisms are in place to assess police forces' progress against the crime reduction targets for vehicle crime and burglary. [111479]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Each police authority's Best Value Performance Plan will be audited each year between 1 April and 30 June. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary will then undertake a series of risk based inspections, an important element of which will be an assessment of the progress a police authority has made towards meeting its five year crime reduction targets. Where targets are not being met, this will have a direct bearing on the appropriate level of inspection.

The recorded crime figures will continue to be published every six months at both police force and Basic Command Unit level. The next publication will be July 2000. These figures will continue to give the public valuable information about how successful their local police have been in reducing crime and what progress has been made towards meeting their crime reduction targets.

Police

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many public relations and/or marketing consultants were engaged by each police force in 1997, 1998 and 1999; [111511]

(2) if he will estimate the number of police officers who currently spend more than 90 per cent. of their working time collating and producing statistics; [111453]

(3) how many press officers were employed in each police force area in 1997, 1998 and 1999. [111512]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Hampshire Constabulary

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilian staff left the Hampshire constabulary in each year since 1991–92. [111300]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information is set out in the table. Information on wastage of civilian staff is not centrally collected.

Hampshire Constabulary 1991 to 1999—total wastage

Year	Officer wastage
1991–92	161
1992–93	147
1993–94	150
1994–95	164
1995–96	159
1996–97	142
1997–98	157
1998–99	137
1999–2000[1]	111

[1] Wastage figures for 1999–2000 are for the first six months only (March to September 1999)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilian staff there were in the establishment of the Hampshire constabulary in each year since 1991–92. [111299]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police force establishments after March 1995 is not available. Under legislation passed by the previous Government in 1994, police officer establishments for each force, set by Government, were abolished from April 1995. It became the responsibility of individual chief constables to determine the number of police offices in their force within the available resources. The Home Office has never set establishments for civilian support staff.

The available information is set out in the table.

Hampshire Constabulary—1991 to 1999

Year (as at 31 March)	*Establishment*	*Police officer strength*	*Civilian support staff*
1991–92	3,202	3,211	1,051.5
1992–93	3,269	3,275	1,077.5
1993–94	3,269	3,270	1,151
1994–95	3,269	3,256	1,230.5
1995–96	n/a	3,347.1	1,323
1996–97	n/a	3,451.7	1,315.6
1997–98	n/a	3,489.5	1,330.9
1998–99	n/a	3,473.4	1,380.7
1999–2000 (as at 30 September)	n/a	3,410.8	1,402.7

Immigration Rules

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has given to the Immigration Service about the interpretation and enforcement of Rule 57(6) of the Immigration Rules following the Government's decision to allow students from outside the European Economic Area to work in this country without a student work permit. [111440]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration Service has been informed of the range of part-time work a student may take without the need for Job Centre approval. There has been no change to the enforcement of paragraph 57(vi) of the Immigration Rules.

West Mercia Police

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each year since 1992 for the Shrewsbury division of West Mercia police *(a)* the number of notifiable offences, *(b)* clear-up rates and *(c)* the number of police officers; and if he will make a statement. [111445]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The total of notifiable offences and clear ups, and numbers of officers, are not collected centrally below police force area level. Details of the numbers of a restricted range of offences for basic command units, including Shrewsbury, for the six month period ended September 1999 are available in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin on recorded crime, issue 1/00, published on 18 January, which is available in the Library.

Child Pornography (Internet)

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what measures the Government are taking to prevent child pornography being placed on the Internet; [111268]

(2) what penalties are in place to deter people from publishing child pornography on the Internet; and what further measures are planned. [111269]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have very strict legislation against child pornography which applies equally to material placed on the Internet as to material in other forms. Under the Protection of Children Act 1978, the United Kingdom has an absolute prohibition on the production, circulation and possession with a view to distribution of any indecent photograph of a child under 16. These offences carry a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. The simple possession of an indecent photograph of a child is also an offence under Section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and carries a sentence of six months' imprisonment. Section 84 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 updated these controls to include indecent computer-generated photographs of children and they have been successfully applied to child pornography transmitted over the Internet.

We are determined to ensure that there are effective measures against child pornography. We support the work of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) which passes to the police details of potentially unlawful material brought to their attention by members of the public via a specially established hotline. If the originators of the material are abroad, the Foundation passes the report to the National Criminal Intelligence Service who liaise with the enforcement agencies of the countries concerned. The IWF took action on 1,126 reports of alleged child pornography in 1999.

The Government also fully support international initiatives in the Council of Europe and the G8 to combat criminal misuse of the Internet.

Drug Treatment and Testing Orders

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the estimated cost is of a drug treatment and testing order per offender; and what the average cost is of a custodial sentence in such cases. [111660]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The estimated average cost of a drug treatment and testing order per offender is approximately £6,000. The cost of custody for all offenders, including drug misusers, will depend on the length of their sentences. The average annual cost of custody for all prisoners in 1998–99 was £25,096 per place.

Nuclear Bunker (Soar)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 176W, on Soar, how many open days will be allocated to inspect the former nuclear bunker at Soar, near Kingsbridge; when they will be; what is the cut-off date for receipt of sealed bids; and where bids must be sent. [111438]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Four days have been allocated; 24 February, 2 March, 14 March and 30 March. Further open days will be arranged if there is an exceptional level of interest in the site. The cut off date for receipt of sealed bids is Friday 14 April 2000. These bids must be sent to:

Building and Property Ltd.
Government Buildings
Burghill Road
Westbury on Trym
Bristol
BS10 6HH.

Fire Service Vehicles

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the average service life of operational Fire Service vehicles by fire service in England. [111516]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The table sets out the information by Brigade for the twelve months to 31 March 1999:

	Vehicles: actual replacement period in years		
Brigade	*Pumps* [1]	*Aerials* [2]	*Specials* [3]
Avon	15	15	16
Bedfordshire and Luton	13	15	15
Buckinghamshire	12	15	15
Cambridgeshire	14	15	12
Cheshire	13	19	10–20
Cleveland	13	15	17
Cornwall	15	15	17
County Durham and Darlington	15	15	15
Cumbria	16	18	18
Derbyshire	12	10–15	15
Devon	7	15	20
Dorset	13	15	15–18
East Sussex	14–15	20	15
Essex	13	16	16
Gloucestershire	10	15	13
Greater Manchester	10	10	10
Hampshire	12	15	22
Hereford and Worcester	12	15	12
Hertfordshire	12	15	15
Humberside	15	19	19
Isle of Wight	20	20	20
Isles of Scilly	15	n/a	n/a
Kent	15	15	15
Lancashire	12	16	8–15
Leicestershire	16	17	17
Lincolnshire	15	20	15
London	13	17	n/a
Merseyside	10	16	16
Norfolk	15	20	20
North Yorkshire	16	23	12
Northamptonshire	13	17	13
Northumberland	18	n/a	n/a
Nottinghamshire	12	17	18
Oxfordshire	11	19	10
Royal Berkshire	13	19	12
Shropshire	12–15	20	12
Somerset	17	18	10–20
South Yorkshire	13	18	10 and 15
Staffordshire	14	20	8–20
Suffolk	15	20	20
Surrey	12	12	12
Tyne and Wear	12	15	19
Warwickshire	12–13	15–16	10–15
West Midlands	12	15	12
West Sussex	12	15	15
West Yorkshire	10	12–15	10–15
Wiltshire	16	15	15–20

[1] Pumps: what the public traditionally class as a fire engine
[2] Aerials: turntable or hydraulic platform
[3] Specials: vehicles providing special facilities, eg command and control, heavy rescue, water tankers, etc

Ricky Reel Inquiry

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what were the reasons for his decision to release to the family of Ricky Reel the report of the Surrey Police investigation into the inquiries carried out by the Metropolitan Police into the death of Ricky Reel; [111385]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the Metropolitan Police investigating officer's report into the death of Ricky Reel; [111389]

(3) if he will place in the Library a copy of the Surrey Police report into the Metropolitan Police investigation into the death of Ricky Reel. [111388]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Disclosure of the Metropolitan Police investigation report into the death of Ricky Reel and Surrey Police report on the Metropolitan Police investigation of the case are matters for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

The Commissioner agreed to disclose, exceptionally and in confidence, the report of the Surrey Police investigation into the inquiries made by the Metropolitan Police into the death of Ricky Reel to the Reel family and their solicitor. He did so in order to assist the investigation by helping to ensure that every avenue of inquiry had been pursued. The Commissioner informs me that he has no plans for the wider publication of either the Metropolitan or Surrey Police reports on the Ricky Reel investigation.

The Government have accepted recommendation 10 of the Macpherson Inquiry Report, that Investigating Officers' reports resulting from public complaints should be disclosed to complainants subject only to the 'substantial harm' test for withholding disclosure. Progress and action to be taken on implementation of recommendation 10 is detailed in the 'Home Secretary's Action: Plan First Annual Report on Progress', published on 23 February.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of the Metropolitan Police investigation into the death of Ricky Reel. [111386]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has advised me that the cost, to date, of the Metropolitan Police investigation into the death of Ricky Reel is approximately £2,000,000.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of the Surrey Police report into the Metropolitan Police investigation into the death of Ricky Reel. [111387]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Chief Constable of Surrey Police has informed me that the cost of the Surrey Police inquiry into the Metropolitan Police investigation into the death of Ricky Reel was approximately £420,000.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the date of his meeting in 1998 with the family of Ricky Reel and their lawyers. [111384]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary met the family of Ricky Reel and their legal advisers on Tuesday 17 November 1998.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Resource Accounts

32. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission pursuant to his oral answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 524, on the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, how much of the extra £1.3 million approved for the National Audit Office in 2000–01 relates to organisations not previously audited by the NAO. [110629]

Mr. Alan Williams: The additional £1.3 million for 2000–01 provides for a number of factors, notably the audit of Resource Accounts and other new accounts produced by bodies that the National Audit Office already audits. There is also provision to maintain competitive salary rates and for building maintenance and information technology.

Some £250,000 of the additional £1.3 million relates to new audits not previously undertaken by the National Audit Office.

Fair Trading

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, pursuant to his oral statement of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 1249, if he will list the oversights of regulatory bodies conducted by the NAO which have considered fair trading issues. [112052]

Mr. Alan Williams: The statement referred to was made by the Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. David Davis). I understand that he was referring to the following six reports presented to the House by the Comptroller and Auditor General, each of which deals with or touches on issues of fair trading:

The Water Industry in England and Wales: Regulating the Quality of Services to Customers (HC 388 Session 1997–98)

The Office of Telecommunications: Countering Anti-Competitive Behaviour in the Telecommunications Industry (HC 667 Session 1997–98)

The Office of Electricity Regulation: Improving Energy Efficiency Financed by a Charge on Customers (HC 1006 Session 1997–98)

The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets: Giving Customers a Choice—the Introduction of Competition into the Domestic Gas Market (HC 403 Session 1998–99)

Insolvency Service Executive Agency: Company Director Disqualification—a Follow Up Report (HC 424 Session 1998–99)

The Office of Fair Trading: Protecting the Consumer from Unfair Trading Practices (HC 57 Session 1999–2000).

I should add that, like the Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts, I am sure that the NAO has the expertise and experience to examine fair trading issues in the context of the work of public authorities, and can do so in a non-political way.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Libya

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he first examined the alleged MI6 report indicating knowledge by the Secret Intelligence Service of plans to overthrow Colonel Gaddafi of Libya. [111678]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 839W.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when was the last occasion representations were made to him regarding the Matabeleland massacres in the early 1980s. [112132]

Mr. Hain: We are in regular contact with the two non-governmental organisations who jointly compiled a report on the atrocities committed in Matabeleland in the 1980s.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when was the last occasion he made representations to the Zimbabwean Government about the Matabeleland massacres in the early 1980s. [112131]

Mr. Hain: My predecessor raised the specific issue of Matabeleland and the atrocities committed there with the Zimbabwe President in December 1998. Since then I have expressed our concerns on human rights and good governance to the President.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason a manuscript amendment was made to the extract from the *Official Report* of 9 February 2000, column 184W, attached to his answer of 17 February 2000 (ref. 110577) to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, on arms exports to Zimbabwe. [111964]

Mr. Hain: Manuscript corrections were made to a copy of the *Official Report* attached to the answer to the hon. Member's question because of the discovery of an administrative error. This has been drawn to the attention of the *Official Report*. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), who tabled the question in the first place has also been informed.

Sierra Leone

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the South African Government concerning the visit to South Africa by the Sierra Leonean rebel leader, Foday Sankoh. [111965]

Mr. Hain: As soon as we were aware that the leader of the Revolutionary United Front, Foday Sankoh, was travelling in South Africa in breach of UNSCR 1171, we raised our concern with the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We requested that his visit visa be revoked. The South African Government responded quickly to ensure Foday Sankoh's prompt departure from South Africa. We understand he is currently in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.

The UK also called for an urgent meeting of the UN Sanctions Committee on Sierra Leone to discuss the breach of sanctions. The Chairman of the Committee raised Foday Sankoh's visit in a letter to the UN

Permanent Representative of South Africa and issued a press release reminding all member states of their obligations to implement UNSCR 1171.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress made by European Union in its economic and infrastructure reconstruction efforts in Kosovo. [112059]

Mr. Vaz: The EU is making a major contribution to international efforts in Kosovo. The EU makes the biggest contribution to reconstruction. In 1999, the EU pledged 127 million euros. This year, the EU will make available 360 million euros, almost half of international pledges.

The main priority of the UNMIK EU reconstruction pillar, under the leadership of Mr. Joly Dixon, a British national, has been the establishment of a coherent modern macro-economic framework. EU assistance is making possible urgent repair of large numbers of homes and transport infrastructure and education facilities and, for electricity supply, generation and distribution facilities as well as paying for emergency imports of power supplies. The EU has also established a Customs Service.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress in establishing and overseeing the development of the first stage provisional democratic self-governing institutions in Kosovo. [112060]

Mr. Vaz: The UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) under the authority of Security Resolution (SCR) 1244, intend to hold municipal elections this Autumn for provisional institutions in Kosovo. UNMIK are currently preparing regulations to set up the election law and administration.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress that has been achieved in the civil implementation of the UNSCR 1244 in Kosovo. [112303]

Mr. Vaz: UNSCR 1244 charges the UN Mission in Kosovo with the establishment of provisional democratic institutions and the transfer of responsibility to the people of Kosovo. The Kosovar Albanian leadership agreed in December 1999 that they would participate in a new Joint Administrative Structure (JIAS). The Serbs have not yet joined the JIAS but the UN is hopeful that they will do so soon. Four of the 19 administrative departments under the JIAS have now been established. The Kosovo Transitional Council (KTC) will remain as a consultative body to UNMIK and has been expanded to about 40 to be more representative of Kosovo's ethnic composition including better representation of women. UNMIK intend to hold municipal elections this Autumn to provisional institutions and are preparing regulations to this end.

Moscow Visit

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list his official engagements during his recent visit to Moscow; and what planned engagements were *(a)* changed and *(b)* cancelled. [111966]

Mr. Vaz: During his visit to Moscow, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met Acting President Putin and Foreign Minister Ivanov, Head of the Yabloko Party, Yavlinsky, and Head of the Alliance of Right Forces Coalition, Kirienko. He also signed the condolence book for former St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak.

As is usual during the planning of such visits, a number of possible engagements/meetings was considered. Some were changed and others could not be taken forward because of timing or availability constraints.

Scott Inquiry Recommendations

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many recommendations of the Scott Inquiry into military and dual-use equipment sales to Iraq have been implemented since 1 May 1997; what are the reasons for the outstanding recommendations not being implemented; and if he will set out the timetable for the implementation of those recommendations accepted by ministers but not yet implemented. [110650]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

On 1 May 1997, the recommendations contained in Sections K2 and K3 of the Scott Report, on the power of Government to control exports and on export licensing procedures respectively, remained outstanding. In response to these recommendations the Government published their White Paper on Strategic Export Controls in July 1998 (Cm 3989). The Government will announce proposals for new export control legislation in due course, following conclusion of the review of the White Paper proposals in the light of responses received. The Government are committed to introducing a new export control Bill as soon as time is available in the legislative programme.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total funding from European Union regional funding that was made available to the UK during 1999. [110230]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

The total European Union Structural Funds allocation to the United Kingdom for 1999 was 2,673 million euros, which is £1,748 million in 1999 prices. This includes the European Social Fund allocation, only part of which was for regional funding.

Official Visits

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the planned official visits to Britain from non-EU countries in the next two months. [112129]

Mr. Robin Cook: The following are expected to visit the United Kingdom before the end of April 2000:

Guest of Government

Prime Minister Amarjargal of Mongolia

Working Visits

The Foreign Ministers and Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

The Secretary General of the United Nations

The Foreign Minister of Albania

The President of the Federal Council and Minister for Defence and Sport of Switzerland

The Minister for Internal Security of Israel.

There will also be a variety of other inward visits by officials of foreign governments. However, these are often planned at short notice and it is not possible to compile a consolidated list of such visits.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list overseas visits to non-EU destinations planned by Ministers in the next two months. [112126]

Mr. Robin Cook: It is not our practice to publish a long term programme of Ministerial travel. Visits are subject to agreement with host governments and are often changed, postponed or cancelled at short notice.

Non-proliferation Treaty

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about his priorities for the non-proliferation treaty review conference. [111955]

Mr. Hain: We are unequivocally committed to our obligations under the NPT, which remains the cornerstone of our non-proliferation policy.

Our priority is to see a successful outcome to the Review Conference which furthers the government's goal of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Bug

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the President of the Council, pursuant to her oral statement to the House of 20 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 975–77, if she will report on the immediate impact of the Millennium Bug on central Government Departments and Agencies. [111880]

Mrs. Beckett: I am pleased to update Members with the results of the detailed monitoring exercise on the impact of the Millennium Bug on central Government Departments and Agencies. Copies of the completed questionnaires have been placed in the Libraries of the House and published on the internet, as has been the Government's practice. This report follows on from my statement to the House on Thursday 20 January.

I can confirm that—as predicted—it continues to be business as usual across Central Government. Twenty-seven Departments and Agencies logged 82 Millennium Bug related incidents over the new year period. Almost all the incidents were assessed as having a low or very low impact, principally because either the problems were fixed before the return to work on 4 and 5 January or because the errors were very minor, such as incorrectly dated reports.

There is no doubt this work on meeting the threat of the Millennium Bug had to be undertaken. The Bug was shown to have the capacity to wreak havoc among services, which, though essential, we take for granted. The Government's objective in that work was always to ensure that the Bug resulted in no material disruption to essential services. That objective has been achieved.

The Government will continue to lead by example and be open and transparent. I will report back to the House in March on the impact of the leap year date change on Central Government, which is expected to be low. This will be followed by a more detailed report on lessons learned and benefits captured.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education Maintenance Awards

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the take-up was of Education Maintenance Awards in Stoke-on-Trent for 1999–2000. [111694]

Mr. Wicks: The number of students being paid the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in Stoke-on-Trent to 21 January 2000 was 1,276.

We are very encouraged by the way the scheme is running in Stoke. Already, it is making a real difference to the life chances of many young people there.

Higher Education (Funding)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was public spending on higher education, excluding the science budget, as a proportion of GDP for each year from 1979 to 1999; and what is the forecast for *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [110399]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The proportion of GDP spent on UK higher education for each financial year, both including and excluding the DTI/OST science budget, is given in the following table. The figures including the science budget are as in our reply to the noble Lord, the Lord Baker of Dorking of 27 January 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords,* column *WA206.* Both sets of figures include expenditure from public funds on tuition fees, maintenance awards and student loans. Figures for 2000–01 and 2001–02 are current spending plans. The proportions will vary depending upon the performance of the economy, which determines the level of GDP. Funding for higher education in England will increase by 11 per cent. in real terms over the four years to 2001–02.

Percentage

	Including science	*Excluding science*
1979–80	1.23	1.08
1980–81	1.33	1.17
1981–82	1.33	1.16
1982–83	1.30	1.13
1983–84	1.28	1.11
1984–85	1.23	1.07
1985–86	1.16	1.00
1986–87	1.14	0.98

Percentage

	Including science	*Excluding science*
1979–80	1.11	0.96
1980–81	1.07	0.92
1981–82	1.08	0.92
1982–83	1.10	0.94
1983–84	1.19	1.03
1984–85	1.28	1.11
1985–86	1.29	1.11
1986–87	1.31	1.13
1995–96	1.29	1.11
1996–97	1.19	1.02
1997–98	1.16	1.00
1998–99	1.12	0.97
1999–2000	1.13	0.97
2000–01	1.14	0.98
2000–02	1.14	0.98

Engineering Faculties

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the initiatives he has taken since 1 May 1997 to attract high-calibre academic staff into engineering faculties in universities in England. [111257]

Mr. Wicks: Higher education institutions are independent bodies which appoint and retain the staff they need to run their academic programmes. For their part, the Government plan to increase funding to the higher education sector by over £1 billion in the four years to 2001–02.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many academic teaching posts in engineering faculties remained unfilled as at 30 September 1999 in universities in England. [111256]

Mr. Wicks: The information is not held centrally.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the age distribution, in 10-year bands, of those holding academic teaching posts in engineering faculties in universities in England. [111258]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available data are given in the table:

Academic staff [1] in engineering faculties [2] in higher education institutions in England 1998–99

Age of staff	*Number*	*Percentage*
21 to 30	442	6.6
31 to 40	1,748	26.1
41 to 50	2,071	30.9
51 to 60	1,934	28.8
61 and over	510	7.6
Not known	2	0.0
Total	6,707	100.0

[1] Academic staff whose primary employment function is either teaching, or teaching and research.

[2] Includes the following cost centres, General Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Mineral, metallurgy and materials engineering, Civil Engineering, Electrical, electronic and computer engineering and Mechanical, aero and production engineering

Higher Education (UK Component Countries)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications were made in 1999 by students based in the United Kingdom for enrolment on a course in a component country of the United Kingdom in which they were not resident. [110395]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The latest data on applicants via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Survey (UCAS) for entry in autumn 2000, based on students who had applied by 15 December 1999, are given in the table. Similar data for part-time courses are not available.

Applicants [1] for entry in 2000 by country of study and country of home domicile

	Country of study [2]				
Country of domicile	*England*	*Scotland*	*Wales*	*N. Ireland*	*Total*
England	241,707	22,347	33,815	764	298,633
Scotland	5,749	22,126	416	172	28,463
Wales	10,757	713	10,342	37	21,849
N. Ireland	6,622	5,687	814	11,555	24,678
Total	264,835	50,873	45,387	12,528	373,623

[1] The number of applicants who applied by 15 December 1999.

[2] Applicants are counted once for each county to which they apply i.e. a student who applied to one or more courses in England and one or more courses in Scotland will be counted once under England and once under Scotland.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many undergraduate students from European Union countries are currently enrolled on courses in each of the component countries of the United Kingdom. [110372]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The most recent information available is given in the table.

Students [1] from European Union countries enrolled on undergraduate courses in the United Kingdom 1998–99

Country of institution	*Students from the European Union [2]*
England	54,886
Scotland	6,262
Wales	4,139
N. Ireland	3,431
Total	68,718

[1] Full-time and part-time students

[2] Excluding students from the UK

Qualifications

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of the population in *(a)* the Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency, *(b)* the City of Leeds and *(c)* the UK have (i) a higher education degree, (ii) at least 2 A-levels at grade E or above, (iii) 5 or more GCSEs at grades A-C or equivalent and (iv) no qualifications. [111064]

Mr. Wicks: The information available, as measured by the Labour Force Survey, is contained in the following table.

Highest qualification held by people of working age [1], 1998–99

Percentage

Proportion qualified to at least	*Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency*	*City of Leeds*	*UK*
Higher education degree or equivalent (NVQ level 4 or above)	n/a	22.8	22.0
Two A-levels at grade E or above or the equivalent (NVQ level 3 or above)	n/a	40.6	39.9
Five or more GCSEs at grades A-C or equivalent (NVQ level 2 or above)	n/a	n/a	61.8
No qualifications	n/a	18.2	17.4

[1] People of working age consist of males aged 16–64 and females aged 16–59
n/a = estimates not available
Source:
DfEE estimates from the Labour Force Survey

School Threshold Payments

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allocate threshold payments to a school where a deficit budget exists. [110999]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The Special Grant will target resources for the performance threshold additional to and separate from schools' delegated budgets. Schools will be able to draw additional funds from this grant via their local education authority for each teacher promoted to the upper pay spine. Such payments will not be affected if a school has set a deficit budget.

Youth Services (North-west)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the amount spent per head of population on youth services for each local authority area in the North West Region in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* the last year for which figures are available. [111665]

Mr. Wicks: The following table sets out the unit cost per head of population, based on the 13 to 19-year-old population for each authority in the north-west region, and in the Merseyside area, as these two regions are often presented together. These figures cover 1995–96, and 1997–98, the latest figures which are available. Information for unit cost per head of population for 1990–91 is not available because the Office for National Statistics (ONS) did not collect individual age band data at that time.

North-west region and Merseyside—youth service expenditure

LEA number	*LEA name*	*Unit costs per head of population (£ cash) 1990–91*	*1995–96*	*1997–98*
Merseyside				
340	Knowsley	n/a	[1]—	[1]—
341	Liverpool	n/a	156	146
342	St. Helens	n/a	43	57
343	Sefton	n/a	61	63
344	Wirral	n/a	80	69
North-west				
350	Bolton	n/a	71	53
351	Bury	n/a	74	47
352	Manchester	n/a	67	59
353	Oldham	n/a	62	117
354	Rochdale	n/a	77	73
355	Salford	n/a	49	56

North-west region and Merseyside—youth service expenditure

LEA number	*LEA name*	*Unit costs per head of population (£ cash) 1990–91*	*1995–96*	*1997–98*
356	Stockport	n/a	49	54
357	Tameside	n/a	101	91
358	Trafford	n/a	55	53
359	Wigan	n/a	45	46
906	Cheshire	n/a	48	71
923	Lancashire	n/a	90	88
909	Cumbria	n/a	41	39

[1] Figures not available

Notes:

1. Unit costs are presented in cash terms.

2. Unit costs have been calculated using net current expenditure (after recharges for management and support services) from the Department of Transport and the Regions Revenue Outturn form called the RO1, together with population data supplied by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Pupil Mobility

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce an agreed national formula for assessing pupil mobility at school level. [111139]

Ms Estelle Morris: University College London are currently undertaking research into pupil mobility, funded partly by this Department and partly by the Nuffield Foundation. The project is due to conclude in June 2000. The Department will be looking further at the issues once the final report is available.

Class Sizes (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average class sizes were *(a)* in (i) primary and (ii) middle schools, and *(b)* for (1) seven, (2) eight, (3) nine, (4) 10, (5) 11, (6) 12, (7) 13, (8) 14, (9) 15, (10) 16 and (11) 17 year olds in the last three years in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. [111052]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information on class sizes for the Newcastle-upon-Tyne local education authority area is shown in the following tables.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by age band in maintained Secondary schools, including middle-deemed Secondary schools, in the local education authority area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne: 1997–99

Position as at January	Middle-deemed secondary	Secondary (ages) [1] Mainly under 14s	Mainly 14 and 15	16 or older	Total secondary
1999					
Average class size	26.2	24.5	20.9	10.6	21.7
Number of classes	137	265	243	110	755
Number of pupils	3,590	6,502	5,090	1,171	16,353
1998					
Average class size	26.7	24.4	21.6	11.0	21.8
Number of classes	136	260	240	121	757
Number of pupils	3,636	6,342	5,186	1,326	16,490
1997					
Average class size	25.8	24.4	21.0	10.6	21.5
Number of classes	133	259	244	112	748
Number of pupils	3,438	6,315	5,135	1,184	16,072

[1] Ages as the start of the academic year (August 31)

Average size of classes taught by one teacher, by year group, in maintained Primary schools in the local education authority area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne: 1997–99

Position as at January	Year groups 3	4	5	6	7	Mixed [1]	Total primary [2]
1999							
Average class size	27.8	28.3	27.6	27.1	[3]—	26.7	26.7
Number of classes	78	72	47	49	[3]—	108	721
Number of pupils	2,171	2,039	1,299	1,330	[3]—	2,888	19,270
1998							
Average class size	27.2	28.3	28.1	28.7	[4]—	27.0	27.6
Number of classes	77	65	47	56	[4]—	111	726
Number of pupils	2,097	1,841	1,321	1,609	[4]—	2,994	20,054
1997							
Average class size	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	27.6
Number of classes	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	746
Number of pupils	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	[4]—	20,574

[1] Excludes mixed year group classes which are comprised wholly of pupils educated at key stage 1
[2] Includes all classes in primary schools
[3] Not applicable (no classes of this type)
[4] Not available

Education Funding (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money has been given to Leicestershire County Council in respect of education funding for each year since the introduction of the revenue support grant. [110838]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is set out in the table.

Leicestershire County Council Education SSA

Year	£ million SSA total
1990–91	276.8
1991–92	321.3
1992–93	344.5
1993–94[1]	311.2
1994–95	313.9
1995–96	316.4
1996–97	333.8
1997–98[2]	201.1
1998–99	215.3
1999–2000	228.2
2000–01	241.0

[1] From 1993–94 Education Standard Spending figures are affected by the creation of the Further Education Funding Council and the subsequent reduction in post-16 funding.
[2] In 1997–98 £527 million was removed for Education Standard Spending for the Nursery Voucher Scheme. Leicestershire was also affected by Local Government Reorganisation—the old Leicestershire LEA was split into Leicester City, Rutland and 1997 Leicestershire. The figures from 1997–98 to 2000–01 quoted in this table are for 1997 Leicestershire.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the percentage increase in education funding for Leicestershire County Council for each year between 1991–92 and 2000–01. [110839]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is set out in the table.

Percentage increase in education SSA [1]

Year	
1991–92	16.1
1992–93	7.2
1993–94[2]	–9.7
1994–95	0.9

Percentage increase in education SSA [1]

Year	
1995–96	0.8
1996–97	5.5
1997–98[3]	—
1998–99	7.1
1999–2000	6.0
2000–01	5.6

[1] The Government are reviewing the way the local authority finance system distributes funding and plans to issue a green paper on the options for change by the summer of 2000.

[2] In 1993–94 Education Standard Spending figures were affected by the creation of the Further Education Funding Council and the subsequent reduction in post-16 funding.

[3] In 1997–98 £527 million was removed from Education Standard Spending for the Nursery Voucher Scheme. Leicestershire was also affected by Local Government Reorganisation—the old Leicestershire LEA was split into Leicester City, Rutland and 1997 Leicestershire. The figures from 1997–98 to 2000–01 quoted in this table are for 1997 Leicestershire.

University (Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to establish a university in Somerset; and if he will make a statement. [110764]

Mr. Wicks: The Government do not determine the siting of higher education institutions. It is a matter for the interested bodies in the region to consider with the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Schools (Urban Wards)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of urban wards have *(a)* no school for six-year-olds, *(b)* no school for 12-year-olds and *(c)* no school for 18-year-olds. [110813]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the percentage of urban wards in England that do not have maintained schools (or further education colleges) that cater for the specified age ranges.

Percentages

Ward category [1]	*No school for 6-year-olds*	*No school for 12-year-olds*	*No school for 18-year-olds*
Wholly urban[2]	12	57	71
Wholly or predominantly urban[3]	11	57	72
Wholly, predominantly or mixed urban[4]	11	58	73

[1] Based on the 1991 population census.
[2] Every population census Enumeration District (ED) in the ward is defined as urban (based on where the majority of the population reside).
[3] Where 75 per cent. or more EDs in the ward are urban.
[4] Where 50 per cent. or more EDs in the ward are urban.

There are almost 9,000 wards in England, compared with about 3,500 secondary schools and 18,000 primary schools.

School Meals

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each local education authority the percentage of schools in which hot meals are served; and if he will make a statement. [110703]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not collected centrally. Under current education legislation, it is up to local education authorities, and schools with delegated budgets for school meals, to decide on their presentation and content, including whether a meal should be hot. The minimum nutritional standards for school lunches, which will be phased in from September this year, will apply to both hot and cold lunches. We plan to offer guidance on when hot meals may be appropriate.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will assess the impact on schools and school children in Newcastle of the delegation of financial responsibility for paid school meals to schools combined with the removal of local education authority subsidy for such meals. [112133]

Ms Estelle Morris: We shall be keeping all new areas of delegation within the new Fair Funding framework under review, including school meals. With the new nutritional standards for school meals to underpin delegation, the transfer of responsibility for school meals to governing bodies opens up new opportunities for schools to provide what their pupils need.

Maintained Secondary Schools

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average cost of a place in a maintained secondary school in England in the most recent year for which figures are available. [109547]

Ms Estelle Morris: The average cost of a place in a maintained secondary school in England based on 1999–2000 Local School Budget figures was £3,672. The Local Schools Budget relates to the new "fair funding" arrangements introduced in April 1999 and is not comparable with the General Schools Budget under the previous arrangements.

Disabled Student Allowance

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the courses eligible for the disabled student allowance; and what plans he has to increase the number of courses. [108137]

Mr. Wicks: To be eligible for the Disabled Students' Allowances, a student should be studying full-time on a designated course as defined in the Education (Student Support) Regulations 1999. The list is as follows:

1. A first degree other than a course referred to at paragraph 4.
2. A course for the Diploma of Higher Education.
3. A course for the Higher National Diploma or Higher National Certificate of:
   (a) the Business and Technician Education Council; or
   (b) the Scottish Qualification Authority.
4. A course for the initial training of teachers, including such a course leading to a first degree.

5. A course for the further training of teachers or youth and community workers.

6. A course in preparation for a professional examination of a standard higher than that of:

   (a) examinations at advanced level for the General Certificate of Education or the examination at higher level for the Scottish Certificate of Education; or

   (b) the examination for the National Certificate or the National Diploma of either the bodies mentioned in paragraph 3 not being a course for entry to which a first degree (or equivalent qualification) is normally required.

7. A course providing education (whether or not in preparation for an examination) the standard of which is:

   (a) higher than that of courses providing education in preparation for any of the examinations mentioned in paragraph (6)(a) or (b); but

   (b) not higher than that of a first degree course, and for entry to which a first degree (or equivalent qualification) is not normally required.

From September 2000, part-time students studying at least 50 per cent. of an equivalent full-time designated course will also be eligible for Disabled Students Allowances.

Some students in receipt of NHS bursaries are also eligible for Disabled Students Allowances. NHS funded student support is a matter for the NHS Executive and the Department of Health.

Primary School Class Sizes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what recent representations he has received regarding class sizes in primary schools; [111380]

(2) if he will make a statement on average class sizes in primary schools. [111407]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department receives representations from time to time about primary class sizes. The average size of primary classes went down from 27.7 in January 1998 to 27.4 in January 1999—the first fall in ten years.

Nursery Pupils

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the number of *(a)* part-time and full-time pupils in nursery schools, *(b)* pupils in each year in LEA and LEA supported schools, excluding nursery schools and *(c)* pupils in each year in private schools in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne in each year from 1995 to 2000. [111050]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The January 2000 Annual Schools Census (Form 7) is currently being undertaken and provisional national estimates will be available in April.

Information about pupils is collected in the Annual Schools Census (Form 7) by age not by year group. Tables give the figures by the age of the pupils at the beginning of each school year and have been placed in the Library.

Teachers' Pay

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he will issue for the measurement of pupil progress where teachers do not teach key stage test classes or external examination classes. [110996]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The performance threshold materials we will be publishing in March will contain guidance notes to help teachers complete their applications to demonstrate that they meet the threshold standards. Draft guidance notes were published for consultation on 9 February. Under the "Pupil progress" standard the draft states that where external test data is not available teachers should use data internal to the school to show progress. This could include examination marks, general coursework marks or grades achieved. Where possible teachers should use these to quantify progress in terms of the levels used within the national curriculum.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to recognise the team element of raising standards in schools under the proposed performance-related pay scheme. [111000]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Part of the 'professional characteristics' aspect of the proposed performance threshold standards will be an evaluation of the way teachers build a team commitment with their colleagues. Teachers and their team leaders may also want to identify objectives relating to team building as part of the process of annual performance review.

We are also introducing an annual performance awards scheme for schools which will provide recognition of high performing teamwork within institutions. An overall budget of £60 million per year will be available to reward between a quarter and a third of excellent and improving schools through allocation to these schools to fund one-off non-consolidated pay bonuses for their staff. The first payments will be made in 2001 on the basis of results from summer 2000.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment under what circumstances teachers on Point 9 of the teachers' salary scale who win PLATO awards *(a)* cross the performance pay threshold and *(b)* become advanced skills teachers. [111044]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* PLATO awards or teaching awards are organised by the Teaching Awards Trust, sponsored by a Lloyds/TSB venture supported by the Department for Education and Employment. Award winners wishing to apply to cross the performance threshold or wishing to apply to become Advanced Skills Teachers will be required to follow the appropriate application procedures and be assessed in the same manner as other teachers.

Employment Targets

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress towards fulfilment of the Government's target for getting young people into work. [111663]

Ms Jowell: The New Deal continues to progress well. We are now nearly three quarters of the way to reaching the manifesto pledge of helping 250,000 young people into work. The New Deal has helped more than 185,000 young people move into jobs by the end of December 1999.

Assisted Places Scheme (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer on the assisted places scheme of 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 475W, when the assisted places scheme will be phased out in Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [111062]

Ms Estelle Morris: Almost all children currently holding assisted places in Shropshire will have completed their school education by the end of academic year 2003–04. We are providing continued support for existing assisted place holders for the remainder of the current phase of their school education. Those receiving secondary education will continue to hold their places until the completion of their secondary education. Those receiving primary education will normally hold their places until the end of their primary education, unless discretion is exercised under the Education (Schools) Act 1997 for individual children to have their places extended for a period in which they receive secondary education.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on recent developments in establishing education action zones. [111662]

Ms Estelle Morris: I am pleased to say that all 48 of the second round shortlisted applications have now been approved, over half of which were led by schools. That means there are now 73 EAZs across England. There are further plans to establish up to 50 small zones within the Excellence in Cities programme, 12 of which are due to start in April 2000.

New Deal (50 Plus)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have found work through the New Deal for 50 plus. [111578]

Ms Jowell: Since New Deal 50 plus started in the nine Pathfinder areas in Great Britain on 25 October 1999, nearly 600 people have come off benefit and started work with the help of the Employment Credit. Many of those finding work so far through this New Deal have been out of work and on benefits for a long time. New Deal 50 plus will be available across the whole country in April.

Schools Funding (Staffordshire)

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total allocation of seed challenge capital for schools within Staffordshire County Council in the next financial year. [110742]

Jacqui Smith: The total allocation of Seed Challenge Capital for schools within Staffordshire County Council in the next financial year is £458,806.

The next financial year, 2000–01, is a pilot year for Seed Challenge. If it is successful in building partnerships and raising additional funding, we will consider expanding the scheme in future years.

Remploy

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what Remploy products his Department has purchased in the last three years. [109936]

Ms Hodge: This information is not held centrally, so could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

LEA Funding

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) which local education authorities in Tyne and Wear had sums withheld from the extra £50 million grant for education; and on what basis those sums were withheld; [112101]

(2) how much each local education authority in Tyne and Wear received from the extra £50 million grant for education; and what was the basis of the apportionment to each local education authority. [112100]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has yet to make a decision on the release of an authority's share of the £50 million special grant. He wants to see authorities passing the whole of their education SSA increases to their education budgets before doing so.

The funding will be distributed among authorities according to their numbers of schools and pupils, following the same pattern as the school improvement grant for 2000–01. The information for the LEAs requested is shown in the following table.

£

LEA	*Share of £50 million grant*
Newcastle upon Tyne	243,000
North Tyneside	182,000
South Tyneside	181,000
Gateshead	209,000
Sunderland	323,000

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will assess the impact on Newcastle's schools of a further delegation from the local education authority to schools of responsibility for

specials needs services combined with a cut of £140,000 in LEA support for such services. [112127]

Jacqui Smith: The quality of provision for special education needs will be taken into account by Ofsted as part of its regular programme of school and LEA inspections. Newcastle local education authority (LEA) must determine how best to manage its budget for the benefit of all pupils. Regardless of whether funding is delegated to schools or retained centrally, the LEA retains responsibility for securing the necessary provision for pupils with statements of special educations needs.

New Deal (Paisley, South)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of the young people in the constituency of Paisley, South who have taken part in the New Deal Scheme and who are *(a)* white and *(b)* of non-white origin have moved on from the New Deal into permanent jobs. [110497]

Ms Jowell: In the period to end the of November 1999 the information is as follows for the Paisley, South constituency:

	White		*Non-white*		*Declined to say*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Entered New Deal	654	98	3	Less than 1	9	1
Leavers from New Deal	480	—	2	—	5	—
Into unsubsidised jobs	210	44	0	0	3	60

We have set targets for all partnerships delivering New Deal, to achieve parity of outcome on jobs between white and ethnic minority young people. Paisley, South is part of the Renfrewshire Unit of Delivery which has responsibility for the parity target.

CABINET OFFICE

Magisterial Appointments

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what representations she has received on the proposed transfer of responsibility for magisterial appointments in Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to the Lord Chancellor. [111577]

Marjorie Mowlam: Replies to the consultation paper were requested by the end of February 2000, and currently we have received 118. I have received my hon. Friend's reply, for which I thank him.

Cabinet Committee on Rural Affairs

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the special advisers to the Cabinet Committee on Rural Affairs; and if she will make a statement. [111912]

Marjorie Mowlam: The proceedings of Cabinet and Cabinet Committees are exempt from the commitment to disclose information under Part 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Drugs Policy

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent evidence her office has taken into account in formulating drugs policy. [111116]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are responsive to all reliable drugs-related evidence which is available. Recent statistics show encouraging signs that Government anti-drugs measures are having a positive effect. For example, research undertaken in 1999 reported that the number of 14/15-year-olds who experimented at least once with illegal substances fell from around 32 per cent. in 1996 to around 26 per cent. in 1998.

On crime, the Home Office study on arrest and probation referral schemes and prison-based work in South London, Brighton and Derby reported large falls in opiate use after contact with criminal justice drug workers. Respondents were also spending £300 less per week on drugs with corresponding falls in drug related crime. The Prison Service has also seen a dramatic reduction in the rate of positive mandatory drug tests, from 24.4 per cent. in 1996–97 to 18.3 per cent. in 1998–99. Furthermore, recent Home Office drug seizure and offender statistics show that in 1998 we seized drugs with a total street value of £710 million and dealt with 127,900 drug offenders—an increase of 13 per cent. on the previous year.

Evidence such as this indicates that the Government's approach is the right one and will deliver the kind of results we all want to see in tackling drug abuse in our society.

GM Communications Unit

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the annual total running cost of the Biotechnology Presentation Unit. [112072]

Marjorie Mowlam: The GM Communications Unit comes within the budget of the Cabinet Office press office. The budget for running the Cabinet Office press office for this financial year (April 1999 to March 2000) is £1,918,000.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list *(a)* the date and *(b)* the people present at meetings members of the Biotechnology Presentation Unit have had with *(a)* companies with a financial interest in genetically modified organisms, *(b)* special interest groups and *(c)* others at which a White Paper on biotechnology has been discussed. [112073]

Marjorie Mowlam: No one working in the GM Communications Unit (which the hon. Member incorrectly referred to as the Biotechnology Presentation Unit) has had meetings with *(a)* companies with a financial interest in genetically modified organisms, *(b)* special interest groups and *(c)* others at which a White Paper on biotechnology has been discussed.

There are no plans for a White Paper on biotechnology.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is *(a)* the Civil Service grade and *(b)* the salary of each of the staff employed in the Biotechnology Presentation Unit. [112071]

Marjorie Mowlam: The grades of those currently employed in the GM Communications Unit are as follows:

One at Band A

Three at Band B2

One at Band C1.

It is not our practice, nor has been the practice of successive Governments, to give personal salary details of those employed in the civil service.

Racism

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what investigations have been undertaken in each Government Department to identify the existence of institutional racism in relation to employment of staff and service provision; and what remedial action has been taken as a consequence of such investigations. [111288]

Mr. Stringer: A key aim of Sir Richard Wilson's Report on Civil Service Reform is for Government departments and agencies to achieve a dramatic improvement in diversity. Departments have been asked to produce diversity action plans and six-monthly reports on progress, including equality proofing of their processes, especially for recruitment, appraisal and promotion.

We are also undertaking research through the People's Panel into the satisfaction of members of ethnic minority communities with public services. The results will be published in the spring.

Gardening Leave

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many officials in the Cabinet Office are currently on gardening leave. [111090]

Mr. Stringer: One member of the Cabinet Office is currently on special leave with pay while awaiting a posting.

TREASURY

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 300W, what was the *(a)* number and *(b)* total value of research contracts let by his Department since May 1997. [111650]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the answer the Economic Secretary gave him on 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 582W.

Audit and Accounts

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to change audit and accountability arrangements for central Government. [112404]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am proposing to undertake a study to recommend suitable audit and accountability arrangements for central government in the 21st century.

The study will cover the issues raised by the Committee of Public Accounts concerning the role and powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General in their recent report on the Government Resources and Accounts Bill (9th Report 1999–2000, HC159). It will also cover other relevant issues, such as the role of audit in modernising government, including performance validation, the audit of joined-up activities and attitudes to risk-taking. It will look at the implications of devolution, the wider European context with particular reference to European directives affecting audit arrangements, possible models from other countries, and the relationship with other audit and regulatory bodies. All this must have regard to the importance of Parliamentary scrutiny and accountability, the costs and burdens of regulation and the mechanics of change.

Given the importance of Parliament's rights in these matters, its interests in scrutiny, accountability and control of expenditure will be reflected in the way the review is undertaken, including the steering group for the study. The steering group will direct a project board responsible for the delivery of the study. The project board will have an independent Chair.

International Monetary Fund

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans the Government have to accept the Fourth Amendment to the International Monetary Fund's Articles of Agreement. [112378]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer is today laying before Parliament a Command Paper indicating formal UK Government acceptance of the Fourth Amendment to the Articles of Agreement of the International Monetary Fund. The Chancellor is also writing to the Secretary of the IMF to inform him of this action. The Command Paper is available in the Library of the House of Commons and is accessible on the Treasury's website www.hm-treasury.gov.uk.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what assessment he has made of the take-up rate for Working Families Tax Credit; [110284]

(2) what estimate he has made of the take-up rate for the Working Families Tax Credit. [110700]

Dawn Primarolo: Up to the end of January 2000, there had been 704,500 awards of the Working Families Tax Credit, of which around 325,000 were for families who were not in receipt of family credit at the time of the claim.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many individuals in London have received assistance under the working families tax credit. [110499]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that about 52,500 families in the London Government Office Region had been awarded the Working Families' Tax Credit by the end of January 2000.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what VAT rate will apply to tolls on the Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [111692]

Dawn Primarolo: This will depend on the outcome of a case before the European Court of Justice. The Government's policy is to exempt tolls from VAT, but the European Commission argues they should be taxed at 17.5 per cent. VAT.

Pensioners (Taxation)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people are affected by the provisions which enable the Inland Revenue to tax pensions on the amount of entitlement rather than the amount received; and how much extra tax was paid on average by each pensioner in 1999–2000, as a result of these provisions. [111252]

Dawn Primarolo: Income tax on pensions under Schedule E is chargeable on the amount to which the pensioner becomes entitled during the year and is not affected by the frequency of payment. No extra tax is payable as a result.

Injury Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the suicide plus undetermined injury rate per 100,000 people in England based on a three-year average around *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998. [109817]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Frank Field, dated 28 February 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question on suicides plus undetermined injury rate per 100,000 people in England.

The European age standardised rate for the average of the years 1996 to 1998 for England is 9.2 suicides or undetermined injury deaths per 100,000 population. 1999 figures are not yet available and we are therefore unable to provide a three year average around 1998.

Child Care

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assistance with child care expenses he will give to parents in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit who do not have access to registered childminders in their locality. [112090]

Dawn Primarolo: Assistance with child care expenses is not restricted to parents who have access to registered childminders. The Childcare Tax Credit can be paid to parents in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit who use and pay for any form of eligible child care. For under eights, this includes child care provided by after school clubs, holiday play schemes, breakfast clubs and nurseries and playschemes registered with local authorities. For children aged eight and over it includes out of school care which is provided by the school, and from April 2000, care which is approved under the new accreditation scheme.

Population (Newcastle upon Tyne)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of residents of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne *(a)* in total and *(b)* in the age range (i) 0 to 4, (ii) 4 to 14 and (iii) 14 to 24 years in each year since 1990; and if he will estimate the numbers in each age range for (1) 2000, (2) 2001, (3) 2002 and (4) 2006. [112307]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 28 February 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking for population statistics for the city of Newcastle upon Tyne.

The lowest level at which mid-year population estimates and projections are compiled is the local authority level. The information provided in the attached table therefore relates to the metropolitan district of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Mid-year population estimates and projections for the metropolitan district of Newcastle upon Tyne

Thousands

		Persons		
	All ages	*0–4*	*5–14*	*15–24*
Population estimates:				
mid-1990	279.0	17.8	31.1	49.0
mid-1991	278.2	17.7	31.5	47.3
mid-1992	281.7	18.1	32.8	46.1
mid-1993	285.3	18.3	33.9	45.0
mid-1994	283.6	18.2	34.1	45.9
mid-1995	283.1	18.0	34.5	46.7
mid-1996	282.3	17.3	35.0	47.3
mid-1997	279.5	16.7	35.1	47.6
mid-1998	276.1	16.1	35.0	47.4
1996-based population projections:				
1999	282.2	16.3	34.6	50.2
2000	282.8	16.0	34.3	50.3
2001	282.1	16.1	33.6	50.6
2002	282.0	16.0	33.1	51.2
2006	281.5	15.9	31.3	52.6

Source:
ONS, Population Estimates Unit and Population Projections Unit

Household Incomes

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Clwyd, 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 610–12W, on household incomes, if he will list the factors underlying the increase in household income in the north between 1997 to 1998 and 1998 to 1999; and if he will also estimate for the North East region the figures given for the years quoted in his answer. [112308]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 28 February 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the increase in household income in the north.

The Answer to the honourable Member for the Vale of Clwyd, Official Report, columns 610–12W mentioned that, like all estimates from sample surveys, the figures were subject to sampling variability, and that care should be taken in interpreting short-term changes in the data. The apparent large increase in income in the North shown by the Family Expenditure Survey between 1997–98 and 1998–99 is almost certainly due mostly to random sampling variability. The estimated increase is £58 a week but this is subject to sampling variability of plus or minus £49 a week, this is the 90% confidence interval. There is only a one-in-ten chance that the true figure lies outside the estimated range. Published regional breakdowns from the FES are now based on three-year averages to reduce their sampling variability.

Figures for the Government Office Region of the North East are available only from 1994–95 and are shown below. The comments on sampling variability apply also to these estimates.

Gross weekly household income for the North East Region, 1994–95 to 1998–99

North East	*Gross weekly household income (£)*
1994–95	310
1995–96	340
1996–97	320
1997–98	340
1998–99	400

An alternative source, the Family Resources Survey, would normally be preferred for regional breakdowns because of its larger sample, more than three times that of the FES. It was not used for this question because it does not provide as long a run of data as the FES and because results are not yet available for 1998–99.

Consumer Debt

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for the Vale of Clwyd of 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 612W, on consumer debt, if he will publish regional estimates of consumer debt. [112311]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 28 February 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on regional estimates of consumer debt.

The information requested is not available.

Customs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the correlation between the cost of extra custom officers and the extra duty paid to the Treasury on account of the consequent diminution in smuggling. [112054]

Dawn Primarolo: A variety of factors influence the level of smuggling. There is no assessment which makes a direct correlation between the cost of extra Customs staff and changes in smuggling or variations in revenue collected.

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list in respect of the re-sale to the producers by HM Customs and Excise of branded goods, seized as contraband, the average percentage of retail value achieved for each type of branded item. [112041]

Dawn Primarolo: Suppliers of UK branded spirits have a contract with Customs and Excise to purchase spirits seized in bulk. The information requested is commercial in confidence.

High Street Banks

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the profit levels of high street banks. [112057]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Don Cruickshank has been asked to review UK banking industry efficiency and competition; and his report is due shortly.

Banking Ombudsman

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is the maximum sum which can be awarded by the Banking Ombudsman in favour of the complainant; [111801]

(2) what has been the average settlement awarded by the Banking Ombudsman in favour of the complainant; [111800]

(3) what percentage of complaints received by the Banking Ombudsman have been resolved in favour of complainants; [111799]

(4) what resources were made available to the Banking Ombudsman and the FSA for each of the last five years for *(a)* qualified staff, *(b)* administrative staff and *(c)* clerical staff, [111871]

(5) how long it has taken on average for the Banking Ombudsman to determine a complaint; [111798]

(6) what is the backlog of cases waiting to be dealt with by the Banking Ombudsman; [111797]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The available information is published in the Banking Ombudsman's annual report.

I am arranging for a copy of the report to be placed in the Library of the House.

EU Trade

Mr. Colman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the volume of trade with the European Union by firms in London and the South East. [111957]

Dawn Primarolo: Firms in London and the South East, along with others in the rest of the United Kingdom, benefit greatly from our participation in the Single Market. The European Union is Britain's foremost trading partner, accounting for more than half of both our exports and imports of goods by value.

Trade data for the UK regions are available only for the value of their total exports and imports of goods (there is no EU/non-EU split). These data indicate that last year London and the South East accounted for around 33 per cent. of UK exports and 45 per cent. of UK imports.

Third World Debt

Ms Drown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans the Government have to support a multilateral deal on debt at this year's G8 summit in Okinawa; [111960]

(2) what the Government's policy is on changing the level of the debt-to-export ratio within the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. [111959]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The UK Government have never closed off any possibility regarding a further multilateral deal on debt. The Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development have both stated publicly that debt relief is not enough in itself and that more must be done to help the poorest countries meet even the basic International Development targets set for 2015. In the first instance, the UK Government want debt relief to lead to poverty reduction and improvements in basic living conditions for the poorest sectors in these countries.

Taxes

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer using the assumptions underpinning the calculations made in the 1996 Budget, if he will calculate the *(a)* direct taxes and *(b)* indirect taxes paid by the average family in the UK as a result of (i) the 1997 Budget, (ii) the 1998 Budget and *(c)* the 1999 Budget. [111927]

Dawn Primarolo: For estimates of direct taxes paid by the average family I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Truro and St Austell (Mr. Taylor) on 25 January 2000, *Official Report,* columns 214–15W.

Estimating the impact of indirect taxes is imprecise as spending patterns vary widely between households with the same composition and income, with the consumption of the majority of goods and services far from universal. For example, only around one third of adults are smokers, just over half the adult population are in households paying vehicle excise duty and around 10 per cent. of households pay air passenger duty. This can be contrasted with direct taxes and benefits where at specified earnings and for particular household types there is a known benefit entitlement or tax liability.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 2000, *Official Report,* columns 214–15W, on taxes, what proportion of households are a one-earner married couple, with two children, on male median earnings; what proportion of earners earn within five per cent. of male median earnings; what proportion of households comprise a one-earner couple with two children; and if he will recalculate his answer to apply to a two-earner household where both earners are employed, one on male median earnings and one on female median earnings, with two children. [110213]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 16 February 2000]:* According to the Family Expenditure Survey 1995–96 to 1997–98, 12.6 per cent. of households are one-earner couples with 2 children. The proportion of these couples who are married is not readily available.

According to the New Earnings Survey, in 1999 8.3 per cent. of males working full-time on adult rates earned within 5 per cent. of median earnings.

Percentage of income paid in direct taxes by a two earner couple where both earners are employed, one on male median earnings and one on female median earnings, with two children

Year	*Percentage*
1983–84	24.0
1984–85	23.5
1985–86	23.4
1986–87	23.1
1987–88	22.5
1988–89	21.7
1989–90	21.5
1990–91	21.2
1991–92	21.1
1992–93	20.4
1993–94	20.5
1994–95	21.8
1995–96	22.2
1996–97	21.4
1997–98	20.8
1998–99	20.8
1999–00	20.2
2000–01	20.1
2001–02	18.9

Notes:

1. Direct taxes are defined as Income Tax plus National Insurance minus Child Benefit. In line with long-standing convention, Child Benefit is treated as a negative component of Income Tax, making it consistent with child tax allowances prior to 1976.
2. Earnings are taken to be median weekly earnings of full-time employees on adult rates with pay unaffected by absence form the New Earning Survey. Median earnings on a consistent basis are not available before 1983.

By 2001 the tax burden for the 2 earner married couple both on average earnings with 2 children will be below 20 per cent. for the first time ever.

Agriculture (Fuel Tax)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much tax per litre of diesel, used for agricultural purposes, was charged in each of the member states of the EU, including all duties and sales taxes in the last financial year for which figures are available. [111790]

Mr. Timms: The rate of excise duty on diesel for agricultural purposes in the United Kingdom is 3.03 pence per litre. Diesel for agricultural purposes is liable to VAT at 17.5 per cent. of the retail price.

Information on the rates of tax on diesel for agricultural purposes in the other member states of the EU is not available.

Wales (Earnings)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Wales earn *(a)* £3.60 per hour,

(b) £3.61 to £3.80 per hour, *(c)* £3.81 to £4.00 per hour and *(d)* £4.00 to £4.50 per hour; and what percentage of total employees this constitutes in each case. [111682]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Dafydd Wigley, dated 28 February 2000:

As the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding earnings for employees in Wales.

The New Earnings Survey (NES) can provide earnings data for geographical areas. However, the release of NES data is restricted to figures which are derived from a sufficiently large sample of employees and have an acceptable level of accuracy. I have provided information for Wales in the attached table. These are based on the 1999 NES, the latest survey for which data are available.

We are only able to give percentages earning below specified thresholds, rather than numbers because appropriate grossing factors for the NES sample are not available.

The NES is based on a one per cent. sample of employees in the PAYE system and is therefore likely to under-represent relatively low paid staff earning below the tax threshold and in particular those who work part-time.

Employees on adult rates, whose pay for the survey period was unaffected by absence

Percentage earning

	Gross hourly earnings excluding overtime (£)			
	£3.60	*£3.61-£3.80*	*£3.81-£4.00*	*£4.01-£4.50*
Wales				
Full-time	0.8	1.4	1.9	5.6
Part-time	5.6	6.6	7.3	14.2
All	1.9	2.6	3.1	7.6

Source:
New Earnings Survey, April 1999 (GB)

Fiscal Changes

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the impact on revenue to the Exchequer in the financial year 2000–01 of *(a)* abolishing the upper earnings limit on employee national insurance contributions, *(b)* introducing a 50 per cent. rate of income tax for taxable income over £100,000 per year, *(c)* extending the 10 per cent. income tax band to £7,115 per year of gross income for (i) all taxpayers and (ii) taxpayers other than higher rate taxpayers and *(d)* raising the rate of the national minimum wage for adults to £4.94 per hour. [111643]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated full-year tax and National Insurance Contribution effects for 2000–01 are in the table.

£ billion

	2000–01 full-year effects [1, 2]
Abolishing the upper earnings limit on employee national insurance contributions[3]	+3.2
Introducing a 50 per cent. rate of income tax for taxable income over £100,000 per year[4]	+2.6
Extending the starting rate band to £2,730 for all taxpayers[4, 5]	−3.5
Extending the starting rate limit to £2,730 for taxpayers other than higher rate taxpayers[4, 5]	−3.1
Raising the rate of the national minimum wage for adults to £4.94 per hour	[6]—

[1] All estimates are consistent with the November 1999 pre-Budget report.
[2] Includes the effects on Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Persons' Tax Credit.
[3] The NIC effect was produced by the Government Actuary's Department.
[4] The income tax estimates are based on the 1997–98 Survey of Personal Incomes.
[5] £2,730 is the difference between £7,115 and the non-aged personal allowance of £4,385.
[6] It is not possible to give an estimate of the impact on Exchequer revenue of increasing the National Minimum Wage to £4.94 per hour. Such a move could have significant adverse effects on the employment of low-skilled workers. Therefore any Exchequer gains through increased tax revenue could to some extent be offset by increases in benefit payments.

Income Tax

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review his decision to reduce income tax by one penny. [111378]

Dawn Primarolo: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in his 1999 Budget statement that the basic rate of income tax will fall to 22p in the pound from April 2000.

National Insurance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claimants of the Working Families' Tax Credit and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit have earnings below the lower earnings limit to national insurance. [111311]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that there have been 704,500 awards of the Working Families' Tax Credit up to the end of January 2000. Of these about 100,000 were where the single person or the main earner in a couple was earning less than the lower earnings limit of £66 per week. 10,712 awards of the Disabled Person's Tax Credit were made in the same period and of these 3,279 had earnings less than £66 a week on the same basis.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the total yield from national insurance contributions in 1999–2000 prices in each financial year since 1978–79, broken down by *(a)* employer national insurance contributions, *(b)* employee national insurance contributions, *(c)* national insurance contributions paid by the self-employed, *(d)* national insurance contributions paid by the others and *(e)* the national insurance surcharge; if he will provide corresponding estimates of the investment income of the National Insurance Fund; and if he will provide projections for each of these items of the next three financial years. [107660]

Dawn Primarolo: Available information for Great Britain is given in the table.

Yield in 1999–2000 prices

£ billion

	(a) Employer NICs	*(b) Employee NICs*	*(c) Self Employed NICs*	*(d) Other NICs*	*(e) NI surcharge*	*(f) Investment income*
1978–79	19.54	12.11	0.91	0.04	6.18	1.45
1979–80	19.35	12.08	0.75	0.03	8.31	1.52
1980–81	19.22	12.28	0.73	0.03	8.16	1.44
1981–82	18.67	14.03	0.81	0.03	7.94	1.28
1982–83	19.35	16.80	0.95	0.04	5.44	1.01
1983–84	20.06	17.89	1.05	0.05	3.35	0.95
1984–85	20.37	18.23	1.15	0.05	1.65	0.96
1985–86	21.57	18.81	1.16	0.07	0.07	0.95
1986–87	22.94	19.49	1.18	0.05	0.01	1.04
1987–88	24.11	20.28	1.24	0.05	0.00	0.96
1988–89	25.60	21.02	1.38	0.05	0.00	1.17
1989–90	26.98	20.28	1.48	0.05	0.00	1.47
1990–91	27.33	18.63	1.48	0.05	0.00	1.30
1991–92	26.81	18.37	1.44	0.06	0.00	1.37
1992–93	26.96	18.09	1.45	0.06	0.00	1.10
1993–94	27.94	17.59	1.63	0.05	0.00	0.55
1994–95	27.29	20.32	1.63	0.07	0.00	0.42
1995–96	27.88	20.81	1.65	0.06	0.00	0.49
1996–97	28.35	20.95	1.73	0.06	0.00	0.51
1997–98	29.59	22.89	1.78	0.07	0.00	0.49
1998–99	31.06	23.97	1.64	0.06	0.00	0.67
1999–2000	32.16	23.48	1.70	0.07	0.00	0.73
2000–01	33.26	23.31	1.35	0.06	0.00	0.83
2001–02	33.35	23.23	2.05	0.06	0.00	0.95

Notes:

1. Constant prices using GDP deflation at market prices.
2. Employer NICs are Class 1 secondary, Class 1A and Class 1B contributions.
3. Employee NICs are Class 1 primary contributions.
4. Class 1 contributions are net of contracted-out rebates deducted from contributions but do not allow for rebates paid in the following year.
5. Self Employed NICs are Class 2 and Class 4 contributions.
6. Other NICs are Class 3 contributions.
7. The NI Surcharge account is closed 1986–87 being the last year that anything other than an insignificant amount was paid in.
8. The totals for Employer and Employee NICs contain some payments into the Redundancy and Maternity Pay Fund. These, like payments to the NI surcharge, have now ended.
9. Figures for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 are projections consistent with the November 1999 pre-Budget Report.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much better off than in the previous year, on average *(a)* single pensioners and *(b)* pensioner couples on Income Support aged (i) under 75, (ii) 75 to 79 and (iii) 80 years or over were in (1) April 1998, (2) April 1999, (3) April 2000 and (4) April 1997, (X) in cash terms, (Y) in real terms and (Z) relative to average earnings, taking into account winter fuel payments and the reduction in VAT on fuel. [111810]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is in the table.

The weekly gain to pensioners on Income Support taking into account winter fuel payments and the reduction in VAT on fuel

	Actual weekly increase on previous year including winter fuel payment and estimated saving due to reduction in VAT[1] £	*Real value of*[1] *uprated to April 2000 prices*[2] £	*Actual percentage increase on previous year* %	*Average earnings percentage increase*[3] %
Single Pensioners				
April 1997[4]				
Under 75	2.30	2.45	3.5	4.2
75 to 79	2.40	2.55	3.5	4.2
80 and over	2.65	2.80	3.6	4.2
April 1998				
Under 75	2.90	3.05	4.2	4.1
75 to 79	2.95	3.10	4.2	4.1
80 and over	3.05	3.20	4.2	4.1
April 1999				
Under 75	4.55	4.60	6.3	4.9
75 to 79	4.60	4.65	6.2	4.9
80 and over	4.75	4.85	6.0	4.9

The weekly gain to pensioners on Income Support taking into account winter fuel payments and the reduction in VAT on fuel

	Actual weekly increase on previous year including winter fuel payment and estimated saving due to reduction in VAT[1] £	*Real value of*[1] *uprated to April 2000 prices*[2] £	*Actual percentage increase on previous year* %	*Average earnings percentage increase*[3] %
April 2000				
Under 75	3.45	3.45	4.5	4.5
75 to 79	3.55	3.55	4.5	4.5
80 and over	3.80	3.80	4.5	4.5
Pensioner Couples				
April 1997[4]				
Under 75	3.55	3.80	3.4	4.2
75 to 79	3.75	4.00	3.5	4.2
80 and over	4.00	4.25	3.6	4.2
April 1998				
Under 75	3.80	3.95	3.6	4.1
75 to 79	3.90	4.05	3.6	4.1
80 and over	4.00	4.15	3.5	4.1
April 1999				
Under 75	7.25	7.35	6.6	4.9
75 to 79	7.30	7.40	6.4	4.9
80 and over	7.40	7.50	6.2	4.9
April 2000				
Under 75	5.35	5.35	4.5	4.5
75 to 79	5.50	5.50	4.5	4.5
80 and over	5.75	5.75	4.5	4.5

[1] Winter fuel payments of £50 per year from January 1998 to November 1999 and then £100 from December 1999, per Income Support claimants, divided by 52 to give weekly increase. Saving due to reduction in VAT on fuel estimated at £16 per year divided by 52 to give weekly gain.

[2] For income related benefits the Rossi index (Retail Prices Index less rent, local taxes and mortgage interest payment) as published by the Office for National Statistics.

[3] Average Earnings are taken from the New Earnings Survey (NES) estimates of earnings for all full-time adult employees, as published by the Office for National Statistics.

[4] Winter fuel payments not payable until 9 November 1998.

Note:

The figures are rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list by decile the *(a)* total average income per week and *(b)* percentage change in that in each year since 1979, for pensioners, (i) in Shropshire and (ii) nationally; and if he will make a statement. [111913]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Average (median) net income of pensioners by decile of the net income distribution (UK, 1979 to 1996–97)

Year	*D1*	*D2*	*D3*	*D4*	*D5*	*D6*	*D7*	*D8*	*D9*	*D10*
Decile of the pensioner couples net income distribution										
1979	90	102	109	116	126	139	153	181	218	310
1981	96	107	115	121	128	140	157	187	227	342
1987	103	119	129	140	153	169	192	225	279	462
1988	101	116	125	135	151	171	199	239	294	505
1989	101	116	127	137	149	166	195	228	288	445
1990–91	97	116	127	141	159	182	212	250	318	497
1992	107	128	139	156	174	198	231	272	333	512
1993	106	130	143	159	179	200	230	269	338	506
1994–95	116	136	152	167	185	207	232	273	357	506
1995–96	113	137	152	169	191	215	244	297	364	555
1996–97	113	140	154	169	191	220	254	298	385	562
Change 1979 to 1996–97 (percentage)	25	37	41	46	51	59	66	64	76	81
Decile of the single pensioners net income distribution										
1979	52	58	63	68	72	76	81	88	105	155
1981	55	62	68	73	77	82	87	95	113	162
1987	57	65	73	80	86	92	99	109	135	209
1988	55	63	71	80	86	91	98	110	144	217

Average (median) net income of pensioners by decile of the net income distribution (UK, 1979 to 1996–97)

Year	*D1*	*D2*	*D3*	*D4*	*D5*	*D6*	*D7*	*D8*	*D9*	*D10*
1989	53	64	70	78	85	90	96	111	147	227
1990–91	57	65	75	82	89	95	104	124	162	258
1992	60	69	79	88	94	100	111	130	166	283
1993	63	72	82	93	100	107	115	131	168	242
1994–95	65	75	85	95	103	111	122	141	179	269
1995–96	65	79	91	101	109	116	127	148	180	263
1996–97	63	76	91	101	110	118	133	154	187	258
Change 1979 to 1996–97 (percentage)	22	32	45	48	52	55	66	75	78	67

Notes:

1. All money amounts are given in £ per week, at July 1997 prices.
2. Single pensioners are defined as single (non-cohabitating) people over State pension age (65 for men, 60 for women); pensioner couples are defined as couples (married or cohabiting) where the man is over State pension age.
3. For any given decile of the income distribution, the average amounts refer to the median net income before housing costs within that decile.
4. The distribution of income is calculated on the net income before housing costs measure. Separate distributions are calculated for pensioner couples and single pensioners in each year. Figures are not available for the distribution of pensioner couples and single pensioners combined.
5. Information is given for all years for which comparable Pensioners' Incomes data, derived from the Family Expenditure Survey, are available. Information for 1997–98, based on the Family Resources Survey is available but has not been included because it is not comparable with Family Expenditure Survey based estimates.
6. All years up to and including 1993 are calendar years, except 1990–91 which refers to the combined calendar years 1990 and 1991. All years from 1994–95 onwards are financial years.
7. All estimate are subject to a high degree of sampling error, since they are based on small sample sizes, and should therefore be treated with caution. In particular, these figures should not be used to estimate changes over time, unless over a period of several years.
8. Estimates are given for the United Kingdom. Estimates are not available for Shropshire due to small sample sizes.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will state, for *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* the latest year for which information is available, at 1999–2000 prices, the percentage of people aged 65 years and over whose annual incomes were (i) £4,000 and below, (ii) £4,001 to £6,000, (iii) £6,001 to £8,000, (iv) £8,001 to £10,000, (v) £10,001 to £15,000, (vi) £15,001 to £20,000 and (vii) over £20,000. [112046]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Net benefit unit income of people aged 65 years and over

Percentage

Annual net income of benefit unit	*1981*	*1990–91*	*1996–97*
People aged 65 and over in couples			
Less than £4,000	*	1	*
£4,001-£6,000	18	11	4
£6,001-£8,000	42	28	16
£8,001-£10,000	15	17	22
£10,001-£15,000	16	24	29
£15,001-£20,000	5	9	14
More than £20,000	4	10	15
All individuals	100	100	100
Single persons aged 65 and over			
Less than £4,000	38	24	13
£4,001-£6,000	48	46	35
£6,001-£8,000	8	13	27
£8,001-£10,000	4	6	11
£10,001-£15,000	2	6	11
£15,001-£20,000	1	2	2
More than £20,000	1	2	2
All individuals	100	100	100
All persons aged 65 and over			
Less than £4,000	18	11	6
£4,001-£6,000	32	27	18
£6,001-£8,000	26	21	21

Net benefit unit income of people aged 65 years and over

Percentage

Annual net income of benefit unit	*1981*	*1990–91*	*1996–97*
£8,001-£10,000	10	12	17
£10,001-£15,000	9	16	21
£15,001-£20,000	3	6	9
More than £20,000	2	7	9
All individuals	100	100	100

Notes:

1. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 1 per cent., but are not necessarily accurate to that degree. Estimates of less than 0.5 per cent. are denoted by "*". Columns may not sum to 100 per cent. due to rounding.
2. Income is defined as the net income before housing costs of the benefit unit, expressed in July 1999 prices. Benefit units are defined as a single person or couple (married or cohabiting) and any dependent children.
3. Percentage estimates relate to the proportion of individuals aged over 65, whose benefit unit income falls into a given category.
4. Income amounts are "unequivalised" (i.e. they have not been adjusted to take account of the size and composition of each benefit unit). This means that a comparison between the benefit unit incomes of someone in a couple and a single person does not give any indication of relative living standards. Therefore, results are provided separately for people in couples and single persons. The table for people in couples and single persons combined can be used only to look at changes in income level over time—it should not be used as a measure of the distribution of incomes in the context of relative living standards.
5. Most components of income are reported in the Family Expenditure Survey as weekly or monthly amounts, which have then been converted to annual amounts for the purposes of this analysis. No account has been taken of variations in the income of a benefit unit over the year.
6. Figures are given for the calendar year 1981, the combined calendar years 1990 and 1991, and the financial year 1996–97—the latest year for which comparable estimates are available.
7. There is no information of this type readily available prior to 1979.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have benefited from a winter fuel payment this winter; and how many times the weather conditions activated a payment to be made for *(a)* Gordon constituency, *(b)* Aberdeenshire and *(c)* Scotland. [111490]

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Member will be aware that Winter Fuel Payments and Cold Weather Payments are different benefits. As the administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, he will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 22 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking how many pensioners have benefited from a winter fuel payment this winter; and how many times the weather conditions activated a payment to be made for (a) Gordon constituency, (b) Aberdeenshire and (c) Scotland.

Winter fuel payments were introduced in the winter of 1997/98 for an initial two years. The Government subsequently decided to continue the scheme, and in addition, increased the amount of the payment to £100 for every eligible household. Delivery of this winter's payments was broadly similar to the last two winters, other than the payments were made before the new year, with the Generalised Matching Service being used to compare addresses to determine whether £50 or £100 was payable to eligible non Income Support/Income based Jobseekers Allowance pensioners. Eligibility is not determined by the severity of the weather conditions.

Where official records showed more than one eligible pensioner as living at an address, each received £50. Other eligible pensioners received £100. Determining the correct amount of payment involved the cross matching of around 13 million records on 8 benefit systems.

In Great Britain a total of 10.2 million pensioners in over 7.5 million households received a Winter Fuel Payment. In Scotland 905,638 pensioners received a payment. The Benefits Agency does not keep statistics in exactly the format you require. However, according to available information the constituencies in Aberdeenshire are Banff & Buchan, Gordon, Aberdeen Central, Aberdeen North, Aberdeen South and West Aberdeenshire & Kincardine, though their boundaries may not exactly match. The attached table shows payments issued to customers in each of the constituencies.

Cold Weather Payments (CWP) are however dependent on the severity of the weather and are paid to people in receipt of Income Support or Income-based Jobseekers' Allowance who have a pensioner or disability premium, or a child under 5 in the household. A CWP is currently £8.50. No separate claim is needed for a CWP.

CWPs are triggered if the temperature has been recorded as an average of 0°C or below over any seven consecutive days, or a forecast shows the temperature is likely to average 0°C or below oever the next seven days, for a weather station area. The payment process can start without awaiting actual recorded temperatures. Payments are not recalled if a forecast is not confirmed by recorded data.

Again BA does not keep information in the format requested but we are able to provide numbers of estimated qualifiers by weather station (and linked postcodes), and actual payments by BA Districts.

Because of the way in which information is held in respect of Cold Weather Payments, we are unable to identify pensioners as a specific group. Therefore, any information provided refers to all customers, i.e. people who are entitled to IS or JSA(IB) for one day in the period of cold weather, and who receive one of the qualifying premiums (Pensioner, Higher Pensioners, Enhanced Pensioner, Disability, Severe Disability, Disabled Child), or, an amount for a dependent child under five.

So far this winter, periods of cold weather have been declared and payments made as shown in the attached tables.

I hope this is helpful.

Weather Stations

Weather station	*Dates*	*Estimated qualifiers*	*Districts affected*
Aviemore	12 December 1999–18 December 1999[F]	929	Grampian and Shetlands, Highlands and Islands,Tayside
	19 December 1999–25 December 1999[F]	—	—
Braemar	12 December 1999–18 December 1999[F]	54	Grampian and Shetlands
	19 December 1999–25 December 1999[F]	—	—
	27 December 1999–2 January 2000	—	—
Eskdalemuir	15 December 1999–21 December 1999[F]	3,723	East Edinburgh and Borders, North Cumbria, South West Scotland
Loch Glascarnoch	12 December 1999–18 December 1999[F]	430	Highlands and Islands
	19 December 1999–25 December 1999[F]	—	—
	14 February 2000–2 February 2000[R]	—	—
Salsburgh	18 December 1999–24 December 1999[F]	10,884	East Edinburgh & Borders, Glasgow South, Lanarkshire
Tulloch Bridge	15 December 1999–21 December 1999[F]	1,968	Argyll and West, Highlands and Islands, Tayside

[F] — forecast
[R] — recorded

Total payments this winter so far (by district and cold weather period)

District	*CWP period payment run (week ending)*	*Automated payments (£)*	*Number of payments*
Argyll and West	17 December 1999	620.50	73
East Edinburgh and Borders	17 December 1999	21,250.00	2,500
	23 December 1999	3,799.50	447
Glasgow South	23 December 1999	2,924.00	344
Grampian and Shetlands	17 December 1999	4,284.00	504
	23 December 1999	4,275.50	503
	6 January 2000	450.50	53

Total payments this winter so far (by district and cold weather period)

District	*CWP period payment run (week ending)*	*Automated payments (£)*	*Number of payments*
Highlands and Islands	17 December 1999	14,441.50	1,699
	23 December 1999	4,088.50	481
Lanarkshire	17 December 1999	2,014.50	237
	23 December 1999	79,288.00	9,328
North Cumbria	17 December 1999	17.00	2
South West Scotland	17 December 1999	7,089.00	834
Tayside	17 December 1999	8,806.00	1,036
	23 December 1999	178.50	21

Note:
Total automated payments are noted. We do not yet have total clerical payments. The latest trigger at Loch Glascarnoch in not included.

Winter fuel payments issued-Period of time Winter 1999–00

Constituency	*Number of payments made*
Banff and Buchan	12,178
Gordon	11,945
Aberdeen Central	11,041
Aberdeen North	10,627
Aberdeen South	13,970
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	11,245

Income Support

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of people on income support for each ward in the constituencies of *(a)* Stockton South and *(b)* Stockton North. [110768]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Ms Dari Taylor, dated 22 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary question asking if he will estimate the number of people on Income Support for each ward in the constituencies of (a) Stockton South and (b) Stockton North.

We are unable to supply figures at ward level for either of these constituencies. However, we estimate that there are 5,400 Income Support claimants in the Stockton South constituency and 7,400 in Stockton North.

These figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and, because they come from the Income Support Statistical Enquiry, August 1999 which is based on a 5% sample, they are subject to sampling error.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people are on income support in each ward of the Vale of Clwyd. [110826]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Chris Ruane, dated 22 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people are on Income Support in each ward of the Vale of Clwyd.

We are unable to supply figures at ward level for the Vale of Clwyd. However, there are 6,400 Income Support claimants in the Vale of Clwyd Parliamentary Constituency.

This figure is rounded to the nearest hundred and, because it comes from the Income Support Statistical Enquiry, August 1999 which is based on a 5% sample, it is subject to sampling error.

I hope this is helpful.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110686]

Angela Eagle: As at 1 April 1999, 55 members of the senior civil service across all government Departments were from ethnic minority background (1.7 per cent).

Information on ethnic origin in the Civil Service is collected on the understanding that it will be treated on a confidential basis. To protect the privacy of individual members of staff we do not disclose data relating to fewer than five people. This Department has fewer than 5 people of ethnic minority background in the Senior Civil Service.

However, a range of measures are in place to improve representation at senior levels. These include a Leadership Group on Equal Opportunities, chaired by the Permanent Secretary, with representation drawn from senior grades and the Trade Unions, the aim of which is to promote diversity issues across the Department.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what provisions are made available to (i) departmental staff and (ii) employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department, for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contract, *(l)* child care allowances, *(m)* careers' leave and *(n)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [108853]

(2) in each of the last five years, what proportion of women employees in (i) his Department and (ii) executive agencies under the control of his Department *(a)* returned to work after childbirth, *(b)* returned to work after childbirth before the end of maternity leave, indicating the (1) time-range and (2) mean time, *(c)* returned to work after childbirth on reduced working hours, indicating the average hours worked and *(d)* returned to work after childbirth full-time and subsequently reduced their hours; [108973]

(3) what childcare provision was made available in the financial year 1998–99 for use by (i) his departmental staff and (ii) employees of executive agencies under the

control of his Department; what was the cost to parents of this childcare; and how many parents used the facilities. [108974]

Angela Eagle: I refer my hon. Friend to the Written answer from my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 518–22W.

Information about women employees and childcare provision is not available in the format requested as detailed information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

However, this Department and its Agencies, are fully committed to providing a family friendly environment to help staff balance home and work responsibilities. The specific provisions and their eligibility criteria are follows.

All women are eligible for up to a maximum of 52 weeks maternity leave.

Women with one-year service at the time they give birth are entitled to 17 weeks paid maternity leave.

Staff are entitled to seven days paid paternity leave and up to a maximum of 10 days paid leave in exceptional circumstances.

Parents have an automatic right to parental leave of three months for the care of children until aged eight and until aged eighteen for children with special educational needs. This is in excess of the Parental Leave Directive. Staff are also entitled to reasonable paid time off to attend to urgent and unforeseeable domestic incidents involving their children.

Flexible working hours are generally available to most staff with individual patterns being determined locally within a framework to meet business needs.

Part-time work and job sharing are available to staff where arrangements can be made to balance the individual's requirement to work reduced hours and the business constraints in doing so. All requests are treated sympathetically and most are approved, however there is an appeals' procedure to deal with unsuccessful requests.

Parents with at least one-year service are eligible for up to 7 days paid special and or extended unpaid special leave to care for sick children and if the normal childcare arrangement is interrupted or breaks down.

The Department's homeworking policy aims to achieve a successful balance between the individual's requirement to work at home and the business constraints in doing so. Managers will support requests for short-term homeworking to help parents manage caring responsibilities.

Term-time and annual contracts working are available to staff where arrangements can be made to balance the individual's requirement to work reduced hours and the business constraints in doing so. All requests are treated sympathetically and most are approved, however there is an appeals' procedure for unsuccessful requests.

The Department provides for child care allowances in several ways by meeting the full cost of family care expenses if staff are required to work outside normal working hours; child care subsidy ranges from £7-£30 and is available for staff to access both Departmentally sponsored or commercial facilities.

The Department operates a career break scheme of up to five years for parents to care for children.

Staff in the Department have access to nursery places and holiday playschemes in a variety of locations across the country. The cost of this childcare varies according to the age of the child, the nature of the provision and the location of the childcare. However, there is a subsidy available to staff of up £30 per child per week. This represents a 30 per cent. subsidy on the total cost of care.

Each business unit is responsible for making its own detailed arrangements which are suitable for local circumstances.

Benefit Claimants (Savings)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will *(a)* raise the savings limit of £2,500 for all benefit claimants and *(b)* establish a higher limit for those with special needs. [110713]

Mr. Bayley: The capital limits in the income-related benefits are reviewed regularly but are not uprated annually. The lower limit of £3,000 was introduced in April 1988. From April 1996 this was increased to £10,000 for people living permanently in residential care and nursing homes. The rules are designed to ensure that help is targeted on those who need it most while not entirely denying benefit to those with only a modest amount of capital. We have no plans to establish a higher limit for other people with special needs.

Compensation Recovery

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the impact of the Social Security (Recovery of Benefits) Act 1997 on *(a)* public finances, *(b)* speed of settlement of cases, *(c)* insurers and employers and *(d)* victims of illness, accident and diseases. [111683]

Mr. Bayley: The compensation recovery scheme was reformed in October 1997 when the provisions of the Social Security (Recovery of Benefits) Act 1997 came into force. The main objectives of the reformed scheme were that a person should not get compensation twice over for the same need; the taxpayer should receive the fullest possible protection; the scheme should allow damages for pain and suffering to be paid in full; the scheme should not result in Government becoming directly involved in the compensation process; and the simplicity of the previous scheme, which helped ensure that administration costs run at less than 5 per cent. of the amount recovered, should be preserved.

The objectives have been achieved: the main changes in the scheme brought about by the Act are that compensators are liable to repay benefits in full; compensators may reduce compensation payments to take account of the liability to repay benefits, but only where benefits and compensation are paid for a like need; compensation for pain and suffering cannot be reduced. The reformed scheme has been designed so that the negotiation process can be as flexible as possible,

allowing claims to be settled quickly. Administration costs continue to be less than 5 per cent. of the amounts recovered, which in 1998–99 was £201.5 million.

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the cost of *(a)* a CT scan and *(b)* a chest x-ray when evidence is sought as to whether a person has an asbestos-related disease. [111703]

Mr. Bayley: There is no standard cost for either investigation. Claimants for an asbestos-related disease under the Industrial Injuries Scheme are referred to Medical Services for advice, which will often necessitate their taking and reporting upon plain chest radiographs. If a CT scan was felt to be necessary, Medical Services would provide one. In either case, Medical Services is recompensed for the investigations it supplies through its overall contract with the Benefits Agency, which does not specify fees for particular investigations.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will accept a privately-commissioned CT scan as evidence when a person is seeking to prove that he has an asbestos-related disease. [111686]

Mr. Bayley: Claimants for Social Security benefits may ask the decision maker to consider whatever evidence they wish to produce in support of their claims. The decision maker will consider any evidence upon its merits. This includes medical investigations carried out in the private sector.

Compensation Recovery Unit

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish statistics for each of the past five years on the work of the Compensation Recovery Unit. [111684]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Net amounts recovered 1994–95 to 1999–2000

Year	*£ million*
1994–95	110.1
1995–96	135.1
1996–97	145.5
1997–98	170.9
1998–99	201.5
1999–2000 (to December)	157.5

Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest hundred thousand

Number of certificates issued by CRU 1994–95 to 1999–2000

Year	*Number*
1994–95	261,000
1995–96	339,000
1996–97	416,000
1997–98	720,000
1998–99	1,267,000
1999–2000 (to December)	918,000

Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest thousand

Housing Benefit

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in receipt of housing benefit live in *(a)* local authority properties, *(b)* housing association properties and *(c)* owner-occupied housing in (i) the DSS administrative region containing Paisley, (ii) Scotland and (iii) the UK. [111681]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available. Such information that is available is in the table.

Number of Housing Benefit recipients living in (a) local authority properties, (b) housing association properties in (i) Scotland and (ii) Great Britain—February 1999

	Total local authority	*Total housing association*
Scotland	383,000	80,400
Great Britain	2,589,600	858,900

Note:
1. The number of recipients is rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Recipients refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.
3. Owner occupiers are not entitled to Housing Benefit.
4. It is not possible to give a smaller administrative unit as data on housing in individual local authority areas administered by Scottish Homes is not available. Figures in the table take into account housing administered by Scottish Homes.
5. The information in the table refers to Scotland and Great Britain only. Requests for Housing Benefit data for Northern Ireland should be referred to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System, Quarterly caseload taken on the second Thursday in February 1999.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people are in receipt of housing benefit and of these how many are *(a)* of working age, *(b)* in receipt of incapacity benefit, *(c)* in receipt of unemployment benefit and *(d)* in receipt of income support in (i) the DSS administrative region containing Paisley, (ii) Scotland and (iii) the UK. [111680]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Housing benefit recipients, Scotland and Great Britain—May 1998

Housing benefit (HB) recipients	*Great Britain*	*Scotland*
All housing benefit recipients	4,475,000	520,000
Of working age	2,662,000	296,000
In receipt of incapacity benefit	438,000	72,000
In receipt of JSA (Contribution based)	65,000	11,000
In receipt of Income Support/JSA (Income based)	2,860,000	324,000

Notes:
1. The number of recipients is rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Recipients refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.
3. Jobseekers Allowance (Contribution Based) replaced Unemployment Benefit from October 1996.
4. There is an overlap in the figures as each case could fit into more than one category.
5. "Working age" is where the claimant is aged 16 or over and under 60.
6. It is not possible to give data for smaller administrative regions as information gained from the sampling process becomes unreliable at this level.
7. The information refers to Scotland and Great Britain only. Requests for Housing Benefit data for Northern Ireland should be referred to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiries taken on the second Thursday in May 1998.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much money was spent on housing benefit in *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1990, *(c)* 1996, *(d)* 1997 and *(e)* 1998 in (i) the DSS administrative region containing Paisley, (ii) Scotland and (iii) the UK. [111679]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Housing Benefit expenditure in Great Britain and Scotland

£ million, cash

	Scotland	*Great Britain*
1980–81	95	1,623
1990–91	595	5,147
1996–97	967	11,380
1997–98	1,017	11,180
1998–99	1,034	11,156

Notes:

1. Information for all the years, except for 1998–99, is final outturn. 1998–99 information is estimated outturn.
2. Figures for Renfrewshire have not been included as they do not include expenditure in relation to housing administered by Scottish Homes in the Renfrewshire area (figure not available). The figures for Scotland and Great Britain do include expenditure in relation to housing administered by Scottish Homes. As an indication of the level of spending on Housing Benefit in the Renfrewshire area, the latest available figure for the local authority's spending is £40 million for 1998–99.
3. The information refers to Scotland and Great Britain only. Requests for Housing Benefit data for Northern Ireland should be referred to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Source:

The figures underlie the Departmental Reports and the 1998–99 figure is from the Pre-Budget Report 1999.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many regulations have been made in respect of housing benefit in *(a)* the past 12 months and *(b)* since the benefit was introduced. [111997]

Angela Eagle: There have been 14 sets of regulations made in the last 12 months that affect Housing Benefit and approximately 110 sets of regulations since Housing Benefit was introduced in 1988. Some of the sets of regulations relate only to Housing Benefit, while others affect a number of the income related benefits, including Housing Benefit. Such regulations may contain only minor changes to Housing Benefit policy.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the level of fraud in respect of housing benefit in *(a)* the DSS administrative region containing Paisley, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* the UK. [111693]

Mr. Rooker: No figures are available on the level of Housing Benefit fraud for the Benefits Agency Area Directorate containing Paisley or for the United Kingdom as an entity.

However, the 1997–98 Housing Benefit Accuracy Review provided the information in the following table on the estimated percentage of the number of Housing Benefit cases for Scotland and Great Britain found to be incorrect as a result of either a confirmed or a suspected fraud.

	Scotland	*Great Britain*
Confirmed fraud	*1.8* (0.7–2.9)	*1.9* (1.3–2.6)
Strong suspicion of fraud	*2.4* (1.2–3.7)	*4.0* (1.9–6.8)
Mild suspicion of fraud	*0.5* (0.2–0.8)	*1.1* (0.7–1.7)

Notes:

1. The figures in italic provide the best estimate from the Review for the percentage of the caseload in 1997–98 within each of the fraud categories. The figures in brackets indicate the range within which we can be 95 per cent. confident that the true value lies.
2. The definition of "confirmed fraud" was "where the claimant had provided incorrect or incomplete information or failed to report a change in circumstances which, on correction, led to a reduction in, or cancellation of, benefit and there was evidence or admission of intention to obtain monies fraudulently".
3. The definition of "strong suspicion of fraud" was "where a fraudulent claim could not be proven but, on the balance of probabilities, the incorrect payment was likely to be due to fraud".
4. The definition of "mild suspicion of fraud" was "where there was some suspicion of a fraudulent claim but, on the balance of probabilities, the incorrect payment was not likely to be due to fraud".

Source:

"National Housing Benefit Accuracy Review 1997–98" published by the Government Statistical Service in October 1998.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many circulars have been issued in respect of housing benefit in *(a)* the past 12 months and *(b)* since the benefit was introduced. [111998]

Angela Eagle: In the last 12 months 88 circulars covering administration, fraud and subsidy matters in respect of housing benefit have been issued. Since the benefit was introduced in 1988 approximately 585 circulars have been issued. Some of these circulars covered Council Tax Benefit as well.

Maternity Payment

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the cost of raising the flat-rate statutory maternity payment to £100 a week. [111242]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Estimated cost of raising the flat-rate Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) and Maternity Allowance (MA) to £100 a week

£ million

Option	*Cost increase*
SMP—imposing floor of £100 for first 6 weeks	10
SMP—raising flat rate to £100 for next 12 weeks	140
SMP Total	150
MA—Raising rate to £100 for 18 weeks	45
Total Cost	195

Note:

These estimates are based on the Government Actuary's Department projection of the average number of women on SMP during 2000–01 and assume 100 per cent. take-up. The estimate of MA for 2000–01 is based on the Government Actuary's Department projections for 2001–02 in 2000–01 prices.

Ministerial Meeting

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which subjects were discussed at his meeting with the European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs on 31 January. [111313]

Mr. Darling: Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou and I discussed a number of issues. The main issue was the Lisbon Special Summit due to be held in March 2000, but we also discussed poverty and the UK Anti-Poverty Report, the Commissioner's proposed Social Action Programme due to be published in September 2000, and prospects for Commission reform.

Welfare Reform

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many people disabled from birth will benefit from the Welfare Reform Bill in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [111448]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

From April 2001, young people disabled before the age of 20 (or 25 if they have been in education) will be able to qualify for Incapacity Benefit without having to have made National Insurance contributions. Rates of Incapacity Benefit are higher than Severe Disablement Allowance (to which such young people would currently be entitled)—after a year on benefit, the rate is over £26 a week more. It is estimated that in Great Britain the change will bring approximately 6,500 young people into Incapacity Benefit each year. If the national pattern of receipt were replicated in Shrewsbury and Atcham, and in Shropshire, the numbers moving into Incapacity Benefit each year in those areas would be some 10 and 25 respectively.

Also from April 2001, the higher rate mobility care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) will be extended to severely disabled children aged three or four. It is estimated that approximately 7,000 children in Great Britain will become entitled in the first year and approximately 8,000 in each subsequent year. If the national pattern of receipt were replicated in Shrewsbury and Atcham and in Shropshire, the numbers of children qualifying in those areas in each year would be some 10 and 50 respectively.

Poverty Statistics

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development the average percentage of *(a)* people and *(b)* children, living in poverty for each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [111067]

Mr. Bayley: Poverty and social exclusion are complex multi-dimensional issues, affecting many aspects of people's lives—their income, health, housing, the quality of the environment, opportunities to work and to learn. There is no single measure which can capture the complex problems which need to be overcome.

The most commonly used measures of poverty in international comparisons are income based. International comparisons are not available annually. The following table gives figures for the proportion of people below 50 per cent. of mean equivalent household disposable income for members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for which data are available. The source of these is the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS), August 1998.

Percentage of population below 50 per cent. of equivalent mean household disposable income for certain OECD countries

Country	*Year*	*Percentage*
Australia	1994	17.0
Belgium	1992	7.1
Canada	1994	14.4
Czech Republic	1992	1.7
Denmark	1992	7.8
Finland	1995	5.7
France	1994	14.9
Germany	1994	13.7
Hungary	1994	14.7
Italy	1995	18.7
Luxembourg	1994	7.2
Netherlands	1991	9.9
Norway	1995	8.1
Poland	1995	15.6
Spain	1990	15.6
Sweden	1995	9.2
United Kingdom	1995	19.5
United States	1997	26.2

Source:
LIS Low Income Measures as computed by K. Vleminckx (Luxembourg Income Study—LIS), August 1998

Studies showing child poverty rates across countries are also subject to data availability. The following table quotes draft results from "Child poverty across the industrialized world: Evidence from the Luxembourg Income Study", Bradbury and Jäntti, August 1999. This study presented results for children in households with an equivalent disposable income less than 50 per cent. of the overall median population income. The results are therefore not directly comparable with those in the first table, as median income differs from mean income.

Percentage of children in households below 50 per cent. of equivalent median household income for certain OECD countries

Country	*Year*	*Percentage*
Australia	1994	17.1
Belgium	1992	6.2
Canada	1994	16.0
Czech Republic	1992	1.8
Denmark	1992	5.9
Finland	1991	3.4
Germany	1994	11.6
Hungary	1994	11.5
Italy	1995	21.2
Luxembourg	1994	6.3
Netherlands	1991	8.4
Norway	1995	4.5
Poland	1995	14.2
Spain	1990	13.1
Sweden	1992	3.7
United Kingdom	1995	21.3
United States	1994	26.3

Notes:
1. Results for individual countries are not accurate to the degree of precision presented in the tables. Comparisons between countries may be affected by differences in the extent to which households in the datasets are representative of the population, and in the accuracy of the income data and its editing.
2. Results for children are sensitive to the precise way in which household incomes are adjusted for household size and composition; the figure for the United Kingdom is higher than official UK estimates for the "50 per cent. of median income" income level.

National Insurance Commissioners

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department has spent in each of the last three years on legal representations before the National Insurance Commissioners on *(a)* in-house legal advice, *(b)* legal advice from Treasury solicitors, *(c)* junior counsel and *(d)* QCs in each of the last three years. [111400]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

£

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
In-house legal advice[1]	214,236.88	211,192.05	221,300.56
Legal advice from Treasury solicitors	0	0	0
Junior Council	21,661.05	20,173.87	8,203.00
QCs[2]	0	2,367.63	6,310.00

[1] Estimated on basis that staff involved spend 50 per cent. of their time on work on appeals to the Social Security and Child Support Commissioners.
[2] Junior Council and QCs charges for 45 weeks only, up to week commencing 14 February 2000.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total amount of benefit in the most recent available year *(a)* in dispute before appeals to the National Insurance Commissioners by claimants, *(b)* in dispute before appeals to the National Insurance Commissioners by the DSS, *(c)* awarded as a consequence of successful appeal to the National Insurance Commissioners and *(d)* reduced, removed or not awarded as a consequence of a decision by National Insurance Commissioners. [111399]

Angela Eagle: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) in respect of requests for written reasons preparatory to lodging an application for leave to appeal to the National Insurance Commissioners, what was *(a)* the average, *(b)* the median and *(c)* the longest time between (i) the request being received and the written reasons prepared and (ii) the reasons being prepared and communicated to the claimant in each of the last three years; [111402]

(2) how many applications for leave to appeal to the National Insurance Commissioners were made to appeal tribunal chairmen; of these how many were *(a)* refused, *(b)* renewed by application to the commissioners and *(c)* granted leave in each of the last three years; [111404]

(3) how many cases remitted to appeal tribunals after successful appeals to the National Insurance Commissioners were successful on rehearing; what was *(a)* the average, *(b)* the median and *(c)* the longest time between the date of decision of the Commissioners and the decision being communicated to the claimant in each of the last three years; [111403]

(4) in relation to cases in which leave to appeal to the National Insurance Commissioners was granted; what was *(a)* the average, *(b)* the median and *(c)* the longest time between leave being granted and the bundle of documents being transmitted to the Commissioners by the appeal tribunal in each of the last three years. [111401]

Angela Eagle: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

War Pensions

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which local authorities disregard war pensions but not war widows' pensions when assessing entitlement to housing benefit or council tax rebates. [111580]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

We do not routinely collect this sort of information on discretionary local schemes for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit as such schemes are funded from an authority's own resources.

Lone Parents

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the percentage of lone parents out of work for each year since 1992 for *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [111066]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Lone parents on income support

	Shrewsbury and Atcham	*Shropshire*	*Great Britain*
November 1992	[1]—	[1]—	964,000
November 1993	[1]—	[1]—	1,010,000
November 1994	[1]—	[1]—	1,025,000
November 1995	[1]—	2,500	1,046,000
November 1996	[1]—	2,600	1,022,000
November 1997	[1]—	2,400	982,000
November 1998	900	2,400	938,000
August 1999[2]	900	2,400	940,000

[1] Data not available
[2] August 1999 are the latest figures available
Notes:
1. Sample size 5 per cent., therefore subject to sampling error
2. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependants who are not in receipt of the disability or pensioner premium
3. Shropshire County changed boundaries between 1998 and 1999. The Wrekin has been removed from figures prior to 1999 as this became a new unitary authority in 1999.
4. Figures for Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire have been rounded to the nearest hundred; figures for GB are rounded to the nearest thousand.
Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, November 1992 to August 1999.

To help lone parents who are out of work and in receipt of Income Support the New Deal for Lone Parents offers advice and support with jobsearch, training, childcare and benefits. Since October 1998 over 100,000 lone parents have joined NDLP and one in three of these have obtained jobs. In addition, initiatives such as the National Childcare Strategy, the Lone Parent's Benefit Run-On and the Working Families Tax Credit are for the first time making work a viable option for many lone parents.

Average Incomes

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the average income per week per household for each year since 1992, for *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [111071]

Angela Eagle: The latest figures published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for household income by county are for 1995 and were published in Table 9 of Regional Accounts 1996: Part 2, Economic Trends No. 535, June 1998. Estimates for household income by region, up to 1997, were published in Regional Accounts 1997: Part 2, Economic Trends No.551, October 1999. Both of these publications are available in the House of Commons Library. No figures are available at constituency level.

The published figures are normally presented in terms of total gross annual household income per head of population. These converted to weekly averages, give for Shropshire from 1992 to 1995 of £166, £173, £184 and £197. These figures on incomes of the household sector are defined on a national accounts basis, which includes persons living in private households and in institutions. These figures have not been adjusted for inflation.

Pensions

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what information he has collected on the number of people who are members of occupational pension schemes that include provision for early retirement on grounds of ill health; and if he will make a statement on the impact of the introduction of stakeholder pensions on that number. [111454]

Mr. Rooker: The vast majority of occupational pension scheme members are part of schemes that include provision for early retirement on grounds of ill-health. Only around 1 per cent. of occupational pension scheme members have no such provision. This means that around 10 million people are covered by arrangements for early retirement on grounds of ill-health. We do not expect the introduction of stakeholder pensions to affect that number.

Source:

The forthcoming Tenth Survey of Occupational Pension Schemes by the Government Actuary.

Pensioners

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate, on the basis of his Department's Family Resources Survey, the number of male married pensioners under the age of 85 years who are receiving amounts of state retirement pension in excess of the rate of full basic state pension applicable to a pensioner of that age. [111239]

Mr. Rooker: In 1997–98 the number of male married pensioners aged under 85 in Great Britain receiving State Retirement Pension in excess of the full basic State pension was 2.27 million. This total includes 0.22 million pensioners between the ages of 80 and 85 who were in receipt of the 25p age addition.

Notes:

1. The numbers above have been extracted from the Family Resources Survey (FRS) 1997–98. The FRS is a survey of private households in Great Britain.

2. In this year, the full basic State pension was £62.45 and £62.70 for pensioners aged 80 years and over (includes the 25p age addition).

Independent Tribunal Service (Sutton)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many staff were working in the office of the Independent Tribunal Service at Sutton on 4 January; [110756]

(2) how many faxes were received by the Independent Tribunal Service at Sutton, Surrey over the Christmas and New Year period; and on what dates each was processed; [110757]

(3) if the Independent Tribunal Service at Sutton, Surrey *(a)* collected and *(b)* had delivered its incoming recorded delivery mail on 4 January. [110758]

Angela Eagle: Administration of the Appeals Service (formally the Independent Tribunal Service) is the responsibility of the Chief Executive, Neil Ward. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from N. D. Ward to Andrew Mackinlay, dated 9 March 2000:

I am writing in reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the service at our Sutton office over the Christmas and New Year period.

We are committed to improving the quality of service we provide to all who use or rely upon our Service. We deal with many thousands of appeals every year without incident, but I recognise that each appeal is of great importance to the individual who makes it. We strive, therefore, to provide the best service possible to every appellant in their given circumstances, whatever the period of the year. Over holiday periods we maintain sufficient—if inevitably lower—levels of staffing at all our offices.

There were 39 staff working our Sutton office on 4 January 2000. The Sutton office is situated next door to the local Post Office and it is our practice to collect mail from them every working day morning. Staff did collect incoming recorded delivery main on 4 January 2000 and the letters were distributed to the appropriate staff during the course of that morning.

I am unable to say how many faxes were received at the Sutton office over the Christmas and New Year period. There are three fax machines in the Sutton office and because of the volume of activity, a log of incoming faxes is not kept. Faxes received are regularly taken from the machines and distributed to the relevant processing teams. It is not possible to say when each of the faxes was processed.

I hope that this reply is helpful. Please contact me should you require any further information.

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 552–53W, what conditions have been placed on the publication of research findings under the premise of clause 12.2 of his standard research contract; what was the subject of each such case; and what were the reasons for the conditions being imposed. [111702]

Mr. Rooker: No conditions have been placed on the publication of research findings under clause 12.2 of the standard Departmental research contract. All consent to publish has been given unconditionally.

Benefits Agency (Somerset)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on recruitment and promotion of Benefits Agency staff in Somerset. [110831]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Jackie Ballard, dated 22 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about recruitment and promotion of Benefits Agency (BA) staff in Somerset.

The number of staff recruited by the BA in Somerset over the last 3 years is:

1997: 36 staff (this includes 8 existing BA staff who transferred to Somerset)

1998: 80 staff (this includes 3 existing BA staff who transferred to Somerset)

1999: 162 staff (this includes 27 existing BA staff who transferred to Somerset)

The number of BA staff from Somerset that have been promoted over the same period is:

1997: 1 member of staff

1998: 14 staff

1999: 12 staff (of which 1 is still unposted)

The high numbers recruited in 1999 are partially the result of Somerset District being a pilot for the ONE Project, and cover staff employed in the District together with other BA Units which are based in the Country of Somerset.

It is anticipated that there will be further promotion and recruitment exercises in Somerset later this year.

I hope this is helpful.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the impact which the projected Benefits Agency overspend will have on staff in Somerset. [110461]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Jackie Ballard, dated 22 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary question about the impact which the projected Benefits Agency (BA) overspend will have on staff in Somerset.

A conscious decision was taken at the beginning of the 1999/2000 financial year to maintain staffing levels at the agreed level in order to ensure we were in a position to update as much work as possible before the millennium, to minimise any potential disruption to service.

This decision was reflected in the allocation of resources to the field network, including Somerset District, and was agreed shortly after the start of the financial year. This strategy helped the Agency in service delivery and also to maintain and improve standards through the year.

However, indicators were that unless some action was taken in the latter part of the year to reduce costs, the total expenditure for the Agency would exceed our annual budget allocations.

Such measures, undertaken in all areas included:

no overtime working [except in exceptional circumstances]

minimal use of casual staff

no recognition payments and the deferral of incentive payments

to defer posting recruited staff until April 2000

deferral of mandatory and non-mandatory training

Somerset District, in line with other local districts, took these measures to ensure the Agency lived within it's budget while continuing to maintain service to the public.

At the outset of the year a resource allocation was made to Somerset which allowed for an average 371.49 whole-time equivalent staff to be employed compared with the 1998/99 average of 347.13, an increase of over 24 staff for the year.

Staffing on mainstream District business is currently still running above the 1999/2000 allocation of 371.49 and is expected to do so until the end of March when the anticipated position will be 385.27.

I hope this is helpful.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 29 February 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Minimum Wage (Wales)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning estimates of the impact of the minimum wage in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [112020]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not had the opportunity to discuss the findings of the Low Pay Commission's report on the impact of the national minimum wage with the First Secretary. The report confirms that the introduction of the minimum wage has helped take over 1.5 million low-paid workers throughout the United Kingdom out of the trap of poverty wages. As in the other parts of the United Kingdom, many thousands of workers in Wales have benefited.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to place a statutory obligation upon the utilities to purchase renewable energy; and what discussions he has had with those utilities to make sure that they purchase renewable energy at a realistic price. [111493]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Utilities Bill, which had its second reading in the House of Commons on 31 January 2000, contains provisions giving the Secretary of State powers to impose obligations on licensed electricity suppliers to secure the supply of renewables electricity. The Government's proposals for renewables electricity are the subject of extensive consultation with the industry.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the United Kingdom's total exports received ECGD cover in each of the last three years. [111010]

Mr. Caborn: The data required to answer this question accurately is not readily available.

In particular, whereas UK Export statistics relate to the year in which the goods were delivered or the work performed, ECGD business statistics relate to the year of guarantee issue. Deliveries of goods or performance of work under guaranteed contracts may continue for a period of several years thereafter.

In view of this lack of correlation it is not possible to provide the year-by-year analysis which you have requested. However, from data readily available, ECGD estimates that it may have covered some 2.3 per cent. of the total UK exports in this period.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Jubilee Line Extension

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions the service on the Jubilee Line extension has been suspended since its opening; and what the reasons were in each case. [109834]

Mr. Hill: Service has never been suspended over the whole line. However, on occasion, trains had to stop while the control computer was rebooted. This typically takes 10 to 15 minutes. There have also been signal-related problems at Stratford (the most complex area) sometimes resulting in suspension of service on the Stratford-North Greenwich section.

The challenges arising from the start of through running were expected since problems are anticipated when bedding in a new railway. London Underground is doing all it can to stabilise and improve performance. The service showed dramatic improvement over the Christmas/New Year period and through January, with the number of incidents lasting 15 minutes dropping from 37 in December to 20 in January. Signal modifications have had a negative impact on recent performance but these changes will improve service. Work is in hand which should improve performance significantly over the next few months.

The table details the number of reported incidents of 15 minutes or more (some of which involved partial suspension of services) since through running began on 20 November 1999. Detailed explanation in each case is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Week commencing	*Number of incidents 15 minutes or more*
20 November 1999	5
27 November 1999	7
4 December 1999	3
11 December 1999	14
18 December 1999	14
25 December 1999	6
1 January 2000	6
8 January 2000	6
15 January 2000	2
22 January 2000	6
Total	69

Road Accident Deaths

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the total road accident fatalities in the United Kingdom since 1970 *(a)* in total and *(b)* for each year; and if he will make a statement. [110806]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Road accident fatalities: UK 1970–1998

	Number of fatalities
1970	7,771
1971	8,003
1972	8,135
1973	7,741
1974	7,199
1975	6,679
1976	6,870
1977	6,969
1978	7,119
1979	6,645
1980	6,239
1981	6,069
1982	6,150
1983	5,618
1984	5,788
1985	5,342
1986	5,618
1987	5,339
1988	5,230
1989	5,554
1990	5,402
1991	4,753
1992	4,379
1993	3,957
1994	3,807
1995	3,765
1996	3,740
1997	3,743
1998	3,581
Total	167,205

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the total of road accident fatalities in England for each year since 1990; what has been the total of road accident fatalities in each English county since 1990, expressed *(a)* in absolute terms and *(b)* in relation to the population of each such county; and if he will make a statement. [110805]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the following tables.

Table (a) shows the fatalities by county and in total and Table (b) shows fatality rates by county per 100,000 population.

Table (a) English road accident fatalities: 1990–98

Year	Number
1990	4,423
1991	3,854
1992	3,549
1993	3,228
1994	3,077
1995	2,995
1996	3,024
1997	3,001
1998	2,834

Table (b) Road accident fatalities: English counties: 1990–98

County	1990–98 Total fatalities	1990–98 Average rate per 100,000 population
Avon	581	59.4
Bedfordshire	408	75.2
Berkshire	376	48.6
Buckinghamshire	493	74.9
Cambridgeshire	677	98.2
Cheshire	712	73.1
Cleveland	279	49.9
Cornwall	356	74.3
Cumbria	536	109.3
Derbyshire	634	66.4
Devon	515	48.9
Dorset	436	64.7
Durham	424	69.9
East Sussex	460	63.2
Essex	888	56.5
Gloucestershire	480	87.5
Greater London	2,616	37.4
Greater Manchester	1,222	47.5
Hampshire	945	54.5
Hereford and Worceser	569	81.9
Hertfordshire	576	57.2
Humberside	613	69.3
Kent	947	61.1
Lancashire	923	65.0
Leicestershire	747	81.8
Lincolnshire	738	121.8
Merseyside	630	44.0
Norfolk	725	94.2
Northants	505	84.6
Northumberland	297	96.6
North Yorkshire	796	109.4
Nottinghamshire	828	80.6
Oxfordshire	533	89.6
Shropshire	381	91.2
Somerset	459	96.1
South Yorkshire	664	50.9
Staffordshire	703	66.7
Suffolk	403	61.5
Surrey	629	60.3
Tyne and Wear	485	43.0
Warwickshire	464	93.5
West Midlands	1,133	43.1
West Sussex	484	66.6
West Yorkshire	1,202	57.2
Wiltshire	513	87.5

Public Transport Deaths

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total of public transport accident fatalities in the UK since 1970 *(a)* in total and *(b)* for each year; and if he will make a statement. [110807]

Mr. Hill: Between 1970 and 1998, 2,700 passengers and staff were killed in bus and rail accidents in Great Britain (including movement accidents, such as passengers alighting from a bus or train). Detailed annual data are attached. Data are not yet available for 1999.

Public transport accident fatalities [1]: Great Britain

	Railways [2]	Bus and coach [3]
1970	108	74
1971	97	64
1972	66	69
1973	73	57
1974	63	69

Public transport accident fatalities [1]: Great Britain

	Railways [2]	*Bus and coach [3]*
1975	103	115
1976	66	69
1977	58	64
1978	81	60
1979	82	34
1980	49	29
1981	57	20
1982	43	33
1983	52	38
1984	59	37
1985	47	32
1986	45	24
1987	51	15
1988	81	17
1989	45	20
1990	55	19
1991[4]	54	25
1992[5]	22	19
1993	17	35
1994	23	21
1995	11	35
1996	16	11
1997	25	14
1998	17	18

[1] Includes movement accidents eg passengers alighting from a train or bus
[2] Passengers and railway staff
[3] Passengers and drivers
[4] Rail data cover 15 months to March 1992
[5] From 1992 rail data are for financial years

Air Services

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what account he will take of United Kingdom regional interests in future discussions he has concerning the development of air services between the United Kingdom and the United States; [111303]

(2) what assessment he has made of the likely economic impact on the North-West of the liberalisation of air service agreements between the United States and the United Kingdom; [111302]

(3) what assessment he has made of the likely impact on the North-West of full liberalisation of air service agreements. [111301]

Mr. Mullin: In all our bilateral aviation discussions, the interests of the regions are given full weight in determining the overall balance of UK interests. Manchester airport contributes significantly to the economy of the north-west, a contribution which should increase as the aviation market is liberalised. Indeed, the Government believes that the liberalisation of air services agreement would bring widespread benefits—to consumers and to the industry, as well as to the regional and national economies. This is why the UK continues work towards the liberalisation of air services generally. The "open skies" template proposed by the United States does not constitute liberalisation. We shall continue to impress upon the US Government the need for them to abandon their protectionist aviation policies and embrace true liberalisation.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to initiate further discussions with the United States concerning the development of air services between the United Kingdom and the United States. [111304]

Mr. Mullin: The United Kingdom and United States governments are currently in discussion on matters concerning the liberalisation of air services.

Roads (North Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has for trunk road improvements in North Yorkshire; and if he will make a statement; [111375]

(2) what proposals he has to assist motor traffic circulation in North Yorkshire during the course of 2000. [111381]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Miss Anne McIntosh, dated 29 February 2000:

Trunk Road Improvements—North Yorkshire

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions. You asked "what proposals he has to assist motor traffic circulation in North Yorkshire during the course of 2000" and "what plans he has for trunk road improvements in North Yorkshire".

The counties' Local Transport Plan will include policies and proposals to assist motor traffic in North Yorkshire. Information on the plan can be obtained from the County Council.

The Highways Agency is progressing the following trunk road improvement proposals in North Yorkshire. All of these projects will contribute to improving traffic flows in North Yorkshire taking account of the needs of both road users and those affected by our roads.

A63 Selby Bypass

Is in the Targeted Programme of Improvements schemes and progress is being made towards a start of works during 2001–2002.

In addition, we are developing a small bypass scheme on the A63 Osgodby costing about £1 million. Subject to satisfactory completion of statutory procedures, the scheme could be taken forward in conjunction with the A63 Selby Bypass.

A1(M) Wetherby to Washforth

We are taking forward the next major Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) project on the A1 between Darrington and Dishforth. This project includes in North Yorkshire, a scheme to improve the A1 to dual three lane carriageway between Wetherby and Walshforth. Start of construction is planned for Spring 2003.

A1 Rainton

As promised in previous correspondence, we are reviewing the need for street lighting at Rainton crossroads. If this is found to be needed it will be undertaken in 2000–2001.

A1 Between Bramham and Barton

A safety study has started which will investigate safety problems between Bramham and Barton on the A1, and will consolidate previous work, consider options and recommend an improvement strategy for the A1. The report is due in Autumn 2000. Depending on the findings, the report recommendations may need to be referred to the Regional Planning Body to consider compatibility with emerging Regional Planning Guidance and the Regional Transport Strategy.

A66 Safety Study

A safety study is about to start to investigate the poor safety record on this route between Scotch Corner and Penrith. The study will recommend options for improving safety. It is due to report in Autumn 2000. Again, depending on the findings, the recommendations may need to be referred to the Regional Planning Body to consider compatibility with emerging Regional Planning Guidance and the Regional Transport Strategy.

We are already developing two schemes to address known safety problems on the A66. These will provide two short lengths of dual carriageway on the A66 between Greta Bridge to Stephen Bank and Carkin to Scotch Corner.

A64 Trunk Road (A1 Bramham to Scarborough)

A Route Improvement Strategy for improving safety on the A64 between the A1 and Scarborough has recently been put to the Regional Planning Forum for Yorkshire and the Humber for their agreement. The Strategy includes the following improvement proposals:

A1 to York

Subject to satisfactory completion of statutory procedures, schemes could start as follows:

A64 Top Lane Improvement—March 2001—to remove traffic signals

A64 Bilborough Top Improvement—2002–2003—provision of new junction to enable gaps in the central reservation to be closed.

A64 Tadcaster Bar Improvement—2002–2003—improvement to existing junction to enable gaps in the central reservation to be closed.

York to Scarborough

Public consultation could start during 2000 on the following schemes:

A64 Barton Hill Junction—options for a two level junction are being investigated

A64 Whitwell on the Hill Junctions—options for a two level junction are being investigated

A64 Whitwell to Malton By Pass—options for a two level junction and possible dual carriageway are being investigated

A64 Rillington By Pass—options for a bypass are being investigated including a review of the previous bypass scheme.

In the meantime, beneficial low cost (less than £100,000) safety schemes such as improved signing and lining, red surfacing, small-scale junction improvements and improvements for pedestrians and cyclists will continue to be identified and implemented on this route. Schemes of this nature will be undertaken in 2000–2001 at the following locations:

A64 Hopgrove Roundabout

A64 North Lane to Hazelbush

A64 Hazelbush to Lobster House

A64 Lobster House to Flamingoland

A64 Whitwell

A64 Malton Bypass

A64 Brambling Fields to Rillington

A64 Rilling to East Knapton

A64 East Knapton to Sherburn

A64 Sherburn Gateways

A64 Serburn to Saxton

A64 Staxton to Musham Bank

A64 Musham Bank to Queen Mary Roundabout

A64 Whitwell to Malton

A64 York Bypass

A1237 Rawcliffe Roundabout

Safety and congestion problems are being addressed along with provision for a Park and Ride facility in partnership with York City Council

Traffic Calming

In addition we will be undertaking the following four traffic calming schemes. Whilst these will not assist in improving traffic flows, they are being taken forward in the interests of safety, environmental improvements and accessibility for non-road users.

A63 Thorpe Willoughby

A63 Cliffe

A63 Hemingborough

A63 Hambleton

Should you require any further information, please contact Kevin Lasbury, Divisional Director for Norther Region, on 0113 283 6405.

Local Authority Housing (North-West)

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each housing authority in the North-West of England *(a)* the total housing stock available for rent by that authority, *(b)* the number of households registered on the general needs waiting list and *(c)* the number of properties vacant for longer than six months for each of the last four years for which figures are available. [111668]

Mr. Mullin: The information reported on the HIP Operational Information returns is as follows:

Local authority housing stock available for rent[1] as at 1 April

	1996	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Allerdale	4,704	4,586	4,497	0
Barrow-in-Furness	3,650	3,616	3,585	3,561
Blackburn	11,305	11,044	10,371	10,167
Blackpool	6,362	6,341	6,298	6,261
Bolton	22,417	22,292	22,234	22,045
Burnley	5,676	5,582	5,545	5,490
Bury	9,923	9,819	9,712	9,609
Carlisle	8,833	8,745	8,596	8,287
Chester	7,382	7,338	7,269	7,120
Chorley	3,558	3,534	3,515	3,472
Congleton	4,214	4,170	0	0
Copeland	4,649	4,598	4,525	4,425
Crewe and Nantwich	7,055	6,936	6,838	6,627
Eden	1,616	1,524	0	0
Ellesmere Port and Neston	7,442	7,353	7,251	7,149
Fylde	2,032	1,998	1,970	1,945
Halton	7,855	7,851	7,781	7,636
Hyndburn	4,019	3,971	3,899	3,829
Knowsley	20,115	19,737	19,304	18,838
Lancaster	4,480	4,460	4,424	4,376
Liverpool	44,643	43,591	41,711	40,731
Macclesfield	6,836	6,750	6,551	6,270
Manchester	80,281	77,304	74,661	65,233
Oldham	20,837	20,562	19,517	19,184
Pendle	4,250	4,213	4,211	4,160
Preston	9,334	9,247	9,173	8,735
Ribble Valley	1,512	1,438	1,412	1,391
Rochdale	17,671	17,513	17,353	17,234
Rossendale	4,995	4,953	4,902	4,800
Salford	32,007	31,969	31,776	30,867
Sefton	14,593	14,406	14,169	13,919
South Lakeland	4,185	4,101	4,004	3,881
South Ribble	0	0	0	0
St. Helens	16,506	16,369	16,168	15,765
Stockport	13,750	13,718	13,624	13,380
Tameside	18,612	18,171	17,813	16,532
Trafford	11,546	11,400	11,321	11,200
Vale Royal	8,104	8,034	7,877	7,718
Warrington	11,583	11,444	11,270	11,112
West Lancashire	8,845	8,721	8,587	8,423
Wigan	28,235	27,877	27,314	27,139
Wirral	19,108	18,606	18,893	16,827
Wyre	0	0	0	0

[1] Stock available for rent is defined here as tenanted properties plus any homes vacant for management purposes (ie available for immediate letting or after minor repairs)

Households on the Housing Register as at 1 April

	1996	1997	1998	1999
Allerdale	1,863	1,377	1,856	1,330
Barrow-in-Furness	879	853	394	926
Blackburn	2,764	2,316	1,854	1,493
Blackpool	4,201	4,159	4,491	3,611
Bolton	5,626	4,460	4,434	5,005
Burnley	2,313	2,466	1,793	2,035
Bury	2,081	2,414	2,441	3,739
Carlisle	4,049	2,642	3,207	3,681
Chester	4,384	3,614	3,797	4,482
Chorley	830	726	843	869
Congleton	1,832	1,616	1,513	1,223
Copeland	1,609	1,609	1,432	1,109
Crewe and Nantwich	1,224	643	1,227	1,355
Eden	693	698	717	657
Ellesmere Port and Neston	4,230	3,429	1,823	1,971
Fylde	1,536	1,655	1,271	1,475
Halton	5,143	2,573	1,021	1,152
Hyndburn	1,001	1,203	909	640
Knowsley	4,185	4,636	4,651	2,794
Lancaster	1,326	1,443	1,346	1,237
Liverpool	5,225	4,321	4,295	4,430
Macclesfield	3,409	2,205	2,421	2,575
Manchester	13,601	9,739	10,397	9,715
Oldham	4,365	3,529	4,218	3,581
Pendle	1,325	1,508	1,731	1,820
Preston	2,448	2,233	2,109	1,913
Ribble Valley	887	669	784	776
Rochdale	5,018	4,648	5,425	3,582
Rossendale	2,188	1,515	1,394	1,715
Salford	5,673	5,655	4,428	3,452
Sefton	5,776	5,220	4,890	4,810
South Lakeland	1,625	1,567	1,524	1,405
South Ribble	2,079	967	1,102	961
St. Helens	2,070	2,194	2,009	2,160
Stockport	6,421	5,999	6,805	6,841
Tameside	5,770	4,950	5,139	4,287
Trafford	3,131	3,681	5,184	5,198
Vale Royal	3,600	3,512	3,215	2,583
Warrington	2,852	2,516	1,497	2,442
West Lancashire	1,603	1,422	1,912	1,712
Wigan	5,458	5,391	5,025	5,151
Wirral	6,643	4,949	6,912	5,725
Wyre	1,618	1,720	1,557	1,458

All local authority stock vacant for longer than six months [1] as at 1 April

	1996	1997	1998	1999
Allerdale	41	52	19	0
Barrow-in-Furness	6	0	0	0
Blackburn	133	412	716	332
Blackpool	10	1	1	25
Bolton	39	49	55	57
Burnley	34	121	187	287
Bury	6	1	12	51
Carlisle	48	129	277	365
Chester	37	24	12	48
Chorley	8	7	6	8
Congleton	29	1	0	0
Copeland	40	70	106	98
Crewe and Nantwich	29	40	28	97
Eden	8	10	0	0
Ellesmere Port and Neston	1	3	1	6
Fylde	1	2	2	0
Halton	106	62	34	48
Hyndburn	6	4	48	83
Knowsley	181	202	387	383
Lancaster	1	3	1	3
Liverpool	3,208	n/a	2,022	1,671
Macclesfield	13	12	36	222
Manchester	166	279	1,661	2,007
Oldham	44	73	58	42
Pendle	0	0	0	0
Preston	6	33	3	40
Ribble Valley	0	3	0	0
Rochdale	37	29	23	8
Rossendale	4	7	33	32
Salford	726	423	693	790
Sefton	26	31	69	104
South Lakeland	11	19	19	19
South Ribble	0	0	0	0
St. Helens	55	72	129	206
Stockport	154	98	109	85
Tameside	104	265	224	137
Trafford	156	119	71	57
Vale Royal	11	2	5	6
Warrington	23	7	4	20
West Lancashire	39	36	28	50
Wigan	34	87	265	196
Wirral	47	436	121	201
Wyre	0	0	0	0

[1] Includes properties vacant for other than management reasons (eg stock scheduled for, or undergoing, major repair work, or awaiting sale or demolition)

Bayley Island Junction

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* pedestrians and *(b)* vehicle occupants were (i) killed and (ii) seriously injured in road accidents at Bayley Island junction between the A49 and A5 in each year from 1992; and if he will make a statement. [111068]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Pedestrians and motor vehicle occupant casualties in accidents at the Bayley Island junction [1,2] between the A49 and A5: 1992–98

	Pedestrian				MV Occupant [3]			
	Fatal	Serious	Slight	All	Fatal	Serious	Slight	All
1992	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
1993	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5
1994	1	0	0	1	0	1	7	8
1995	0	0	1	1	0	0	6	6
1996	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	6
1997	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
1998	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3

[1] Accidents on or within 20 metres of a junction

[2] Includes casualties where A5112 intersects A5 and or A49

[3] Motor vehicle occupant or rider

Greater London Authority Elections

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the purpose of the computer bar code which is to be on the ballot papers for the Greater London Authority elections; and what safeguards relate to them. [111581]

Mr. Hill: It is proposed that the ballot papers for the Greater London Authority elections on 4 May 2000 should be counted by electronic scanning equipment. The unique bar code which will appear on each ballot paper enables the electronic scanning equipment to identify each ballot paper as having been properly issued. Ballot papers without a proper bar code will not be counted. The bar code does not contain any information about the voter, but puts the number normally present on a traditional ballot paper in a form which can be read by the scanning equipment. The computer system supporting the scanning equipment has a number of security features which prevent unauthorised access.

Driving Test Centres

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the consultative process used for the closure of driving test centres involves seeking the approval of *(a)* the Chief Executive of the Driving Standards Agency and *(b)* a Minister for the closure proposal before other interested parties are consulted. [111695]

Mr. Hill: The consultative process currently used by the Driving Standards Agency when the closure of a driving test centre is being considered involves seeking the approval of the Agency's Chief Executive and the Minister to consult about the proposed closure. Then other interested parties are consulted. A final decision has to be approved by the Chief Executive and the Minister, taking into account the results of the consultation. Consultation before closure is not always possible, for instance when a test centre has to be closed at short notice for health and safety or operational reasons.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the maximum round trip distance that driving test candidates are expected to travel to a driving test centre in an area of 23 persons per square kilometre. [111102]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The guideline currently operated by the Driving Standards Agency is that in areas with a population density of less than 100 persons per square kilometre, candidates should not have to travel more than 30 miles to a practical driving test centre.

Parking Revenue (London)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the revenue derived from parking by each London borough in the last full year for which figures are available. [112002]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table.

London Local Authorities—1998–99 Parking Income

	Income £000
Barking and Dagenham	935
Barnet	3,060
Bexley	2,618
Brent	4,052
Bromley	5,404
Camden	21,286
Corporation of London	12,702
Croydon	10,148
Ealing	3,120
Enfield	3,777
Greenwich	5,570
Hackney	3,473
Hammersmith and Fulham	13,194
Haringey	4,129
Harrow	3,408
Havering	3,478
Hillingdon	3,192
Hounslow	3,339
Islington	5,793
Kensington and Chelsea	25,946
Kingston	4,775
Lambeth	5,476
Lewisham	1,338
Merton	2,365
Newham	2,542
Redbridge	2,312
Richmond	5,561
Southwark	4,749
Sutton	3,484
Tower Hamlets	7,469
Waltham Forest	3,173
Wandsworth	6,160
Westminster	101,894
Total	289,922

Note:

The figures for parking revenue in the table are derived from the RO2 (Revenue Expenditure) forms which all local authorities (including the London boroughs) must submit to DETR. Parking revenue covers all parking income i.e. revenue from parking meters, pay and Display, off-street parking, car parks, parking tickets, clamping, removal etc.

The RO2 form splits revenue expenditure into two categories—(i) "Sales, Fees and Charges" and (ii) "Other Non-Grant income". These are terms used by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. The figures in the table represent the total of these two categories.

Local Government Ombudsman

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend the jurisdiction of the Local Government Ombudsman to consider complaints against parish councils; and if he will make a statement. [112023]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have no plans to bring parish councils within the jurisdiction of the Local Government Ombudsman. Every elector has a right to raise any concerns that they may have about the business or conduct of their parish council at the annual public meeting.

Urban Foxes

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who has responsibility for the control of urban fox populations; and what powers local authorities have in this area. [112013]

Mr. Mullin: The fox is not a protected species and may be killed or taken by owners and occupiers of land using any method, eg shooting or trapping, which is not prohibited by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Local authorities are therefore able to take action to control foxes if they deem it appropriate.

Housing

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many houses have been improved in Shrewsbury and Atcham from funding released from capital receipts in each year since 1997; and if he will make a statement. [111914]

Mr. Mullin: The table shows the capital allocations that have been made to Shrewsbury and Atcham under the Capital Receipts Initiative (CRI), together with the number of properties which have been renovated using these resources. Allocations are made in the form of Supplementary Credit Approvals.

	Allocations (£)	*Number of properties renovated*
1997–98	219,000	75
1998–99	757,000	136
1999–2000	685,000	153

Note:

There has been no separate allocation of resources under the CRI since 1999–2000, following the introduction of the single housing capital pot from 2000–01

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of his Department's research into the involvement of drugs in road traffic accidents with particular reference to *(a)* road traffic accident and *(b)* road traffic accidents involving pedestrians. [112077]

Mr. Hill: The Department's research into the numbers of road accident fatalities (drivers/riders, passengers, cyclists and pedestrians) with a measurable trace of drugs in their body will be published in July. The research will help to provide data on the incidence of drugs—both illegal and medicinal. However, the presence of drugs in a fatality is not evidence of accident causation, although there may be an association.

Drugs and driving is an issue addressed in our road safety strategy, on which an announcement is to be made tomorrow. Relevant documents will be placed in the Library tomorrow morning.

Section 28

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 712W, if he will provide a full list of the organisations which have made representations to him calling for *(a)* the repeal and *(b)* the retention of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. [111931]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A full list of organisations that have made representations to the Secretary of State concerning the repeal of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 has been placed in the House Libraries.

London Research Centre

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has for the transfer of the London Research Centre to the Greater London Authority. [111993]

Mr. Hill: The London Borough of Islington has been directed to prepare a transfer scheme for the transfer of the appropriate staff, property, rights and liabilities of the London Research Centre to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The transfer will take place on 1 April 2000. The intention is that the property, rights and liabilities will then transfer to the Greater London Authority on 8 May 2000, with the exception of a small number of functions of the LRC which will transfer to Transport for London on 3 July 2000. My officials are in contact with Islington Council as to the detailed contents of the transfer scheme.

Marine Conservation

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to introduce a marine conservation Bill to promote the sustainable conservation of marine habitats and species. [111923]

Mr. Mullin: The Government have no plans at present to introduce a marine conservation Bill. My Department conducted a review of coastal byelaw powers in 1998. We have given a long-term commitment to introduce legislation to take forward those recommendations in the review which require changes to the law.

We are also actively considering what measures might be warranted to improve protection of marine habitats and species. My Department has established a review group to look at ways of improving marine nature conservation. The group's final report is expected to be presented to DETR Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales by the end of this year.

In addition, the Countryside Amenity and Conservation Bill will include provisions on wildlife enforcement, and wildlife crime, including crime relating to marine species, will be punishable by tougher measures such as custodial sentences.

Rail Safety

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his oral statement of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1373–76, relating to the installation of train protection warning systems, applies to all freight rolling stock. [112040]

Mr. Hill: The Railway Safety Regulations 1999 require all trains, including freight trains where they are running on passenger lines, to be fitted with train protection warning systems by the end of 2003. A freight train which will never run on a passenger line will not require train protection.

Neighbourhood Forums

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Government have to introduce neighbourhood forums in place of parish and town councils. [111956]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Neighbourhood Forums could have a valuable role in making local government more effective, but the Government do not intend that they should take the place of parish councils. Our White Paper, "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People", set out our policy that parish councils are an essential part of the structure of local democracy in our country and that they would continue to play a vital part in the life of our towns, villages and rural communities, as they have in the past.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the Strategic Rail Authority and its potential impact upon Wales; and if he will make a statement. [112022]

Mr. Hill: The First Secretary has made representations on the railways provisions of the Transport Bill. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) has consulted the National Assembly for Wales in connection with proposals for franchise replacement. Wales will benefit, along with the rest of Great Britain, from the strategic and coherent direction which the SRA will bring to the railway industry. Specific Welsh concerns will be addressed by having a Welsh representative on the Authority and by consultation with the National Assembly both on that appointment and on the SRA's strategies.

Windermere

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to make a statement on the proposed byelaws for a 10 mph speed limit on Lake Windermere. [112500]

Mr. Mullin: I have today announced that I have confirmed the Windermere byelaws. A copy of the decision letter setting out my reasons for the decision will be placed in the House Libraries.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many privately owned, legally held *(a)* shotguns, *(b)* rifles and *(c)* handguns have been used for (i) murders and (ii) attempted murders in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years and the current year to date; and how many of the deaths and injuries were self-inflicted. [102156]

Mr. Ingram: The Chief Constable has advised me that the information about the number of attempted murders in which legally held privately owned firearms used is not readily available and would incur disproportionate cost to provide. Tables A and B, however, show the number of murders and suicides involving legally held, privately owned shotguns, rifles and handguns in each of the last five years.

A: Number of murders

Year	*Shotguns*	*Rifles*	*Handguns*	*Total murders*
1995	1	0	1	2
1996	3	0	4	7
1997	1	0	0	1
1998	1	0	2	3
1999	0	0	0	0
2000	0	0	0	0
Total	6	0	7	13

B: Number of suicides

Year	*Shotguns*	*Rifles*	*Handguns*	*Total suicides*
1995	7	2	0	9
1996	5	0	2	7
1997	12	0	2	14
1998	7	2	1	10
1999	8	1	3	12
2000	0	0	0	0
Total	39	5	8	52

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many questions on policing matters in Northern Ireland have been tabled by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) since 1 June; and what has been the cost of providing answers to those questions. [103673]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for the time taken to answer his question. During the period 1 June 1999 to 31 January 2000, my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) has asked a total of 153 parliamentary questions on policing matters in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that the total cost of answering these questions was £52,020.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which projects relating to his Department that appeared in the Private Finance Panel's list of 29 November 1995 *(a)* have been completed, *(b)* are still pending, *(c)* have been dropped and *(d)* are being pursued by means other than a public private partnership. [105878]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 24 January 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 117–18W.

Paramilitaries

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (i) on what date the most recent use of violence for political ends was thought to be the responsibility of or claimed by *(a)* the Irish Republican Army, *(b)* the Real IRA, *(c)* Oglaigh na'hEireann,

(d) Cumann na mBann, *(e)* Fianna na h'Eireann, *(f)* the Red Hand Commando, *(g)* Saor Eire, *(h)* the Ulster Freedom Fighters, *(i)* the Ulster Volunteer Force, *(j)* the Irish National Liberation Army, *(k)* the Irish People's Liberation Organisation, *(l)* the Ulster Defence Association, *(m)* the Loyalist Volunteer Force, *(n)* the Continuity Army Council, *(o)* the Orange Volunteers and *(p)* the Red Hand Defenders, (ii) how many persons have been charged or successfully prosecuted for belonging to each, (iii) how many persons have been charged or successfully prosecuted for soliciting support for each, (iv) how many persons have been charged or successfully prosecuted for contributing money or property to each, (v) how many persons have been charged or successfully prosecuted for displaying support for each and (vi) what is his estimate of the numerical strength of each organisation. [107832]

Mr. Ingram: Attribution for paramilitary style incidents is generally confined to the generic terms Loyalist and Republican. In some cases the police are unable to attribute individual incidents to a particular group. In the absence of a claim of responsibility they can consider only the physical evidence available or intelligence information. Where attribution may be determined by any of these means, it is not Royal Ulster Constabulary policy to make this known except where it is specifically in the public interest to do so. It is not therefore possible to provide the information requested and to obtain the details necessary would incur a disproportionate cost owing to the manner in which the offences are recorded.

However, the following tables may be helpful. They show the number of persons proceeded against and found guilty for offences under the EPA and PTA. The figures include primary and secondary offences. Details of paramilitary groupings are not recorded on the statistical return used to collate this information.

1: Persons proceeded against for belonging to a proscribed organisation

Year	*Persons proceeded against*	*Persons found guilty*
1991	1	1
1992	16	15
1993	26	22
1994	19	17
1995	28	24
1996	7	6
1997	5	2
1998	3	3

2: Persons proceeded against for soliciting support for proscribed organisations

Year	*Persons proceeded against*	*Persons found guilty*
1991	0	0
1992	0	0
1993	0	0
1994	2	2
1995	0	0
1996	0	0
1997	3	3
1998	0	0

3: Receiving or accepting money or other property for terrorism

Year	*Persons proceeded against*	*Persons found guilty*
1991	0	0
1992	0	0
1993	0	0
1994	0	0
1995	1	1
1996	0	0
1997	0	0
1998	0	0

4: Persons proceeded against for contributing money or property to proscribed organisations

Year	*Persons proceeded against*	*Persons found guilty*
1991	30	25
1992	19	18
1993	15	14
1994	18	11
1995	11	11
1996	4	3
1997	1	1
1998	0	0

5: Persons proceeded against for displaying support for a proscribed organisation

Year	*Persons proceeded against*	*Persons found guilty*
1991	0	0
1992	0	0
1993	0	0
1994	0	0
1995	0	0
1996	0	0
1997	2	2
1998	0	0

Note:
The statistical database is unable to relate charges against prosecutions.

Public Bodies (Fees)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which fees his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies collect; how much has been raised and will be raised from each of these fees from 1989–90 to 2004–05; and which of these fees count as negative expenditure. [107978]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him on 2 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 624–25W.

Politically Motivated Offences

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many politically motivated offences have been committed by *(a)* Republican and *(b)* Loyalist groups since Good Friday 1999; if he will break the numbers down into categories of offences; and if he will make a statement. [109555]

Mr. Ingram: The following table shows the number of security related offences recorded since 2 April 1999. It is not possible to answer the question with the detail

requested because of the difficulty in distinguishing between a security related and a non security related offence[1].

	By		
	Loyalist	*Republican*	*Total*
Deaths	3	3	6
Shooting incidents	n/a	n/a	[2]90
Bombing incidents	n/a	n/a	[2]61
Casualties as a result of Paramilitary style attacks			
Shootings	37	16	53
Assaults	59	26	85

[1] A bank robbery is a criminal offence and will be recorded as such but may be carried out with criminal or paramilitary motivation.

[2] Attribution for these incidents is assessed by the police, and cannot be guaranteed. A single recorded shooting incident may lead to more than one casualty.

Departmental Contracts

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the number and value of contracts let by his Department since May 1997 to external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes. [109452]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 February 2000]:* Since May 1997 10 contracts have been let by this Department to external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes. The total value of these contracts was £1,411,104.03.

Terrorist Activity

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people from Northern Ireland have been forced into exile by terrorist activity since the Good Friday Agreement. [110055]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* There are no figures available which may indicate the number of persons who may have been forced to leave the Province.

CCTV (Portadown)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements there are for monitoring the CCTV system in Portadown Town Centre; what regulations will safeguard exposed film for evidential purposes; and what target will be set for average police call-out and response time. [110653]

Mr. Ingram: The Portadown CCTV system is currently monitored by staff based at Craigavon police station. They are in direct communication with Portadown police control room who deploy resources to incidents as considered appropriate. Strict procedures are in place to ensure the safeguard of video tapes for evidential purposes including secure storage and cataloguing, complying with guidelines set out in the CCTV Code of conduct. There are no set targets for police call-out and response times as each incident requires to be carefully assessed and the most appropriate response determined within available resources.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110684]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is in the process, for the first time, of introducing monitoring of ethnic origin. Consequently, ethnic origin data will not be available until later this year. Home Civil Servants (HCS) employed in the Northern Ireland Office are already subject to monitoring, but none at Senior Civil Service level are from an ethnic minority background.

Police Reform

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* women and *(b)* Catholics are involved in work at a senior policy level on police reform within the (i) Northern Ireland Office, (ii) Police Authority and (iii) RUC. [110846]

Mr. Ingram: The percentage of women involved in work on policing reform at a senior policy level in the RUC is nil, in the Police Authority for Northern Ireland it is 30 per cent. and in the Northern Ireland Office it is 27 per cent. Percentages cover a very small number of individuals. Senior officials are included in PANI and NIO percentages as appropriate, though it is Authority members and Ministers respectively who take policy decisions.

There are strict requirements governing the confidentiality and proper use of community background monitoring data. The provision of community background data at the level asked for would breach those requirements.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [110721]

Mr. Ingram: No peat or products containing peat are used in gardens owned or tended by my Department, except for recycled peat, such as spent mushroom compost, or peat needed for ericaceous planting where specifically indigenous to the habitat.

Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what costs have been incurred through action under the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999 to date; how many bodies have been recovered to date in *(a)* Northern Ireland, *(b)* in the Irish Republic and *(c)* elsewhere; and if he will provide a breakdown of these costs under the principal headings used in accounting for this expenditure. [110902]

Mr. Ingram: Following implementation of the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999, the cost to the UK for the operation of the independent Commission for the location of victims remains amounts to £3,104.13 to date.

The remains of three individuals have been recovered: Eamon Molloy in Dundalk on 28 May and Brian McKinney and John McClory on 29 June at Colgagh, County Monaghan.

A breakdown of costs is as follows:

Transport—£530.13

Fees—£2,338.00

Other—£236.00

Total—£3,104.13.

Civil Service Entrants

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many candidates who entered the 1999 Civil Service grade 7 competition were *(a)* male Protestants, *(b)* female Protestants, *(c)* male Roman Catholics and *(d)* female Roman Catholics; and how many in each of the above categories were successful at stage 1. [111084]

Mr. Ingram: A competition for promotion to Administrative Grade 7 in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) was launched in September 1999. The competition is a two stage exercise with candidates deemed eligible at the end of Stage 1 to compete in individual departmental competitions for promotion to Grade 7. A total of 437 candidates participated in Stage 1 of the competition and of these 131 were deemed eligible to participate in stage two departmental competitions. The gender/community background of those candidates who entered the 1999 competition and those who were successful at stage 1 is as follows:

	Protestant	*Roman Catholic*	*Not Determined*	*Total*
Candidates who entered the Stage 1 Competition				
Male	194	100	16	310
Female	61	57	9	127
Total	255	157	25	437
Candidates who were successful at Stage 1				
Male	55	26	2	83
Female	21	22	5	48
Total	76	48	7	131

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 32W, if he will place a copy of the standard research contract in use by his Department in the Library. [111673]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* This Department does not use a standard research contract.

TransTec

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the Government grants or loans received by TransTec plc. or its subsidiaries for use in Northern Ireland since 1991. [111582]

Mr. Ingram: TransTec Automotive (Campsie) Ltd., a wholly-owned subsidiary of TransTec Plc, based at Campsie in Londonderry, and now in administrative receivership, was paid grants directly and also benefited in leasing terms from capital grants paid to the lessors of capital equipment as shown:

	£
(1) From the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland	
Paid to the Company	
Capital Grant	565,671
Employment Grant	2,901,999
Total paid to the Company	3,467,670
Paid to Lombard Initial Leasing Ltd.	
Capital Grant	[1]3,192,196
(2) From the Training and Employment Agency	
Investment Support for Training	875,083

[1] Where assets are leased grant is paid to the leasing company with TransTec Automotive (Campsie) Ltd. benefiting by way of reduced lease rental

Prisoner Releases

Mr. MacKay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many terrorist prisoners have successfully applied for early release under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998; and of those how many are still in prison. [111877]

Mr. Ingram: To date, 430 prisoners have successfully applied for early release under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Of these, 115 still remain in prison. This information is taken from statistics which are current at 22 February 2000.

Mr. MacKay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many prisoners have been released under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998; and what is their perceived paramilitary affiliation. [111878]

Mr. Ingram: To date there have been 315 prisoners released under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Information is held in relation to the perceived paramilitary affiliation of prisoners, where applicable, for management purposes. It should be noted, however, that, with the exception of HMP Maze, where links are more clearly defined, this information is based on a combination of factors including the offence, sympathies and associates. The table provides the breakdown by perceived affiliation and is taken from statistics which are current at 22 February 2000.

Perceived affiliation of prisoners released on licence under the NI (Sentences) Act 1998	*Total (as at 22 February 2000)*
UDA	71
No trace	9
UFF	8
PIRA	142
UVF	53
Former INLA	7
Loyalist	5
Rep Sym	2
RHC	2
Criminal	1
LVF	6
Republican	1
INLA	8
Grand total	315

Union Flag

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who authorised the removal of the Union flag from the headquarters of *(a)* the Department of Education and *(b)* the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. [112064]

Mr. Ingram: These flags were removed during the period of devolution. This is therefore a matter for the NI Legislative Assembly which is currently in suspension.

DEFENCE

Tracer/FSCS System

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what stage has been reached in the development of the Tracer/FSCS system; and if he will make a statement about its future prospects. [109860]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Christopher Gill, dated 29 February 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the stage that has been reached in the development of the TRACER/FSCS system; and whether he would make a statement about its future prospects. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

TRACER is a UK/US collaborative programme. Contracts for project definition studies, worth a total of some £180m. were awarded in January 1999 to two consortia: LANCER, an alliance of BAE SYSTEMS and Alvis Vehicles with United Defense and Raytheon; and SIKA, a joint venture company formed by BAE SYSTEMS and Lockheed Martin. The consortia are competing for a single demonstration phase contract although neither nation is formally committed beyond the current phase, and any decision to proceed to future project phases will be the subject of further national approvals.

The current phase of the programme is of 42 months duration, completing in July 2002. The key aims of this phase of the programme are to reduce progressively areas of programme risk and to secure firm price proposals for the demonstration and initial manufacture phases. The programme is proceeding to schedule and both participating governments are pleased with progress to date. In parallel, studies are being conducted to examine the potential use of unmanned air vehicles. The outcome of these studies will be used to inform the UK decision on the optimum mix of platforms, technologies and sensors, and the role that TRACER will play in the Army's future battlefield information gathering system.

A feature of defence procurement is the high cost of the sophisticated systems being brought into service. Conflicting demands on the available resources inevitably lead to priorities being under systematic review. The current budgetary review process in the US, which could have implications for the TRACER programme, is being closely monitored; and we are in regular contact with the US DoD.

Container Ships

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's plans to procure four new roll-on roll-off container ships. [109391]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Ms Rachel Squire, dated 29 February 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Ministry of Defence's plans to procure four new roll on roll off container ships. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The Strategic Defence Review confirmed the requirement for four ships in addition to two then in service. The Department is currently conducting a competition for this expanded sealift capability. As this is defined as a non-warlike requirement, the competition is being conducted under European and World Trade Organisation public procurement rules. As stated in the Department's press statement of 13 December 1999, a copy of which is enclosed, we plan to announce a single preferred bidder in late spring and to place a contract in July 2000.

Trigat Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the medium range Trigat project. [110494]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 29 February 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Medium Range (MR) TRIGAT Anti-Tank Guided Weapon Programme. This matter falls to me for answer within my responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Germany, France and UK, as the major participants in the programme, have signed the MR TRIGAT Industrialisation and Production Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The Netherlands and Belgium have still to sign and we expect decisions to be made by both nations by Spring 2000, once their Governmental and Parliamentary procedures are complete.

The Industrialisation and Production contract has now been initialled by the Prime Contractor Aerospatiale but is awaiting completion of the MOU signatory process before it is formally notified (and placed) by France, acting as the contracting authority on behalf of the participating nations. Despite the delay in signing the MOU by the Netherlands and Belgium, contract placement by Spring 2000 would, on current plans, maintain the programme on schedule to meet the UK's in-service date.

Future Transport Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many aircraft types fully meet the European Staff Requirement for a Future Transport Aircraft. [111340]

Dr. Moonie: Within the four nation Future Transport Aircraft competition, bids are being assessed on merit against a baseline derived from the European Staff Requirement (ESR). We have made clear to bidders that strict compliance with the ESR will not necessarily be a deciding factor and is but one factor in the assessment by which nations judge the solution offering the best value for money. This assessment includes analysis of operational performance, investment appraisal, risks and commercial and industrial considerations. It would be inappropriate for me to disclose, at this stage in the competition, any aspect of our assessment of the comparative merits of the proposals which we have received.

CHARM Contract

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what impact the 10-year partnering deal between BAe and his Department had on the decision on the CHARM contract; and if he will make a statement; [111455]

(2) what conditions were specified for the competition to supply CHARM munitions as regards providing fixed and firm proposals; if all the bids met those conditions; and if the final decision was based on a fixed-price solution; [111459]

(3) what assessment he has made of the value for money offered by the contract with BAe to supply CHARM munitions; and if he will make a statement; [111457]

(4) for what reasons the declared non-compliances in Portsmouth Aviation Team's proposals relating to the CHARM contract were not raised during the Phase 1 negotiations in time to enable a compliant bid to be prepared for Phase 2; and if he will make a statement; [111456]

(5) what provisions have been included in the contract for the supply of CHARM munitions to cover the possibility of BAe being unable to design and manufacture to the price offered; and if he will make a statement; [111458]

(6) what account was taken of *(a)* scheduled BAe plant closures and *(b)* BAe's past performance and costs when determining the award of the CHARM contract; what assurances were requested on these matters; and if he will make a statement. [111462]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Michael Hancock, dated 29 February 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the CHARM 3 Training Round contract. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The decision on the CHARM 3 Training Round contract was taken following a fair and open competition. The 10 year partnering arrangement recently agreed between MOD and BAe (Royal Ordnance) was negotiated separately and had no impact on the outcome.

The CHARM 3 Training Round competition was conducted in two phases. For reasons of intellectual property rights, limited information regarding the performance requirement was released to bidders during the first phase. In response to the proposals received during phase one the technical specification was revised for the second phase of the competition and further, more detailed technical information on the Challenger 2 armament system was released. It was therefore only possible to judge the extent of the technical compliance of the bids (including that from Portsmouth Aviation) at the end of the second phase.

The contract proposals were assessed against the standard criteria of technical compliance, performance whole life cost and value for money which apply to all MoD contracting. The competition specified that proposals were to be based on firm prices.

Final bids when received met the firm price criterion and the contract will be awarded against a firm price proposal.

The terms and conditions of the contract for the supply of the CHARM 3 training Round will be those contained in the Invitation to Tender. These include standard contractual conditions to safeguard the Department's interests in the event of breach of contract or default by the contractor.

BAe (Royal Ordnance) have been selected as the preferred bidder because their bid best met the requirement. The contract will be awarded subject to agreement of satisfactory terms and conditions, independently of any consideration of scheduled BAe plant closures. Past performance was considered at the ITT stage of the competition in the usual way. The contract will clearly state the time cost and performance standards that this contract will have to meet.

Computers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answers of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 372W, and 2 February 2000, column 590W, on computers, what were the grade and post of each of his Department's staff involved in internal hacking incidents over the past five years; and what was the date and location of each incident. [111111]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Government-wide Unified Incident Reporting and Alert Scheme (UNIRAS) accepts reports on the understanding that the anonymity of the organisation submitting the report is maintained. The records held within the UNIRAS system do not include the grades and posts of those involved in each incident, or the disciplinary action taken. The details requested cannot be provided without incurring disproportionate cost, or in the case of location of incidents, risking prejudicing the anonymity of the UNIRAS system.

SERCO

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* number, *(b)* details of service involved, *(c)* length of contract and *(d)* location of contracts his Department has entered into with SERCO. [111785]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is not readily available in the form requested. I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

RAF Aircraft Crashes

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the causes of the crashes of *(a)* RAF Tornado GR1 near Everton, Nottinghamshire, on 21 January 1999, *(b)* RAF Harrier GR7 over Rollins Air Force Base, Nevada on 29 January 1999, *(c)* RAF Harrier GR7 over RAF Laarbruck, Germany on 4 February 1999, *(d)* RAF Bulldog T1 over RAF Leuchars on 5 March 1999, *(e)* Army Lynx MK7 over Tilton Hill on 18 May 1999, *(f)* RN Sea King HAS 6 over SNS Reina on 12 June 1999, *(g)* Army Turbo Islander AL1 over Broughton on 13 June 1999, *(h)* RAF Harrier GR7 south of Boston on 9 July 1999, *(i)* RAF Hercules C130 over Kukes, Albania, on 11 July 1999, *(j)* Army Gazelle AH1 over Belize on 11 September 1999, *(k)* RAF Tornado GR1 near Kirkheaton on 14 October 1999, *(l)* RAF Hawk T1 over Shap on 22 October 1999, *(m)* RAF Tornado F3 near Torness on 17 November 1999, *(n)* RAF Chinook HC2 in Oman on 25 November 1999, *(o)* RAF Harrier GR7 over Coldstream on 14 July 1999 and *(p)* RAF Jaguar GR1 over Moray Firth on 20 October 1999; what measures have been taken to prevent similar accidents in each case; what were the costs of each crash in terms of (i) equipment and (ii) lives; and if he will make a statement. [111710]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of value for money in relation to the requirement of *(a)* the Boeing C17 and *(b)* the Antonov 124. [111930]

Dr. Moonie: In deciding how to meet our future air transport requirements, we will take into account a range of factors, including the need to achieve our military requirements while at the same time obtaining value for money for the taxpayer.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of documentation used by her Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111603]

Clare Short: *(a)* Presently less than 1 per cent. of documentation used by my Department is made from recycled paper. However, the wood used in the production of the paper is from sustainable forests.

We are currently in the process of setting up an Environmental Management System and addressing the issue of how to increase the amount of recycled paper.

(b) The percentage of paper that we currently recycle is 23 per cent. I expect this figure to rise in the coming years.

Multi-national Trade Agreements

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to help build the capacity of developing countries to allow them *(a)* to take advantage of, *(b)* to understand and *(c)* to comply with multi-national trade agreements. [111518]

Clare Short: My Department is working bilaterally and with a wide range of other organisations, to help build the capacity of developing countries to participate more effectively in the WTO. To date, the UK has committed over £15 million to capacity building programmes of this type and a full list of activities has been placed in the Library of the House of Commons.

Helping developing countries better understand the WTO is the first step. This is a principal objective for the technical assistance programmes of the WTO, ITC and UNCTAD, all of which are supported by the UK through substantial financial contributions. Commonwealth developing countries are also benefiting from technical assistance of this type through the Trade and Investment Access Facility, to which the UK is a principal donor.

Assisting developing countries comply with their obligations and take advantage of their rights/opportunities in the WTO is a longer term process. In this regard, the UK is supporting bilateral technical assistance programmes in Bangladesh, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe. A focus of such technical assistance is often implementation of the WTO Agreements relating to trade remedies, where developing countries need help to utilise WTO-sanctioned instruments. In addition, the UK is a founder member and substantial donor of the Advisory Centre on WTO Law which enables developing countries to take better advantage of the WTO's Dispute Settlement process.

The UK has been very active in calling for the World Bank to give practical effect to its commitments to mainstream trade into its Comprehensive Development Framework for developing countries. We believe that the World Bank has a key role to play in enhancing developing countries' capacity to implement trade agreements and in expanding their trade capacity.

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to help build the capacity of developing countries to take part in multi-national trade talks. [111434]

Clare Short: We are working bilaterally and with a wide range of other organisations, including United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the World Bank, ITC and the Commonwealth Secretariat, to help build the capacity of developing countries to participate in multi-national trade talks in the WTO and in the context of the EU-ACP post-Lomé arrangements. To date, the UK has committed over £15 million to trade-related capacity building programmes of this type and a full list of activities has been placed in the Library of the House of Commons.

More specifically, the UK is supporting bilateral technical assistance programmes in Bangladesh (£0.56 million), Malawi (£0.25 million), South Africa (£0.1 million), Zimbabwe (£0.5 million) and the 14 CARICOM countries in the Caribbean (£1.1 million). A project in Pakistan is currently under review and a new project in Ghana is being finalised. This technical assistance comprises expert technical advice, training, trade policy studies and negotiating skills and is typically provided to a broad base of stakeholders from national governments, the private sector and civil society organisations who are involved in trade policy negotiations.

At the multilateral level, developing countries' participation in the WTO negotiations is being particularly supported by a major World Bank Trade Policy Development Programme (TPDP), to which the UK has committed £3 million. TPDP comprises trade policy research and analytical studies; seminars on key issues for the WTO negotiations; training for trade policy officials; and a handbook for trade negotiators from developing countries.

In addition, Commonwealth developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific are benefiting from the Commonwealth Trade and Investment Access Facility (TIAF), to which the UK has committed £1.4 million. TIAF's technical assistance projects including full-time specialist WTO and Trade Policy Advisers based in Geneva and in the Pacific, who played a key role in helping Commonwealth developing countries prepare for, and participate in, the WTO Seattle Ministerial meeting.

Grants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the initiatives launched by her Department since May 1997 under which specific grants are allocated, indicating in each case and for each financial year the funding provided by central Government. [109311]

Clare Short: Practically all of our programme expenditure is on grant terms.

Our voted allocation for 1999–2000 was increased in respect of the following amounts from the Central Reserve: £68 million towards DFID's Kosovo humanitarian relief, £3.25 million in respect of East Timor humanitarian relief, and a £33.3 million additional contribution to the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative.

Information on all new initiatives could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Information on DFID's spending is published in Statistics on International Development and the Departmental Report, both of which are available in the Library of the House.

Remploy

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what Remploy products her Department has purchased in the last three years. [109930]

Clare Short: The information requested can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by her Department; and if she will make a statement. [110715]

Clare Short: Peat compost is not used in any gardens owned or tended by my Department.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in her Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110678]

Clare Short: As at 1 April 1999, 55 members of the senior civil service were from ethnic minority background (1.7 per cent.).

Information on ethnic origin in the Civil Service is collected on the understanding that it will be treated on a confidential basis. To protect the privacy of individual members of staff we do not disclose data relating to fewer than five people.

My Department has fewer than five people of ethnic minority background in the SCS.

China

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to co-operate with China in the field of poverty elimination. [111255]

Clare Short: We have a strong and growing development partnership with China, which has at its core the shared objective of poverty elimination. Our programme in China provides assistance in the key areas of health, education, economic reform and the environment. We are also looking for opportunities to work with and through other organisations, such as the World Bank, in order to strengthen the collective development effort in China. Our strategy underpinning our work in China is available in the Library.

Child Labour

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures her Department is taking to assist developing countries to comply with ILO agreements aimed at preventing child labour. [111435]

Clare Short: The United Nations provides a framework for promoting the rights of working children through its Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and through the conventions established by International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Last year, we provided $1 million funding to the ILO's in-focus programme on child labour: the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). This money is just part of DFID's collaboration with IPEC, which extends from particular operational alliances in India, Tanzania, South East Asia (for example), to engagement in IPEC policy making in Geneva.

In 1999, the Department for International Development, in collaboration with the Department for Education and Employment, worked strenuously to help reach agreement on the new ILO convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The convention provides an accessible target for poor countries in relation to ending the worst abuses of children's rights in the most exploitative forms of child labour (including child pornography and prostitution, drugs trafficking and slave labour).

Female Genital Mutilation

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which girls' and women's health projects supported by her Department have included education on female genital mutilation in the years 1997, 1998 and 1999; which non-Governmental organisations have carried out those projects and in which countries; and what was the total amount of funding for these projects in each of the years 1997, 1998 and 1999. [111294]

Clare Short *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* During 1997–99, my Department supported the following organisations and projects aimed at educating and informing communities about the harmful consequences of female genital mutilation:

Country: Gambia

Project: Women's health promotion

Institution: FORWARD

Total Commitment: £226,013

Expenditure: 1997/98—£21,269, 1998/99—£91,542, 1999/2000—n/a

Region: Horn of Africa

Project: Well women media project

Institution: Christian Aid/Health Unlimited

Total commitment: £200,000

Expenditure: 1997/98—£32,957, 1998/99—£82,831, 1999/2000—n/a.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the aid projects being carried out jointly with Zimbabwe, listing the amount of British aid in each case. [112115]

Clare Short: Current projects in Zimbabwe are as follows:

		£ million
1.	Support for the Privatisation Agency	2.48
2.	Farm Community Trust	1.6
3.	Wills and Inheritance Laws Project	0.86
4.	Women's Civic Education Project	0.98
5.	Rural District Council Institutional Development	10.6
6.	National Water Resources Management Strategy	0.5
7.	Public Service Reforms	0.48
8.	Police Organisational Development Project	6.44
9.	Agricultural Services and Management support	5.75
10.	Assistance to Developing Enterprises Project	1.4
11.	Agribusiness Entrepreneur Network and Training Development	0.49
12.	Credit for the Informal Sector	1.3
13.	Bikita Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project	2.27
14.	Lupane Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project	3.54
15.	Rural Water-Point Upgrading/Rehabilitation Project	0.87
16.	Small Dams Rehabilitation	1.96
17.	Bulilima-Mangwe Water Supply and Environmental Rehabilitation	0.31
18.	Community Based Maintenance of Water Points in Binga	0.24
19.	Small Engineering Workshops	0.39
20.	Sexual Health Project	9.2
21.	Social Marketing of Condoms	2.0
22.	Adolescent reproductive health education	0.5
23.	Civil participation in Health Services	0.04
24.	Riders for Health	0.28
25.	Everyone's Child (AIDS orphans)	0.17
26.	Air Traffic Control Radar (Former ATP project)	4.3
27.	Police Landrover supply (Former ATP project)	8.5

AIDS (Africa)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the Government's budget for the current financial year for AIDS and HIV measures in Africa. [112323]

Clare Short: Our estimated expenditure for work to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa for 1999–2000 is around £25 million. Exact figures are to be confirmed.

Nuclear Power Projects

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the Government's policy on contributing funds to nuclear power projects in developing countries; what Government funds have recently been made available to such projects and in respect of which projects; what plans she has for funding such projects in the future; and what recent discussions she has had with international development organisations, the World Bank and the IMF concerning the funding of nuclear power projects in developing countries. [112070]

Clare Short: My Department's policy is not to contribute funds to nuclear power projects in developing counties with the exception of help with safety and training where there is a genuine developmental objective. Under the previous Administration, a small nuclear safety project was committed for China. This project is due to be completed in March 2000. I have had no recent discussions with international development organisations, the World Bank and the IMF concerning the funding of nuclear power projects in developing countries.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much money has been spent to date by her Department and by bodies funded by her Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much her Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112137]

Mr. Foulkes: To date, we have spent £61,000 in connection with the Euro Changeover Plan. This was in respect of a scoping study carried out by external consultants on the implications of Economic and Monetary Union for the Department as a whole.

We do not anticipate any further external expenditure in the next 12 months.

HEALTH

Complementary Therapies

12. **Mr. Tredinnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to issue guidelines to primary care trust executives regarding the provision of complementary therapies. [110864]

Yvette Cooper: Provision of complementary therapies is a matter for Primary Care Groups to decide in line with locally agreed priorities. We are aware that some PCGs have said they would welcome guidelines on the provision of complementary therapies. Given the limitations of the evidence base and the variety of complementary medicine, we are examining the feasibility of objective guidelines that could be of real assistance.

Community Hospitals

13. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support he plans to give to the development of community hospitals. [110865]

Mr. Denham: This Government made clear its commitment to the future role of community hospitals in the National Health Service in the White Paper, The New NHS, provided that they can offer facilities to meet modern needs. They can also play an important role in the future development of intermediate care.

Consultant Waiting Times

14. **Mr. Lilley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish on a regular basis waiting times for patients for appointments with consultants in each specialty at each NHS hospital. [110866]

Mr. Denham: Data on outpatient waiting times by specialty in each National Health Service trust are published quarterly. Figures for the quarter ended 31 December 1999 show that 75 per cent. of patients were seen within 13 weeks of written referral by a general practitioner, with 93 per cent. seen with 26 weeks.

Hernia Operations

15. **Mr. Ennis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the number of hernia operations carried out in the NHS in 1998–99. [110867]

Yvette Cooper: There were 82,139 inguinal hernia operations carried out in National Health Service hospitals in 1998–99.

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many hernia operations have been carried out in *(a)* Barnsley and *(b)* Doncaster in each of the last five years. [111367]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the table.

Finished Consultant Episodes (FCEs): Inguinal hernia operations in Doncaster and Barnsley 1994–95 to 1998–99

District of Residence/Main operation	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Barnsley DHA					
Inguinal hernia	441	407	401	347	390
Recurrent inguinal hernia	36	31	17	35	38
Total	477	438	418	382	428
Doncaster DHA					
Inguinal hernia	452	481	412	440	495
Recurrent inguinal hernia	42	42	41	35	27
Total	494	523	453	475	522

Notes:
1. An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant within one healthcare provider. Please note that the figures do not represent the number of patients, as a person may have more than one episode of care within the year.
2. The figures for 1998–99 and 1997–98 are provisional, as no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data (ie the data are ungrossed) but for 1994–95 to 1996–97 figures are grossed for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data.

Medicine Costs

16. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding increases in drug and medicine costs. [110868]

Ms Stuart: We have received various representations. In recent months, many have been about sharp increases in the price of generic medicines to the National Health Service. We very much share the concern about these. We have given the NHS an additional £90 million to help meet the cost and have commissioned a fundamental review of the generics market.

A and E Waiting Times

17. **Mr. Pickles:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the time that patients are waiting for treatment at hospital accident and emergency departments. [110869]

Ms Stuart: We are tackling waiting times in Accident and Emergency (A&E) Departments as a matter of priority, backed by the biggest investment in A&E services in the history of the National Health Service. Long waits for treatment in A&E departments are unacceptable. We have issued guidance requiring senior managers and clinicians to intervene personally to resolve the problem if long waits start to occur.

Wakefield Health Authority

18. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the future provision of hospital services by Wakefield health authority. [110870]

Mr. Hutton: The Wakefield Health Authority completed a public consultation exercise on the future options for configuration of hospital services on 25 January 2000. The results of the consultation, and the Health Authority's proposals on the outcome of consultation were the subject of a public meeting on 25 February 2000.

Appointments

19. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria he applies in respect of appointments to health authorities and trusts, with particular reference to political balance. [110871]

Ms Stuart: All candidates for these appointments must be able to demonstrate a strong personal commitment to the National Health Service and to the needs of their local community. Candidates are considered on their merits and the contribution they can make, not on their politics.

23. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the selection and appointment system for posts in NHS trusts, authorities and boards; and if he will make a statement. [110877]

Ms Stuart: Appointments to NHS boards are widely advertised in the national and local press, as well as in publications aimed at ethnic minority groups and people with a disability. All candidates are considered according to Nolan principles and guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

General Medical Council

20. **Dr. Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the role of the General Medical Council. [110872]

Mr. Denham: The General Medical Council is an independent statutory body set up by the Medical Act 1983.

The Government are determined that all the bodies involved in the regulation of the healthcare professions should be modernised and we have been working towards this aim with the professions over the past year.

It is vital that the GMC maintains public confidence that it will put patients' interest in the forefront of all they do—especially when dealing with doctors who have not met the standard expected of the profession.

Infliximab

21. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the current situation regarding the prescription of Infliximab. [110873]

Ms Stuart: Infliximab was licensed last year for limited categories of Crohn's disease where conventional treatment has proved ineffective. The decision to prescribe infliximab is based on clinical opinion, taking into account some concerns about the long-term safety and efficacy of this drug. Healthcare commissioners will need to consider its clinical and cost effectiveness before making any decisions about funding.

Acute Beds (North-east London)

22. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase acute bed numbers in north-east London. [110876]

Mr. Denham: We published the National Beds Inquiry for three month's consultation on 10 February. This set out that under any future scenario the overall number of acute, residential and intermediate care beds are likely to rise. The consultation will focus on the balance of acute and other beds in the whole system. The Government's plans for acute care beds will be announced once the consultation is complete.

GP Co-operatives

24. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy towards general practitioners' co-operatives. [110878]

Mr. Denham: Our policy is that patients should have access to high quality care 24 hours a day. We have increased the out-of-hours development fund to £43.4 million to support the development of out-of-hours services. General Practitioner Co-ops are the single largest provider of such services and they have demonstrated that they can deliver flexible, responsive emergency general medical services and reduce the burden of out-of-hours work for GPs involved.

Acute Waiting Times

25. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on acute waiting times. [110879]

Mr. Denham: The average waiting time for those on the in-patient list has fallen. At the end of December 1999, the average wait was 13 weeks, two weeks less than in June 1998.

We remain on track to achieve our manifesto commitment to reduce in-patient waiting lists to 100,000 below the inherited level of 1.158 million. The in-patient waiting list is now 50,000 below the level inherited.

Primary Care Groups

26. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the quality of work and efficiency of primary care groups; and if he will make a statement. [110881]

Mr. Denham: Primary Care Groups (PCGs) are vital components in this Government's plan to improve and modernise the National Health Service. They will ensure that innovative, patient-centred services are delivered to their patients. From April, we expect most PCGs to have taken on responsibility for managing at least 60 per cent. of their population's health service budget. PCGs must have the resources, skills and competencies necessary to deliver on these responsibilities. I have recently written to all health authorities to make clear my expectation that they must develop each PCG to achieve this and support them in meeting the objectives agreed locally to improve healthcare for their patients.

Smoking

27. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his measures to ensure the protection of young people from the dangers of tobacco smoking. [110882]

Yvette Cooper: As part of its comprehensive programme of action to tackle smoking, the Government are taking a number of measures which will protect children against the dangers of tobacco. This includes implementation of Directive 98/43/EC banning tobacco advertising as soon as possible; work with local government to strengthen enforcement of legislation on under-age sales of cigarettes and oral tobacco; encouragement of proof-of-age cards; and a targeted education campaign aimed at young people to be launched later this year.

Hospital Beds (Leicestershire)

28. **Mr. Reed:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to increase the number of hospital beds in Leicestershire. [110883]

Mr. Denham: We published the National Beds Inquiry for three month's consultation on 10 February. This set out that under any future scenario the overall number of acute, residential and intermediate care beds are likely to rise. The consultation will focus on the balance of acute and other beds in the whole system. The Government's plans for acute care beds will be announced once the consultation is complete.

At present, Leicestershire Health Authority is carrying out a review of acute services, which will be informed by the National Bed Inquiry.

Private Sector Resources

29. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will investigate ways in which the NHS could make greater use of private sector resources. [110884]

Ms Stuart: We do not believe that there needs to be greater reliance on private medicine in order to achieve modern standards in healthcare. We remain committed to a National Health Service funded from general taxation, available to all on the basis of need and need alone.

We are committed to providing good-quality services that represent best value for money to patients and the taxpayer, and we encourage the NHS to enter into Public-Private Partnerships with the private sector when this is the best way of achieving these aims.

Northamptonshire Health Authority

30. **Mr. Sawford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the funding of Northamptonshire Health Authority since 1992. [110885]

Mr. Denham: The table details the allocations Northamptonshire Health Authority has received each year since 1996–97.

	Allocation (£000)	*Cash increase (£000)*	*Percentage cash increase*	*Percentage distance from target*
1996–97	230,629	7,246	3.24	0.59
1997–98	241,142	9,401	4.06	−1.07
1998–99	252,747	11,331	4.69	0.43
1999–2000[1]	326,245	19,621	6.40	1.51
2000–01[1]	350,167	21,186	6.44	0.89

[1] The figures for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 are not comparable with previous years

1999–2000 was the first year of unified allocations, covering hospital and community health services, prescribing and general medical services cash limited.

The allocation figures prior to 1996–97 are not readily available as a result of the changes in regional boundaries in those year. We will write to my hon. Friend when these figures have been calculated.

Dentists

31. **Ms Southworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he will take to increase the professional accountability of dentists. [110886]

Mr. Hutton: The General Dental Council has drawn up proposals for increasing its lay membership, introducing a mandatory requirement for dentists to participate in continuing education and empowering the Council to investigate and sanction complaints about dentists which fall short of serious professional misconduct, but still throw doubt upon the dentist's fitness to practise. We support these measures and are discussing with the Council the best way of bringing these into effect.

Dentistry (Pregnant Women)

32. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what preparation is normally used to insert necessary fillings into the teeth of pregnant women under NHS treatment; and for what reason this is used. [110887]

Mr. Hutton: The most commonly used tooth-filling material in the general dental service for all adults, including expectant mothers, is dental amalgam. This is because it has the strength and durability necessary to restore cavities in back (posterior) teeth, particularly when restoration of the biting surfaces are involved. This is important to securing and maintaining oral health when treating tooth decay. The health benefits of using dental amalgam outweigh any theoretical risks from their use.

In April 1998, a statement from the Government's Advisory Committee on the Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) on the toxicity of dental amalgam was published. This confirmed that there was no evidence that the placement or removal of amalgam fillings during pregnancy was harmful. The Committee did, however, advise that it might be prudent to avoid, where clinically reasonable, the placement or removal of amalgam fillings during pregnancy.

Breast Cancer Services

33. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the development of breast cancer services in the NHS. [110888]

Yvette Cooper: We are committed to modernising cancer services and have invested an extra £30 million in breast cancer services since 1997. This is being used to implement evidence-based guidance to improve survival outcomes by helping to speed access to diagnosis and treatment by specialist multi-professional breast cancer teams.

From April 1999, all patients suspected of having breast cancer are guaranteed an outpatient appointment within 14 days of their general practitioner making an urgent referral. In the period April—September 1999, 35,000 women benefited from this high standard of care.

Through the National Health Service Breast Screening Programme, over one million women in England are screened each year at a cost of around £35 million. Nearly 8,000 women had breast cancer detected and treated through screening in 1997–98, and thousands of others had the reassurance of knowing that they are being checked every three years for the disease.

Cataract Operations

34. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the number of cataract operations carried out in the NHS in 1998–99. [110889]

Mr. Denham: According to provisional data for 1998–99, the number of cataract operations carried out in National Health Service hospitals in England was 201,682.

ENT Treatment (Southmead Hospital)

35. **Mr. Webb:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of delays in the provision of in-patient ear, nose and throat treatment at Southmead hospital in Bristol. [110890]

Ms Stuart: I understand, from information received from North Bristol National Health Service Trust, that a large number of medical admissions in recent weeks necessitated the postponement of a number of routine ear, nose and throat operations. Decisions about the postponement of operations are taken by clinicians on the basis of clinical priority.

The trust is taking action to maintain its elective capacity by the use of weekend operating lists, the use of local independent hospitals to enable routine surgical operations to be performed by NHS surgeons operating in NHS time, and buying places in private nursing homes to facilitate the discharge of medical patients.

Dentistry

36. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's funding of the use of palladium-based precious metals in dentistry. [110891]

Mr. Hutton: Precious metal casting alloys for use in the General Dental Services (GDS) must contain not less than 33⅓ per cent. fine gold, platinum or palladium. Decisions on any particular precious metal alloy is a matter for the individual dentist.

Fees for items of service in the GDS are adjusted annually in line with the recommendations of the independent Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration.

Whittington Hospital (PFI)

37. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the costs to the public purse of private finance initiative bids for the reconstruction of the Whittington hospital. [110892]

Mr. Denham: The outline business case for this much-needed redevelopment was approved by the regional office of the National Health Service Executive in November at a value of £23 million. The regional office is currently working with the trust to decide what elements of the scheme are suitable for private finance initiative and which may be more suitable for public funding. This decision will be taken in the next few months. Until then, it is not possible to make an estimate of the cost of seeking and securing private finance bids.

NHS Spending Statistics

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of expenditure per head in real terms on the National Health Service for *(a)* each English county and *(b)* each English health authority for each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [106744]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 January 2000]:* Levels of spending on health per weighted head of population in real terms are shown in the table.

Expenditure levels per weighted head of population on health are not available by county. Figures based on health authorities have been provided. In some cases the health authority may approximate to a county but this is not the position for all health authorities.

Expenditure in 1995–96 and earlier years is not included because information is not available on a comparable basis.

Figures are taken from health authority annual accounts which are prepared on resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year.

For 1997–98 and 1998–99, the majority of drugs expenditure has been accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority rather than individual health authorities. For all three years the majority of General Dental Service expenditure is not accounted for by health authorities. A total national position is shown including these two elements.

England—Expenditure by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

£

Health Authority	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Avon	677.73	626.04	672.26
Barking and Havering	637.87	583.12	652.23
Barnet	693.57	667.13	661.27
Barnsley	616.31	555.74	567.41
Bedfordshire	649.29	590.12	626.61
Berkshire	645.19	602.80	644.68
Bexley and Greenwich	657.41	646.38	674.90
Birmingham	716.31	667.16	700.88
Bradford	661.28	619.22	611.56
Brent and Harrow	684.09	666.49	706.46
Bromley	618.87	603.91	753.95
Buckinghamshire	648.47	619.44	637.24
Bury and Rochdale	685.42	618.94	609.57
Calderdale and Kirklees	624.32	576.49	586.74
Cambridge and Huntingdon	672.53	625.47	675.05
Camden and Islington	777.46	668.94	789.56
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	654.67	613.29	627.65
County Durham	628.31	582.51	602.19
Coventry	644.98	609.55	635.01
Croydon	638.10	594.90	646.09
Doncaster	629.25	612.55	692.17
Dorset	638.30	596.63	634.75
Dudley	624.60	591.05	686.50
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	702.89	648.66	678.49
East and North Hertfordshire	682.09	656.44	689.22
East Kent	614.50	589.72	628.75
East Lancashire	640.78	607.24	619.47
East London and the City	706.50	631.84	659.33
East Norfolk	681.01	636.05	686.35
East Riding	655.74	607.23	624.72
East Surrey	756.23	717.08	764.04
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	603.51	603.34	641.16
Enfield and Haringey	656.73	606.00	628.56
Gateshead and South Tyneside	685.36	634.45	631.75
Gloucestershire	678.80	638.24	646.29
Herefordshire	660.72	682.28	664.77
Hillingdon	675.53	615.47	650.26
Isle of Wight	654.59	670.20	698.15
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	787.69	692.32	751.47
Kingston and Richmond	710.12	701.99	751.49
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	690.70	633.28	659.47
Leeds	718.83	690.10	725.55
Leicestershire	674.91	637.69	654.02
Lincolnshire	664.17	674.47	664.17
Liverpool	684.66	626.55	677.80
Manchester	722.55	667.76	692.35
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	707.29	660.25	695.34
Morecambe Bay	684.35	672.73	809.16
Newcastle and North Tyneside	680.45	625.49	652.08
North and East Devon	674.09	647.88	669.42
North and Mid-Hampshire	667.47	641.32	671.24
North Cheshire	697.23	655.46	656.23
North Cumbria	656.89	622.31	643.42
North Derbyshire	609.29	630.75	658.32
North Essex	632.42	617.01	660.35
North Nottinghamshire	637.43	597.72	602.79
North Staffordshire	626.67	609.59	602.89
North West Anglia	650.80	601.67	625.29
North West Lancashire	643.71	592.53	597.69
North Yorkshire	640.24	647.10	692.21

England—Expenditure by weighted head of population expressed in real terms

£

Health Authority	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Northamptonshire	643.38	605.63	669.00
Northumberland	662.08	655.28	693.85
Nottingham	650.16	593.97	681.76
Oxfordshire	642.80	621.98	645.00
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	607.52	559.07	621.30
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	658.33	644.17	687.03
Rotherham	630.01	573.78	582.97
Salford and Trafford	661.61	602.83	652.22
Sandwell	647.23	622.56	648.70
Sefton	678.01	590.39	631.57
Sheffield	819.64	785.08	780.61
Shropshire	647.08	618.03	630.13
Solihull	713.82	678.11	695.51
Somerset	646.11	630.28	652.65
South and West Devon	659.84	610.58	625.77
South Cheshire	664.44	632.96	669.48
South Derbyshire	658.61	645.53	647.23
South Essex	589.60	587.31	636.27
South Humber	636.63	668.41	696.41
South Lancashire	647.60	630.87	669.35
South Staffordshire	673.45	642.55	677.99
Southampton and South West Hampshire	623.52	622.69	663.64
St. Helens and Knowsley	642.86	596.93	615.64
Stockport	647.03	595.08	618.59
Suffolk	659.10	618.09	654.67
Sunderland	642.04	593.58	643.55
Tees	636.28	574.15	623.15
Wakefield	705.43	718.04	723.21
Walsall	644.44	598.16	634.57
Warwickshire	723.65	688.90	688.56
West Hertfordshire	684.36	648.50	672.37
West Kent	653.94	624.27	648.89
West Pennine	614.51	567.14	580.15
West Surrey	735.84	660.76	694.12
West Sussex	630.64	605.84	650.35
Wigan and Bolton	595.01	563.37	581.77
Wiltshire	695.48	644.00	678.43
Wirral	626.86	575.39	627.91
Wolverhampton	652.30	589.11	609.50
Worcestershire	661.47	684.27	696.57
All England before national adjustment for drugs and GDS	664.15	627.68	659.76
All England after national adjustment for drugs and GDS	684.00	697.19	722.25

Notes:

1. Figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 have been shown in real terms, with 1998–99 as the baseline using the GDP deflator.

2. Figures are taken from the health authority annual audited accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year.

Sources:

Health Authority accounts for 1996–97, 1997–98, and 1998–99
Weighted population estimates for 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99
GDP Deflator: 1963–64 to 1998–99 calculated from ONS data for GDP (YBHA and ABMI)

Comparative Statistics

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish figures showing the composite index for infant deaths in *(a)* 1995–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99 for (i) England, (ii) East and North Hertfordshire, (iii) West Hertfordshire and (iv) the health authority in the prospering growth area with the (1) lowest figure and (2) highest figure. [109757]

Mr. Denham: The 1995–97 figures for the infant deaths indicator were published in "Quality and Performance in the NHS: High Level Performance Indicators" in June 1999. Figures for 1996–98 will be published later this year.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish figures showing the composite index for available deaths in *(a)* 1995–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99 for (i) England, (ii) East and North Hertfordshire, (iii) West Hertfordshire and (iv) the health authority in the prospering growth area with the (1) lowest figure and (2) highest figure. [109758]

Mr. Denham: Information on the composite index for avoidable deaths has been supplied.

The 1995–97 figures for the avoidable deaths indicator were published in "Quality and Performance in the NHS: High Level Performance Indicators" in June 1999. Figures for 1996–98 will be published later this year.

Due to the nature of the indicator there are no plans to publish for the years 1997–98 and 1998–99.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate has had made of the number of people who suffer from body dysmorphic disorder; and if he will make a statement. [109680]

Mr. Denham: The number of reported admissions to National Health Service hospitals in England with a diagnosis of body dysmorphic disorder during the financial year 1997–98 was 121.

NHS Dentistry (Shropshire)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the adequacy of provision of NHS dentistry in Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [109829]

Mr. Hutton: National Health Service Dental Services are accessible for much of the population of Shropshire, although I am aware that in some areas, there are longstanding problems of availability of NHS Dentistry. Shropshire Health Authority, through its Health Improvement Programme for 2000–01, has taken steps to enhance registration opportunities. These include a pilot for a Dental Access Centre, where services are offered to non-registered patients, as well as a number of "Investing in Dentistry" initiatives.

NICE

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will publish the relevant interests declared by *(a)* members of the Appraisal Committee of NICE and *(b)* specialist advisers appointed in respect of each evaluation commissioned by NICE since its establishment; [109703]

(2) if he will list the names and qualifications of the members of the Appraisal Committee of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence; [109701]

(3) when the specialist advisers who will be called upon to provide evidence to NICE on beta interferon will be appointed; and how many will be appointed. [109702]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The National Institute for Clinical Excellence, subject to the approval of the Secretary of State, is responsible for

deciding the members of their Appraisal Committee. NICE operates in an open and transparent way, and the list of members and interests for the Appraisal Committee will be placed in the Library, or can be found on NICE's website at www.nice.org.uk. NICE will also be publishing the names and interests of its specialist advisers when the appraisal committee has met, and any interests of Appraisal Committee members will also be recorded in the Minutes of the Appraisal Board meetings. The appraisal on beta-interferon is scheduled for August this year. The specialist advisers for beta-interferon will be appointed shortly, and their appointments will be available in the Library or on the NICE website.

The members of the NICE appraisal Committee are:

Professor David Barnett
Professor Ronald Akehurst
Professor Sir Colin Berry
Professor Martin Buxby
Professor Yvonne Carter
Dr. Karl Claxton
Professor Duncan Colin-Jones
Professor Sarah Cowley
Dr. Nicki Cullum
Mr. Christopher Evennett
Ms Jean Gaffin
Dr. Trevor Gibbs
Dr. Sheila Gore
Mr. John Goulston
Professor Philip Home
Dr. Terry John
Dr. Diane Ketley
Mr. Mayur Lakhani
Mr. Muntzer Mughal
Mr. James Partridge
Dr. Linda Patterson
Professor Philip Routledge
Professor Andrew Stevens
Mrs. Sue Gallagher.

NHS Direct

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects NHS Direct to cover *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [110134]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct will be available to the whole of England, including Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire, by the end of October 2000.

Drugs

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average price inflation of drugs supplied to the NHS for each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [110558]

Ms Stuart: Information on the average price increase over previous year's prices is given in the table. It covers all prescriptions dispensed in the community in England.

	Percentage increase
1993	−3.2
1994	−1.7
1995	−1.3
1996	0.0
1997	−0.4
1998	−2.6

Notes:

1. The table has been composed using the Paasche index, which gives the percentage change in the average price of products which existed in both years.
2. Data is only available from 1992 onwards.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money is provided by drug companies to the NHS; what form these donations take; which companies provide the major contributions; and if he will make a statement. [110556]

Ms Stuart: The Department expects all significant donations to be declared at local level, as set out in existing guidelines published in January 1993—Standards of business conduct for National Health Service staff (HSG(93)5).

Consultation has recently taken place on updated guidance, which we expect to be available shortly.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which EU regulations govern the pricing and supply of drugs; and if he will make a statement. [111468]

Ms Stuart: The pricing and supply of medicines are not governed directly by EU regulations, but left to member states. However the measures adopted by member states have to conform to the general requirements of European law and in particular Council Directive 89/105/EEC relating to the transparency of measures regulating the pricing of medicinal products for human use and their inclusion in the scope of national health insurance systems.

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the NHS's purchasing policy for *(a)* generic and *(b)* branded drugs. [111469]

Ms Stuart: Our policy is to secure purchasing arrangements which ensure a reliable and secure supply of medicines to patients and value for money for the National Health Service.

In the case of branded medicines, we have negotiated a new five-year Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme (PPRS). The PPRS includes a 4.5 per cent. reduction in the price of branded medicines from October 1999. Thereafter, the only changes permitted until 1 January 2001 are cost-neutral modulations, with strict controls on price increases after that date. The Health Act 1999 includes reserve powers to deal with companies that elect not to be scheme members or cease to be scheme members. Regulations came into force on 14 February 2000 to ensure that the prices of medicines supplied by

companies outside the voluntary scheme may be controlled, and the price reduction implemented where appropriate. At the same time the PPRS contains incentives to companies to develop new medicines, and allowances for the cost of research and development.

Generic medicines are not covered by the PPRS. We have commissioned a fundamental review of arrangements for the supply of generic medicines to the NHS in England to examine whether existing arrangements best serve the health service and to identify possible alternatives. The conclusions of the programme of work are expected in the summer.

The NHS Supplies Authority plays a part in the procurement of medicines for hospitals. The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency will be set up from 1 April to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of purchasing in the NHS in England.

Epilepsy

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many surgical interventions for epilepsy have been carried out in each region in each of the last 10 years. [110933]

Mr. Hutton: The Information requested has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to ask the Secretary of State for Health when the report of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group on epilepsy will be published. [111504]

Mr. Hutton: We are currently considering the report's conclusions and recommendations and their implications for the National Health Service. The report will be published in the near future.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for changes to NHS services for people with epilepsy. [111505]

Mr. Hutton: When we have published the report from the Clinical Standards Advisory Group on epilepsy, officials will meet with members of the Joint Epilepsy Council to carry work on epilepsy services forward.

General Practitioners (Negligence)

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioners have been *(a)* struck off and *(b)* reprimanded for professional negligence in each year since 1995. [110790]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is contained in the table:

Year	*Erased from the medical register*	*Suspended from the medical register*	*Admonished*[1]	*Conditions on registration*	*Referred to health committee*
1995	8	4	6	2	—
1996	12	5	4	9	—
1997	7	5	6	2	—
1998	10	1	7	—	—
1999	28	3	2	7	2
Jan 2000	4	1	2	1	—
Total	69	19	27	21	2

[1] Found guilty of serious professional misconduct but have no restrictions placed on registration.

Source:

General Medical Council statistics on erasures and other sanctions imposed on general practioners by the Professional Conduct Committee.

NHS Management Costs

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the total management costs and *(b)* the management costs as a percentage of income for each NHS trust in England in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [110709]

Mr. Denham: The latest year for which figures are available is 1997–98. The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Eye Tests (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people over 65 have received free eye tests in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire since April 1999; and if he will make a statement. [110833]

Mr. Denham: Eligibility for National Health Service sight tests was extended to all those aged 60 and over from 1 April 1999. Figures for the numbers of over 60s who have received free eye tests in particular areas are not collected centrally.

However, the increase in the total number of sight tests paid for by Shropshire Health Authority in the six months April to September 1999 was just under 11,000[1] . It is fair to assume that the majority of this increase was due to newly eligible people aged over 60 obtaining NHS sight tests.

[1] There is a one-month lag in payments so this figure will increase.

Source:

Department of Health—General Ophthalmic Services Activity Statistics

NHS Dentistry (Wansdyke)

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to increase the accessibility of NHS dental provision in the Wansdyke parliamentary constituency. [111155]

Mr. Hutton: Avon health authority is developing a proposal for a Personal Dental Services pilot project. If the proposal is successful the project will offer a full range of high quality National Health Service dentistry across most of the health authority area, including Wansdyke.

Waterhouse Report

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what date an urgent search was ordered in England for those people named in the Waterhouse report as being unsuitable to work with children. [111369]

Mr. Hutton: Immediately following publication of the Waterhouse Report on 15 February, the Department wrote to chief executives of every local authority, health authority, National Health Service trust and to major children's services providers in the voluntary sector. Local authorities, health authorities and trusts were required to check their employment records and respond to the Department by 5pm on Thursday 17 February 2000 and voluntary organisations by 3pm on Friday 18 February.

Long-term Care

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on the provision of beds in nursing homes for post-operative patients, following the report of the Royal Commission on Long-term Care. [111117]

Mr. Hutton: We share the Royal Commission's views on the importance of rehabilitation. The Royal Commission recommended ways in which the charging system for residential social care could help promote rehabilitation and we are considering these as part of the current review of Government spending.

There is an important role for intermediate care, which enables people to avoid being admitted to hospital and to be discharged earlier. Schemes involve health and social care services working together and include rapid response teams, community support teams, hospital at home nurse-led units, step down facilities and community-based rehabilitation services.

MRSA

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on MRSA and the advice his Department gives on combating and containing it. [110874]

Yvette Cooper: MRSA is the antibiotic resistant form of *Staphylococcus aureus*, a bacterium which is carried harmlessly on the skin by at least a third of the population. Action is in hand to improve the surveillance of MRSA and also to strengthen arrangements for the prevention and control of all hospital acquired infections, including new standards on infection control and a programme of action with a timetable to improve control arrangements.

Eye Tests

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the number of eye tests carried out on people aged over 65 years since April 1999. [110875]

Mr. Hutton: From April to September 1999, nearly 1.3 million more sight tests were paid for by health authorities in England and Wales than in the equivalent period in 1998. Most of this increase may be attributed to the Government's decision to restore eligibility for National Health Service sight tests to everyone aged 60 and over with effect from 1 April 1999.

TREASURY

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the Government agencies that have been involved in implementing the National Changeover Plan; and what guidance he has issued to them; [112142]

(2) how much money has been allocated to public sector bodies for the purpose of implementing the National Changeover Plan over the next 12 months. [112144]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer made clear in his speech to the British American Chamber of Commerce in New York on 22 February that the second Outline National Changeover Plan would be published in the coming weeks.

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how much money has been spent by the public sector to date in connection with the National Changeover Plan; [112151]

(2) if he will publish a breakdown of how funds for the National Changeover Plan have been spent to date. [112141]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 78W.

Euro-related Events

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the diary of euro-related events for *(a)* the Welsh Euro Forum and *(b)* the Scottish Euro Club. [112344]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information, which is regularly updated, is available on the websites of the Welsh Euro Taskforce (www.waleseic.org.uk) and the Scottish Euro Forum (www.euro-info.co.uk/euro).

Tax Law

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on further progress on the Tax Law Rewrite Project. [112498]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to be able to tell the House that the Tax Law Rewrite project is continuing to make good progress. The Inland Revenue today publish the project's ninth Exposure Draft, containing more draft rewritten clauses on capital allowances. This publication also includes the rewritten clauses from earlier exposure drafts on capital allowances, making up a first draft Bill. Some—but not all—of this earlier material has been revised in the light of comments received. I hope the final Bill—which will completely rewrite the current capital allowances legislation—will be ready to be introduced in Parliament later this year. Copies of the Exposure Draft will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111607]

Mr. Bayley: All envelopes used are made from recycled paper or post-consumer waste and all forms and leaflets are made from part mechanical paper which uses the whole tree and is more environmentally friendly than wood-free paper. All paper stock used by this Department is certified as coming from sustainable forests that are replanted to ensure effective use of available land. Approximately 60 per cent. of the Department's waste is currently collected for recycling and the Department is working with its estates partners to maximise recycling potential with the aim of ensuring that all suitable waste paper is sent for recycling.

Internet

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the total number of DSS benefit offices; how many are linked to the Internet; what estimate he has made of the cost of linking DSS offices to the Internet which are not so linked; and if he will make a statement. [111398]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Andrew Dismore, dated 28 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the total number of DSS benefit offices; how many are linked to the Internet; and what estimate he has made of the cost of linking DSS offices to the Internet which are not so linked.

I can confirm that the total number of DSS benefit offices is 440. In this instance I have assumed you refer to Benefits Agency local and district offices and the Benefits Centres. Of these, 26 are linked to the Internet via a standalone telephone connection.

The estimated cost of linking the remaining 414 offices in a similar way would be around £400,000.

I hope this is helpful.

Ex-miners

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to apply the Social Security (Recovery of Benefits) Act 1997 to compensation awards made to ex-miners with serious respiratory disease under the handling agreement on compensation principles signed by the DTI on 24 September 1999; and if he will estimate the numbers of likely claimants subject to such recovery in each region and nation of the United Kingdom. [111347]

Mr. Bayley: The provisions of the Social Security Recovery of Benefits Act 1997 will apply to miners in the same way as they do for other victims of accident, injury or disease. The compensation recovery scheme is intended to ensure that people do not receive double compensation for the same need. Compensation paid in respect of loss of past earnings, cost of past care or loss of past mobility is therefore reduced to take account of all benefits paid

for the same purpose, but only for a maximum period of five years from the date of claim to benefit in respect of the disease. Whether miners see a reduction in the amount of compensation they actually receive, therefore, will depend on the make-up of their compensation payment. However, compensation awarded to miners in respect of pain and suffering will be paid at the full amount awarded under the terms of the handling agreement.

The information on likely claimants subject to benefit recovery is not available in the form requested. The claims handlers IRISC have estimated a total of 150,000 claims under the handling agreement, distributed as follows:

England—97,500

Wales—40,500

Scotland—12,000.

Not all of these claims will be subject to benefit recovery.

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much benefit, and for how many cases, has been recovered by the Compensation Recovery Unit for asbestos-related illnesses and diseases in each of the past five years. [111685]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of the Compensation Recovery Unit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Tony Worthington, dated 28 February 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how much benefit, and for how many cases, has been recovered by the Compensation Recovery Unit for asbestos-related illnesses and diseases in each of the past five years.

The computer system is unable to identify asbestos related illnesses and diseases, however, we are able to provide details relating to asbestosis cases.

The available information is in the table below.

Year	*Number of cases*	*Total amount recovered (£)*
1 April 1994–31 March 1995	138	1,030,457.77
1 April 1995–31 March 1996	173	1,507,320.58
1 April 1996–31 March 1997	240	1,860,957.46
1 April 1997–31 March 1998	255	2,029,302.49
1 April 1998–31 March 1999	353	3,433,959.90
1 April 1999–31 December 1999	235	2,338,166.37

I hope this is helpful.

Benefit Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the amount of *(a)* fraud and *(b)* error committed by officials from his Department or its agencies in connection with (i) jobseeker's allowance and (ii) income support in the most recent year for which figures are available. [111711]

Mr. Rooker: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 28 February 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what was the amount of (a) fraud and (b) error committed by officials from his Department or its agencies in connection with (i) jobseeker's allowance and (ii) income support in the most recent year for which figures are available.

The Benefits Agency (BA) keeps a close eye on Internal Fraud, the Probity and Transformation Section in BA Security is tasked with developing a strong security culture among BA staff.

In April 99, approximately 9,000 were employed in paying JSA and approximately 15,000 in paying IS.

The following figures relate to (BA) staff for the period April 1998 to March 1999.

a) Cases of fraud involving officials

(i) Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA)	
Number of cases	2
Loss to public funds	£4,454.85

(ii) Income Support (IS)	
Number of cases	16
Loss to public funds	£426,947.86

Of the cases outlined, nineteen BA officials were involved. Of these, eight were prosecuted resulting in seven being jailed and one fined, a further two were reprimanded and three were dismissed, three resigned before further action could be taken and there was insufficient evidence to take action on the remaining three. This demonstrates our commitment to protecting the system and that staff who abuse their position for personal gain will take the consequences of their action. The member of staff who misused the computer system to create four false claims and embezzle over £100,000 was sentenced to three years imprisonment.

b) Official error

(i) Jobseeker's Allowance	
Percentage accuracy	88.02
Percentage error	11.98
Monetary value of error:	
Underpayment	£22.16m
Overpayment	£221.68m
Total	£243.84m

(ii) Income Support	
Percentage accuracy	83.4
Percentage error	16.6
Monetary value of error:	
Underpayment	£210.91m
Overpayment	£425.90m
Total	£636.81m

Between April 1998 and March 1999 the BA dealt with 2,827,315 claims to JSA paying out £3.5 billion in benefit and dealt with 1,202,792 claims to IS and paid out £12 billion in benefit.

I hope this is helpful.

Single Room Rent Restrictions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) of 7 February 2000,

Official Report, column 57W, what changes to single room rent restrictions on young people aged under 25 years he plans in order to address the localised difficulties caused by the present rules; and if he will make a statement. [111723]

Angela Eagle: We are considering the future of the single room rent as part of our wider review of housing. We will be taking account of all the available research which will include the localised reports we received from a variety of organisations on the effects of the single room rent, and the research we commissioned jointly with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on Housing Benefit and the private rented sector to gauge the effects of the rent restriction rules which were introduced in 1996.

Mobility Equipment

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the future of the Mobility Equipment Fund and Drivers Fund. [112743]

Mr. Bayley: A review of the Mobility Equipment Fund (MEF) and Drivers Fund was completed last year, and we are grateful to Motability's Tenth Anniversary Trust for their financial support to the Funds while that was ongoing. The purpose of both funds, to provide major adaptations to vehicles to allow severely disabled people to travel as drivers or passengers, is in line with our objective of providing more support for seriously disabled people. We have therefore decided that the pilot status of both funds should be ended, that they should be made substantive, and that they should continue to be administered on our behalf by Motability.

We are aware of the funding problems recently experienced by the funds and have recently agreed revised financing for the Funds with Motability. By restructuring our total support for Motability we shall be making available an additional £1 million for grants in the current financial year, and about £2.7 million extra from 2000–01. This will ease some of the current strain upon the MEF in particular, and start to reduce the waiting list. We recognise that to further reduce the MEF waiting list will require additional funding in the future. Further funding for the MEF will be considered alongside other Government spending priorities in the forthcoming spending review.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112147]

Angela Eagle: I refer the right hon. Member to the written answers which my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary has given the right hon. Member today.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for the location of the local arms of the Learning and Skills Council. [112499]

Mr. Wicks: My noble Friend the Minister for Education and Employment in the Lords announced in October 1999 the boundaries of the 47 local arms of the Learning and Skills Council. She is today announcing, subject to the passage of the legislation to set up the Learning and Skills Council, the location of the offices of the local Councils. In reaching decisions, she has taken account of the need to get best value for public money by using, where appropriate, premises currently occupied by Training and Enterprise Councils, and of the need for locations that will facilitate effective operation of the LSC.

The announcement relates to England only. Letters giving details have today been sent to all hon. Members with English constituencies, the contents of which have been placed in the Library.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112148]

Mr. Wills: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given today by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary.

Surplus School Places

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, what his policy is on surplus places in schools and if he will list the *(a)* numbers and *(b)* percentages of surplus places in each local education authority in England. [112646]

Ms Estelle Morris: The focus of all our policies is raising educational standards. Maintaining empty school places is a poor use of resources which could be better directed towards improving standards. When planning school provision, local education authorities should consider the options for removing surplus places, initially focusing on those schools with a quarter or more of their places unfilled and with particular regard to standards at those schools. The aim should be to bring the supply and demand for school places more closely together, maximise parental preference and provide good quality education in the most cost effective way. The Department collects information on surplus places annually which provides an opportunity to monitor the position in each authority.

The tables set out the numbers of surplus places as at January 1999 for each local authority area, listing primary and secondary separately, together with the proportion that these represent of total capacity. They also include the numbers of schools which at that date had surplus of

25 per cent. or more, and at least 30 surplus places, together with the proportion that these represent of the total number of schools. The data are drawn from the returns made during 1999 by local education authorities in respect of all maintained primary and secondary schools in their area. Included for the first time are a number of former grant-maintained schools for which data were not previously available. The returns indicate that there were 732,366 surplus school places in January 1999, representing 9 per cent. of the total capacity of 7.8 million places. This is an overall reduction of just over 29,305 places on 1998 figures. The number of schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more, and at least 30 surplus places, also fell by 138 to 2,391, which represents 11 per cent. of the total number of schools.

The returns also provide the Department with details of what action authorities propose to take on schools with 25 per cent. or more surplus. The returns indicate that in many cases action is being taken. Where there is no indication of action to reduce surplus and no substantial reasons given, the Department will be taking follow-up action with these authorities.

Surplus places by local authority area at January 1999

	Primary[1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus[2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more[3]		Actual surplus[2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more[3]	
LEA	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
301 Barking and Dagenham	1,164	7	3	6	811	7	0	0
302 Barnet	1,384	6	5	5	1,060	5	1	5
370 Barnsley	1,468	7	2	2	1,571	11	2	14
800 Bath and North East Somerset	1,127	8	3	4	970	8	2	15
820 Bedfordshire	3,548	13	21	14	5,340	13	11	19
303 Bexley	829	4	1	2	1,405	8	1	6
330 Birmingham	7,600	7	25	8	5,717	8	8	10
889 Blackburn with Darwen	855	6	4	7	509	5	0	0
890 Blackpool	393	3	1	3	704	9	2	25
350 Bolton	1,872	7	11	10	883	5	1	6
837 Bournemouth	390	4	1	4	778	8	1	10
867 Bracknell Forest	678	7	2	6	926	13	1	17
380 Bradford	5,021	13	26	16	5,195	11	17	21
304 Brent	1,837	9	6	10	1,489	10	1	8
846 Brighton and Hove	2,026	11	10	16	1,503	12	2	20
801 Bristol	2,508	8	12	10	3,777	18	7	32
305 Bromley	425	2	1	1	528	3	0	0
825 Buckinghamshire	6,125	13	46	23	1,378	5	3	9
351 Bury	581	4	3	4	290	3	0	0
381 Calderdale	1,588	8	7	8	1,069	7	0	0
873 Cambridgeshire	3,461	7	14	7	1,123	4	1	3
202 Camden	549	5	1	2	697	6	1	10
875 Cheshire	6,806	11	35	12	3,509	7	4	9
831 City of Derby	1,505	7	5	6	2,533	15	3	21
810 City of Kingston upon Hull	5,125	18	20	25	2,861	16	5	31
201 City of London	10	5	0	0	—	—	—	—
892 City of Nottingham	3,359	12	21	21	4,763	26	10	48
874 City of Peterborough	1,661	10	7	12	1,186	9	2	15
879 City of Plymouth	4,622	18	23	29	1,875	9	2	11
213 City of Westminster	487	5	1	3	796	10	2	25
908 Cornwall	2,608	6	16	7	324	1	0	0
331 Coventry	3,114	10	13	15	2,268	10	3	16
306 Croydon	1,355	5	3	3	2,060	12	2	10
909 Cumbria	5,133	11	44	15	3,637	10	6	14
841 Darlington	736	8	6	16	1,128	17	2	29
830 Derbyshire	5,549	9	39	11	4,854	10	9	19
878 Devon	4,266	7	18	6	1,819	5	1	3
371 Doncaster	5,865	18	30	27	2,826	12	3	18
835 Dorset	2,096	8	9	7	2,279	8	2	5
332 Dudley	2,981	10	12	15	1,009	5	1	5
840 Durham	6,157	13	50	20	4,728	13	8	22
307 Ealing	2,796	11	8	12	276	2	0	0
811 East Riding of Yorkshire	2,601	9	17	13	1,357	6	1	6
845 East Sussex	2,441	6	11	7	1,703	6	1	4
308 Enfield	938	4	3	5	1,551	7	1	6
881 Essex	9,379	8	33	7	9,384	10	8	10
390 Gateshead	1,668	9	8	11	1,016	8	0	0
916 Gloucestershire	4,963	10	20	8	2,320	6	5	12
203 Greenwich	2,106	10	5	7	1,673	12	1	7
204 Hackney	1,679	10	7	12	1,058	12	0	0
876 Halton	3,183	21	18	33	1,140	12	2	22
205 Hammersmith and Fulham	955	10	5	14	926	13	2	25
850 Hampshire	9,490	8	38	9	5,462	8	5	7
309 Haringey	617	3	2	3	1,042	9	0	0
310 Harrow	1,340	7	1	2	971	11	2	20
805 Hartlepool	755	8	2	7	657	9	0	0
311 Havering	1,217	6	2	3	2,098	13	3	17
884 Herefordshire	1,639	10	9	11	1,320	13	4	29
919 Hertfordshire	7,885	8	38	9	9,426	12	14	16

Surplus places by local authority area at January 1999

LEA	Primary [1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3]		Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3]	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
312 Hillingdon	1,293	6	2	3	900	6	1	7
313 Hounslow	2,011	11	7	11	659	4	0	0
921 Isle of Wight	371	5	1	2	615	5	0	0
420 Isles of Scilly	85	39	2	50	49	31	1	100
206 Islington	1,930	12	7	14	1,291	15	2	22
207 Kensington and Chelsea	1,144	16	7	27	756	18	1	25
886 Kent	6,309	6	18	4	10,107	11	12	11
314 Kingston upon Thames	69	1	0	0	631	7	0	0
382 Kirklees	2,644	7	8	5	2,277	8	3	9
340 Knowsley	2,742	15	13	22	1,859	16	1	9
208 Lambeth	2,352	12	9	13	1,611	19	3	30
888 Lancashire	9,889	9	57	11	6,500	8	12	13
383 Leeds	8,953	13	46	19	5,602	11	9	20
856 Leicester City	4,160	14	18	21	3,795	18	8	38
855 Leicestershire	2,990	6	11	5	4,791	10	10	18
209 Lewisham	951	5	3	4	2,318	17	2	15
925 Lincolnshire	4,937	9	36	12	4,389	10	10	16
341 Liverpool	7,571	16	29	18	5,019	14	6	17
821 Luton	2,355	11	7	11	772	6	0	0
352 Manchester	7,215	16	30	19	6,161	22	12	43
887 Medway	1,506	6	7	8	2,557	12	4	20
315 Merton	873	6	5	10	1,202	14	2	18
806 Middlesbrough	1,412	9	1	2	975	10	1	9
826 Milton Keynes	3,885	15	18	21	1,358	11	3	30
391 Newcastle upon Tyne	3,692	16	22	29	2,160	11	4	19
315 Newham	810	3	2	3	1,396	8	0	0
926 Norfolk	4,722	7	20	5	3,700	8	5	10
812 North East Lincolnshire	2,684	15	13	20	1,788	14	3	25
813 North Lincolnshire	1,463	10	6	9	1,325	11	3	21
802 North Somerset	886	6	2	3	984	8	0	0
392 North Tyneside	2,486	15	11	20	2,274	14	5	22
815 North Yorkshire	5,609	11	31	9	2,196	6	3	6
928 Northamptonshire	4,728	9	26	10	4,626	9	10	16
929 Northumberland	3,414	15	27	19	4,377	13	13	21
891 Nottinghamshire	5,203	8	21	7	9,751	16	15	26
353 Oldham	2,224	10	12	12	1,162	7	2	13
931 Oxfordshire	4,741	10	23	10	5,408	13	6	13
836 Poole	506	4	1	3	430	5	1	11
851 Portsmouth	1,368	8	6	11	151	2	0	0
870 Reading	813	8	5	13	1,769	22	3	38
317 Redbridge	964	5	1	2	486	3	1	7
807 Redcar and Cleveland	1,453	10	5	9	1,274	11	2	15
318 Richmond upon Thames	286	3	0	0	519	7	1	13
354 Rochdale	1,262	6	2	3	1,747	11	3	21
372 Rotherham	2,242	9	6	5	1,455	7	1	6
868 Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	398	5	2	4	785	8	2	14
857 Rutland	660	21	3	17	262	12	1	33
355 Salford	3,881	16	21	24	2,882	19	5	29
333 Sandwell	1,725	6	5	6	2,613	12	2	10
343 Sefton	3,237	12	18	19	1,633	8	3	14
373 Sheffield	4,249	9	18	12	2,071	7	1	4
893 Shropshire	2,674	11	18	12	1,149	7	1	5
871 Slough	785	7	0	0	366	5	0	0
334 Solihull	1,277	6	5	7	707	5	1	8
933 Somerset	2,524	6	9	4	3,993	12	6	15
803 South Gloucestershire	1,734	7	7	7	946	6	1	7
393 South Tyneside	1,940	13	9	16	1,356	12	2	18
852 Southampton	2,335	12	12	17	925	7	0	0
882 Southend	891	6	1	2	1,074	9	1	8
210 Southwark	2,034	9	6	8	1,277	12	3	23
342 St. Helens	1,556	9	7	11	959	8	0	0
860 Staffordshire	8,121	11	40	13	1,661	3	3	4
356 Stockport	2,235	8	9	9	1,368	8	0	0
808 Stockton-on-Tees	1,751	9	5	8	1,359	10	2	14
861 Stoke on Trent	3,907	15	19	22	1,567	10	3	18
935 Suffolk	4,863	10	26	10	5,061	9	6	8
394 Sunderland	3,813	13	17	18	1,276	6	1	6
936 Surrey	9,658	11	44	13	4,200	8	6	11
319 Sutton	322	2	0	0	435	3	0	0
866 Swindon	1,864	10	10	14	1,299	11	1	9
357 Tameside	1,148	5	4	5	1,003	7	2	11
894 Telford and Wrekin	840	5	1	2	891	9	2	15
883 Thurrock	1,556	10	4	9	1,868	19	3	30

Surplus places by local authority area at January 1999

LEA	Primary [1] Actual surplus [2] Number	Primary [1] Actual surplus [2] Percentage	Primary [1] Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3] Number	Primary [1] Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3] Percentage	Secondary Actual surplus [2] Number	Secondary Actual surplus [2] Percentage	Secondary Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3] Number	Secondary Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3] Percentage
880 Torbay	238	3	2	6	117	1	0	0
211 Tower Hamlets	2,667	12	9	12	1,400	9	1	7
358 Trafford	1,362	7	4	5	1,177	7	1	6
384 Wakefield	2,851	9	12	9	1,534	7	2	11
335 Walsall	2,873	11	11	11	1,384	6	1	5
320 Waltham Forest	1,537	7	5	8	1,190	9	1	6
212 Wandsworth	1,493	9	5	8	728	7	1	11
877 Warrington	2,428	12	14	19	752	6	0	0
937 Warwickshire	7,060	15	39	20	3,283	10	5	14
869 West Berkshire	1,132	9	3	4	531	5	2	18
938 West Sussex	5,398	8	20	8	4,818	11	5	13
359 Wigan	3,292	11	22	20	1,184	6	2	10
865 Wiltshire	4,081	10	32	15	2,523	9	3	9
344 Wirral	3,799	12	18	18	2,235	9	2	9
872 Wokingham	735	6	5	9	252	2	0	0
336 Wolverhampton	2,816	11	13	14	1,834	11	4	22
885 Worcestershire	4,397	10	17	9	4,629	11	9	15
816 York	1,938	13	11	18	1,285	12	4	33
Total	415,794	9	1,930	11	316,572	9	461	13

[1] Primary figures show surplus after taking account of any summer entry
[2] Actual surplus is defined as the difference between capacity and number on roll for all schools where capacity exceeds number on roll
[3] Schools with less than 30 surplus places are not included

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Day-old Chick Imports

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many day-old chicks were imported into the UK from *(a)* within and *(b)* outside the EU in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999 to date. [98590]

Ms Quin: *(a)* The number of live day old chicks imported into the United Kingdom from other member states from 1996 to 1999 is given in the table. These figures are derived from the information messages which European law requires exporting countries to send to the importing country to inform them of the number of animals certified for export in a given consignment.

	Number of day old chicks
1996	16,616,815
1997	1,342,848,163
1998	84,497,843
1999	98,280,536

(b) The number of live day old chicks imported into the United Kingdom from countries outside the EU is given in the table.

	Number of day old chicks
1996	0
1997	28,100
1998	28,806
1999	192,126

Note:

1. These figures are provisional and subject to validation.

2. These data are subject to a degree of statistical error and care is needed when interpreting them.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he intends to introduce arrangements under which the Ministry will *(a)* nominate which local veterinary inspector is to inspect a specific consignment of live farm animals prior to export and *(b)* pay the LVI and recover the cost for this service through charges on the exporter; and if he will make a statement. [101634]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* We are in discussion with the Scottish and Welsh administrations about the implications of carrying forward these further changes to the pre-export procedures for live food animals, in the light of views expressed in response to our consultation paper last year.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Luxembourg on 24 to 25 January; and if he will make a statement. [107151]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the UK at the Agriculture Council meeting in Brussels on 24 January, accompanied by the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin) and by Mrs. Brid Rodgers, MLA, Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Council held an in-depth debate on the Commission's proposal for compulsory labelling of beef, notably on the indications which are necessary to guarantee traceability and on how to define the origin of beef. I welcomed the aims of the proposal and stressed my desire that British beef, a premium quality product, be marketed around the world as such. I supported including essential traceability information on the label, while

stressing the need for some simplification of the Commission's approach. The proposal will return to the Council for decisions in the coming months.

Commissioner Byrne introduced the Commission's White Paper on Food Safety, which outlines plans for a European Food Authority and sets out an action plan for a comprehensive legislative framework intended to guarantee the highest level of consumer protection. Along with all other Council members, I welcomed the White Paper and the Commission's commitment to a new integrated approach to EU food law with food safety at its heart. The White Paper will now be considered intensively within the Council framework to prepare a report for the Feira European Council in June.

The Council agreed by qualified majority (Germany, Austria and Netherlands opposing) a common position deferring the deadline for introducing compulsory pig databases.

Grants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the initiatives launched by his Department since May 1997 under which specific grants are allocated, indicating in each case and for each financial year the funding provided by central Government. [109317]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 February 2000]:* The initiatives launched by this Department since May 1997 under which specific grants are allocated are given in the table:

£ million

Year/Initiative	*Funding*
1999–2000	
Organic Farming Scheme	11.35
2000–01	
Agricultural Development Scheme	2.00

In addition to the above, in December 1999, the Government announced their intended expenditure under the England Rural Development Plan for the period 2000 to 2006, which includes the Organic Farming scheme. For details of the planned expenditure I refer the hon. Member to the replies given to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 284–85W; and to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 442W.

EU Compensation

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much EU agri-money compensation was available to the United Kingdom to claim in the years *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999, and how much of this money was drawn down by the United Kingdom for those years. [110035]

Ms Quin: No compensation is payable in respect of the strength of sterling in 1995. The table sets out the amounts of compensation available and the amounts actually paid or being paid in each year for the strength of sterling in the years shown at the left of the table. Compensation is paid on a degressive basis for the three years following a year in which sterling's value has triggered compensation.

EU funded agrimonetary compensation payable since 1997

£ million

Year for which compensation relates	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Amount payable in each year					
1996	344	229	114	—	—
1997	—	90	60	30	—
1998	—	—	276	92	46
Amount paid or being paid					
1996	85	48	—	—	—
1997	—	—	—	—	—
1998	—	—	264	88	44

Compensation for the strength of sterling before 1998 was optional, and 50 per cent. EU and 50 per cent. nationally funded. For 1998, compensation is compulsory and 100 per cent. EU funded in the first year. Only the EU funded amounts are shown in the table.

Paper and Timber Products

Mr. Reed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that paper and timber products purchased by his Department are independently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as coming from a sustainable source. [110148]

Mr. Morley: The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) label is accepted by buyers as demonstrating that timber and timber products have come from sustainably managed sources. This Department has encouraged such schemes.

However, it is not practicable to require that all paper and timber products purchased by the Ministry are independently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council because this might discriminate against any equally valid schemes based on similar sustainable criteria and therefore be against public procurement rules.

Specifying just the FSC label might also result in us failing to meet all our requirements as currently only a tiny percentage of timber products are FSC certified. This is why the Ministry's policy statement for greening its operations suggests that evidence of sustainability might take the form of a certificate issued under a credible, preferably independent, verification scheme; or other documents which demonstrate the operation of an environmental management system incorporating forest management criteria that conform with internationally recognised principles such as the Helsinki Guidelines.

Farmers' Markets

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers' markets there are in England; what steps he is taking to encourage the setting up of such markets; what steps he is taking to encourage shops in market towns to purchase produce from local farmers; and if he will make a statement. [110561]

Ms Quin: The National Association of Farmers' Markets (NAFM) estimate that there are about 150 farmers' markets currently operating in England and expect that number to rise significantly over the coming year. We fully support NAFM and their work to promote the farmers' market movement. We also wish to encourage farmers to

better market their products through shops and other outlets, and financial support for new marketing initiatives will be a key feature of the England Rural Development Plan which will come into operation later this year.

Electricity Generation

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of the electricity used by his Department is generated from renewable sources; and if he will make a statement. [111034]

Mr. Morley: My Department supports the Government's aim of obtaining 10 per cent. of the UK's electricity from renewable sources by 2010 and remains committed to playing its part in this.

The Department's Greening Operations Strategy, which was updated and re-published last June, has a key objective to encourage the supply of "green electricity" (electricity produced from renewable sources) where this provides value for money. We are therefore investigating the cost effectiveness and practicality of obtaining electricity from renewable sources.

We are also committed to schemes that combine heating with other energy efficiency benefits. At our Central Veterinary Laboratory we have a system whereby a waste heat boiler is linked to the main incinerator to provide a large proportion of the heating and hot water for the site. A Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant will also be on stream by the middle of this year to provide energy for new buildings on the Laboratory site. My Department is also connected to the Whitehall CHP system.

Broiler Chickens

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to implement the Farm Animal Welfare Council's 1992 recommendation that a maximum stocking density for broiler chickens should be controlled by regulation. [110770]

Mr. Morley: The Government have made clear their wish to improve minimum standards for broiler welfare. But we wish to do so on a EU-wide basis since simply exposing the home market to lower welfare products produced elsewhere would bring little benefit to birds' welfare. We do however reflect the Farm Animal Welfare Council's recommendation in our broiler chicken welfare code and plan to maintain it in the revised version.

Pig Industry (Ireland)

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Minister of Agriculture in the Republic of Ireland concerning the aid package introduced there for pig farmers in the border regions; what reasons the Irish Minister gave for its introduction; and if he will make a statement. [111247]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The Government in the Republic of Ireland have announced an aid scheme to help their pig producers in the border region and have linked the proposed payments to a fire at the Ballymoney pig processing plant. The UK Government have already paid state aid totalling £700,000 to pig producers in Northern Ireland for the welfare problems resulting from this same fire. The Irish Government have submitted a formal state aid notification to the European Commission and await the Commission's response.

Farms (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the contribution to GDP from farms in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire for the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [111073]

Ms Quin: The agriculture industry in Shropshire contributed 5.5 per cent. to the county's GDP in 1996 and 0.04 per cent. to national GDP, as measured at factor cost. Data for Shrewsbury and Atcham are not available. Later figures are not yet available at regional level.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport under what circumstances the Millennium Dome is available for whole-day private hire; and what such deals have been done. [105244]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* NMEC is willing to consider any approaches it receives for such hire arrangements and will consider them in the context of its business and public accessibility objectives. To date, one such booking has been made: by the TUC for Monday 1 May.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the total number of tickets sold for the dome to date; and how many have been provided for corporate use. [107275]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 31 January 2000]:* As at 23 February, 718,961 people had visited the dome, including 18,907 whose bookings were made through the corporate hospitality facility.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his latest estimate of receipts to the New Millennium Experience Company arising from *(a)* catering and *(b)* merchandising; and if he will make a statement. [109724]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company undertakes regular reviews of its overall budget, like any other commercial company but with the added imperative of achieving its estimated income within only 12 months of operation. New forecasts are made, and changes are implemented on the basis of actual financial achievements as the year moves forward. The reviews are discussed in full, and changes agreed with the Millennium Commission. The latest review is currently being finalised and is the subject of ongoing discussion with the Commission. At this stage, the provisional estimate of income from the two categories in question is: catering (excluding hospitality)—£6 million net; merchandise—£20 million net.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to encourage more school children from Scotland to visit the Millennium Experience at Greenwich. [111091]

Janet Anderson: NMEC is providing up to one million free school tickets under the Education Tour scheme. All schools in the UK can apply for these tickets. The tickets are allocated over a series of four ballots and schools can apply for up to 100 pupil tickets each. NMEC, through the Education and Learning Experience Managers in its 12 offices countrywide (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the North-East, Yorkshire and Humberside, the North-West, the East Midlands, the West Midlands, the East, the South-East, the South-West and London), and through the regional media will continue to ensure that all schools are fully aware of the free ticket scheme and of the education visit arrangements. NMEC has also worked hard to negotiate deals with travel providers and operators which represent good value for money for visitors to the Dome. NMEC has informed schools about these providers and operators in their area.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many free tickets to the dome have been issued to VIP visitors. [109721]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The policy of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is that where there is a benefit to the business, guests (whether VIPs or not) invited to the dome can attend on a non-paying basis. This policy also applies where there is a relevance to the NMEC's public accountability remit—Millennium Commissioners and certain of their staff are allowed free access to enable them to satisfy themselves that the project is meeting the conditions of the national lottery grant; and parliamentary representatives, including Ministers and Select Committee members, would also not pay in recognition of the company's responsibilities to Parliament. Additionally, because the dome has such a high profile as the centrepiece of the UK's Millennium celebrations, many VIPs whether on official or State visits, often request that the dome be included on their itinerary. Over 390 such individuals have attended from 14 countries to date. In most cases the host body of the visiting group reimburses NMEC.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he plans to encourage the new Millennium Experience Company to make reductions in ticket prices for entry to the millennium dome. [109911]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The ticket pricing structure is a matter for the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) which, under the terms of its lottery grant from the Millennium Commission, must consult and obtain the agreement of the Commission to any in-year changes in ticket pricing. NMEC has no plans to change the overall ticket price structure but is currently looking at ways in which it can increase value for money for visitors to the dome.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many staff are employed at the Millennium Dome; and how many are nationals of *(a)* the UK, *(b)* other EU member states and *(c)* other countries. [109720]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The information is not available in the form requested. Of the 2,077 employees of the New Millennium Experience Company, 31 are from non-EU countries and the remainder are from EU member states.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the range of ethnic minority food options available for public purchase at outlets at the Millennium Dome; and what representations have been received from the public in respect of the variety and cost of food at the dome. [110665]

Janet Anderson: There are more than 50 separate catering outlets at the dome, providing a wide range of food and drink options at high street prices. As well as high-quality British cuisine and a range of fast food and snack options, visitors to the dome can enjoy food from across the world, including Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Chinese, Thai and Kosher catering. Anecdotal feedback indicates that the wide variety of food on offer and the prices are being well received by the majority of visitors.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make it his policy that no further funds, by way of *(a)* loan, *(b)* grant and *(c)* otherwise, will be (1) received by the New Millennium Experience Company from any Lottery fund; [110472]

(2) provided from the Millennium Commission to the New Millennium Experience Company. [110473]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* The distribution of Lottery funds is a matter for the Lottery Distributors who operate independent of the Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will write in more detail, in his capacity as Chairman of the Millennium Commission, to my hon. and learned Friend.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will provide in respect of *(a)* advances, *(b)* loans and *(c)* grants agreed to be made to the New Millennium Experience Company by the Millennium Commission since 1 January, details of undertakings as to the personal liability of (i) officers and (ii) directors of the New Millennium Experience Company and the Millennium Commissioners. [110474]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* I refer my hon. and learned Friend to the reply I gave him on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 90W. Both the Non-Executive and Executive Directors of the New Millennium Experience Company are bound by the normal Companies Act regulations applying to Directors of Companies.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many contracts were awarded by the New Millennium Experience Company to caterers to operate on the site of the Millennium Dome; what net revenue was received by the NMEC from the granting of those contracts; how many of those contracts were awarded after a process of competitive tendering; and how many of those contracts are still in force. [110912]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Sixteen catering and supply contracts have been awarded by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) to contractors to operate in and around the dome. All

contracts have been let following competitive tender processes and all contracts are still in force. Each contractor will pay NMEC an agreed percentage of net sales as a concession fee, the precise details of which are commercially confidential while the contracts are current.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been paid by the New Millennium Experience Company in overtime payments since the commencement of the Millennium Dome project. [110915]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The total sum paid by the New Millennium Experience Company in overtime since the start of the Millennium Experience Project (March 1997) is £677,418.

National Audit Office

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his oral answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 1246, on what basis he concluded that the NAO *(a)* does not have expertise in fair trading issues and *(b)* is not able to undertake a politically independent scrutiny role. [112051]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* My right hon. Friend fully accepts the need for external scrutiny of the BBC's fair trading commitment. He considers, however, that other organisations would be better placed than the NAO, whose core work is financial audit and value for money exercises, to form a view on the adequacy of the BBC's fair trading policies. Taking account of this, and while in no way questioning the NAO's ability to undertake a politically independent scrutiny role, he believes the most effective way to meet the concerns raised in the Davies report is for him to appoint independent auditors and for their reports to him to be made available to the House and to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.

BBC

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the mechanism he intends to deploy to review the BBC digital service; and what safeguards will be in place to prevent any compromise of the BBC's editorial independence. [112053]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The Government will be announcing details of the review of digital services in due course and we will ensure that the BBC's editorial independence is not compromised in any way.

Sir Denis Mahon's Paintings

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the plans of Sir Denis Mahon with regard to his collection of paintings. [112612]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The art historian and connoisseur Sir Denis Mahon has recently made it known that he intends to arrange for the great majority of his pre-eminent collection of Baroque pictures painted in Italy to pass after his death to the National Art Collections Fund for permanent allocation to public galleries and museums in Britain. At that time 58 paintings (with a present estimated value of approximately £20 million) will be deposited by the Fund permanently in British institutions with the stipulation, warmly endorsed by the Government, that they may remain only with galleries where free admission to the public is in place. Two further paintings, both by Guercino, The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple and Elijah fed by Ravens, are to pass to the National Gallery in London by other means.

This is a magnificent gesture. I thank Sir Denis, on behalf of the Government, for his generosity in taking steps to ensure that most of his wonderful collection will be available for the greatest possible number of people to enjoy in this country after his death. They are at present on indefinite loan to the galleries and museums concerned. The works and their proposed permanent allocation are as follows:

The National Gallery, London:

Gioacchino Assereto, The Angel appears to Hagar and Ishmael; Ludovico Carracci The Agony in the Garden; Valerio Castello, The Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist; Guiseppe Maria Crespi, Musicians, Peasants with Donkeys; Donato Creti, Artemisia drinking the Ashes of Mausolus; Domenichino, Landscape with a Fortified Town; Luca Giordano, Mythological Scene of Agriculture, Allegory of Divine Wisdom, Allegory of Fortitude, Allegory of Justice, Allegory of Prudence, Allegory of Temperance, Apotheosis of the Medici, The Cave and Eternity, Minerva as Protectress of the Arts and Science, Mythological Scene with the Rape of Proserpine; Guercino, Saint Gregory the Great with Saints Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier, The Cumaean Sybil with a Putto, The Angel appears to Hagar and Ishmael; Jan Lingelbach (attr.), Roman Street Scene with Card Players; Johann Liss, The Fall of Phaeton; Guido Reni, The Rape of Europa; Salvator Rosa, Landscape with Travellers asking the Way; Bartolomeo Schedoni, The Holy Family with the Virgin teaching the Child to Read; Matthias Stom, Salome receiving the head of Saint John the Baptist.

The National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh:

Corrado Giaquinto, Madonna and Child in Glory appearing to Four Saints; Andrea Locatelli, Landscape with a Waterfall and Distant Lake, Rocky Landscape with a Natural Arch and Distant Tower; Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini, Jepthah returning from Battle is greeted by his Daughter; Salvator Rosa, Desolate Landscape with Two Figures, Landscape with Saint Anthony Abbot and Paul the Hermit; Andrea Sacchi, Saint Anthony of Padua reviving a Dead man; Francesco Solimena, The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saint Peter Martyr and Two Warrior Saints.

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford:

Paulus Brill, Mythological Landscape with Nymphs and Satyrs; Michelangelo Cerquozzi, Spring (Flora), Summer (Ceres); Pietro da Cortona, The Oath of Semiramis, Giuseppe Maria Crespi, Noli Me Tangere; Domenichino, The Vision of Saint Jerome; Gaspard Dughet, Landscape in the Roman Campagna; Guercino, Head of an Old Man; Pierre Patel, Landscape in the Roman Campagna; Giovanni Francesco Romanelli, Angelica encountering the wounded Medoro; Ippolito Scarsella, The Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist, Bernardo Strozzi; Horatius Cocles Defending the Bridge.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge:

Francesco Albani, The Trinity with the Virgin Mary and Musician Angels; Ciro Ferri, The Adoration of the Shepherds; Andrea Sacchi, The Baptism of Christ; Bartolomeo Schedoni, The Coronation of the Virgin; Francesco Solimena (attr.), The Rest on the Flight into Egypt; Pierre Subleyras, The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth, Zacharias and John the Baptist.

City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham:

Francesco Albani (studio), Faith, Hope and Charity; Giovanni Battista Gaulli, The Virgin, with the Child piercing the Head of the Serpent; Pieter van Laer (attr.), A Franciscan Saint distributing Food to Peasants; Pier Francesco Mola, Mercury and Argus; Salvator Rosa, Head of a Man with a Turban.

Temple Newsam House, Leeds:

Pier Francesco Mola, Landscape with two Carthusian Monks.

The free access stipulation does not apply to this single exceptional case. The picture by Mola originated from the Temple Newsam collection, and it seems fitting that it should return there. Temple Newsam is treated by Leeds City Council as a country house involving admission charges, but its associated institution, the Leeds City Art Gallery, has no plans to charge admission.

In addition Sir Denis has said that he wishes seven pictures to pass to the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna in Italy, and eight to the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. These pictures are at present on long-term loan to the galleries in question. They are as follows:

Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, Italy:

Annibale Carracci, Saint John the Baptist in a Landscape; Domenichino, Landscape with River and Boats; Benedetto Gennari (after Guercino), Portrait of Guercino; Guercino, The Madonna of the Sparrow, A Sibyl holding a Scroll; Guido Reni, Saint Francis consoled by a Musician Angel, A Sibyl.

The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin:

Sébastien Bourdon, Abraham's Sacrifice near Beth-el (?); Annibale Carracci, Mary Magdalene in a Landscape; Domenichino, Saint Mary Magdalene; Luca Giordano, Venus, Mars and the Forge of Vulcan; Guercino, Jacob blessing the Sons of Joseph, Saint John the Baptist visited in Prison by Salome; Pier Francesco Mola, Landscape with Saint Bruno in Ecstasy; Guido Reni, Cleopatra.

Taking all the considerations into account, including the advice of the Government's advisory body on these matters—the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art—I have granted export licences for these paintings (including those which are of national importance) to supersede the temporary licences already granted. I am also pleased to say that, in recognition of Sir Denis' generosity, two charities related to these galleries have agreed—after his death and the passing of title—to make donations to the National Art Collections Fund in Great Britain of $1,600,000 and £100,000 respectively.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110680]

Mr. Straw: As at 1 April 1999, five members of the senior civil service were from an ethnic minority background (3 per cent). These staff were all men. I am committed to increasing the level of representation and, as part of the Modernisation of Government agenda, targets have been published to cover recruitment, progression and retention of ethnic minority staff at all grades within the Home Office. There are also separate senior civil service targets for women. The Government are committed to meeting these targets.

Wheelclamping

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the steps he is taking further to regulate wheelclamping. [111613]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In the White Paper, "The Government's Proposals for Regulating the Private Security Industry in England and Wales", issued last year, we announced proposals to regulate wheelclampers as part of a package of statutory measures for the private security industry as a whole. We are currently analysing the responses we received to the White Paper and will introduce legislation as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

Prison Liaison Officers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons in England and Wales have a foreign national liaison officer available to work with prison inmates. [111936]

Mr. Boateng: All prisons have a race relations liaison officer and a race relations management team which are responsible for the local implementation of the Prison Service race relations policies set out in Prison Service Order 2800, a copy of which is in the Library. This Order seeks to ensure the fair treatment of ethnic minority and foreign national prisoners. Some establishments with larger numbers of foreign national prisoners have appointed a member of staff to work specifically with foreign national prisoners. Information on these is not held centrally.

Discharged Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if a questionnaire is issued to all prison inmates before they are discharged from prisons in England and Wales. [111939]

Mr. Boateng: The issuing of questionnaires to prisoners before discharge is not a standard procedure within the discharge process.

Individual prison establishments may use questionnaires as a means of gathering feedback and information locally, and questionnaires may be used from time to time as a means of gathering information relating to specific initiatives on a national basis.

Prisons (Foreign Nationals)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many foreign nationals were being held in prisons in England and Wales on 1 February. [111937]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available information is for the last day of December 1999. On that date, there were 5,323 foreign nationals in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales.

Prisons (Foreign-language Materials)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prison induction booklets that are in a foreign language in prisons in England and Wales; and what those languages are. [111935]

Mr. Boateng: The prison induction booklets available in foreign languages and issued centrally are: the prisoners' information book for life sentenced prisoners; the prisoners' information book for male prisoners and young offenders; the prisoners' information book for women prisoners and female young offenders; and the prisoners' information book about visiting and keeping in touch.

These provide information on prison life relevant to all prisoners and have been translated into the following 20 languages: Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Welsh, Turkish, Greek, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Bengali, Gujerati, Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil and Urdu. Copies are being sent to prison libraries.

The foreign prisoners' resource pack has been produced in the following 12 languages: English, Arabic, Bengali, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Gujerati, Hindi, Italian, Spanish and Urdu.

Other foreign language induction material may also have been produced locally by establishments or by other agencies. Details of these are not held centrally.

Prisons (Showers)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the rules followed by prisons in England and Wales as to how often an inmate should be allowed to shower; and if he will make a statement. [111933]

Mr. Boateng: Rule 28 of the Prison Rules 1999 states that

> every prisoner shall be required to wash at proper times, have a hot bath or shower on reception and thereafter at least once a week.

No exact information is available, but it is understood that most prisoners have the opportunity to shower at least two or three times a week. Many prisoners take a shower on a daily or almost daily basis.

Preston Prison

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason Dylan Wyn Roberts, Prisoner No. CB. 8719 at Preston Prison, was held for several weeks in his cell for 23 hours per day; if he is still being so held; if this is standard treatment for Category C prisoners; and what aspects of the situation at Preston Prison make such treatment necessary. [111716]

Mr. Boateng: Throughout his time at Preston, Mr. Roberts had access to the normal regime for prisoners on normal location. This included the opportunity to go to work or education for half a day each working day, an hour's exercise every day, and two and half hours association on alternate days. Mr. Roberts chose not to go to work or education and, therefore, spent most of these periods in his cell. Mr. Roberts is now at Wymott prison.

Asylum Seekers

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to address delays in the asylum decision-making process. [112634]

Mr. Straw: The Government are devoting great effort and substantial additional resources into the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) in Croydon to reduce the backlogs there and to deliver faster decisions as part of the commitment to delivering a fairer, faster and firmer immigration and asylum system. The asylum system we inherited required a radical overhaul to the processes used in making asylum decisions and the legislative basis for appeals to deliver these faster.

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, now on the Statute Book, will help achieve this. Its provision will progressively be introduced, but a fairer and faster system cannot be delivered by legislation alone.

One of our actions was to undertake a thorough review of the asylum decision-making processes. Vantagepoint was commissioned by the IND to help with its review of the asylum decision process. The aim of the review was to identify where there were delays in the procedures which might affect the ability of IND and the Lord Chancellor's Department to achieve the White Paper targets, and to make recommendations for change.

A number of ways in which IND could improve its procedures and introduce more flexibility into the asylum decision-making process were identified and are being implemented as part of a systematic overhaul of the asylum business.

Changes that have already been made include the following:

> In this year and the next two years, we are investing a minimum of £120 million in IND, including an extra £60 million on speeding up casework. Hundreds more staff are being deployed as caseworkers. Output in the Integrated Casework Directorate (ICD) is improving and staffing levels remain under review to ensure that output targets are met. There has already been a significant increase in asylum productivity as our new recruits to asylum decision making gain experience and we expect this to continue.
>
> Ports and the ICD are jointly taking forward the implementation of streamlined processes aimed at ensuring as far as possible consistency in the processes for handling asylum casework. A new Statement of Evidence Form has been introduced for use by both the ports and the ICD, where appropriate.
>
> Outside consultants are currently training existing staff and new staff in effective and efficient interview skills.
>
> All health and safety issues concerning interview rooms have been addressed and resolved. Safety alarms have been issued to all interviewing staff and guards are readily available.
>
> Country policy advice is being systematically reviewed. There is a full library of country information available for the top asylum producing countries and short country background briefs are, additionally, being provided in a consistent format. A chief caseworker post has been created with particular focus on co-ordinating needs of asylum caseworkers for country policy advice.

We are also committed to achieving the targets set out in the White Paper published in July 1998 to deliver most initial asylum decisions within two months and most appeals within a further four months. The White Paper target is to do this by April 2001. For families with children, we are already meeting the targets.

We are taking radical measures to reduce the backlog of cases in IND dating from 1996 onwards. The rate at which we do this will be dependent on a wide range of variables, not least of which will be future application rates, but we remain committed to the White Paper target

of reducing the backlog of initial asylum decisions to fractional levels by April 2001. We expect to make major inroads into this backlog by the end of the year.

Other actions taken include piloting new procedures in respect of both port and in-country asylum applications. Measures have been introduced which aim to obtain the maximum amount of information at the outset. These, together with enhanced computer links between ports and the IND in Croydon, have reduced the stages and time in the decision-making process.

Copies of the report dated July 1999 by consultants Vantagepoint (formerly called BDO Stoy Hayward) on the asylum decision-making process have been placed in the Library.

Anti-terrorism Legislation

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has appointed a reviewer for those sections of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 which are not already included in the existing review of anti-terrorism legislation. [112635]

Mr. Straw: I am pleased to announce that Mr. John Rowe QC has accepted my invitation to carry out the annual review of sections 5 to 7 of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 which deal with conspiracy in this country to commit criminal offences abroad.

Alternative Voting Procedures

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* the Local Government Association and *(c)* the press were informed of his decision to approve pilot projects of alternative voting procedures under the provisions of the Representation of the People Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matters raised by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 1118; [112029]

(2) what pilot projects of alternative voting procedures he has approved under the provisions of the Representation of the People Bill; what alternative procedures he has approved in each case; and when each local authority was informed that its pilot project had been approved. [112030]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Following a discussion I had with the hon. Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), provisional approval has been given to the following schemes. A final decision will be taken on each scheme once the Representation of the People Bill has received Royal Assent.

Early Voting

Blackburn
Blackpool
Chester
Coventry
Kingston upon Hull
Knowsley (3 wards)
Manchester
Norwich[1]
Pendle
Plymouth
Redditch
St. Helens (6 wards)
Stoke on Trent
Sunderland[1]
Telford and the Wrekin (2 wards)
Watford[1]

Electronic Voting/Counting

Broxbourne
Bury (1 ward)
Salford (2 wards)[1]
Stratford on Avon
Three Rivers
Warrington

Extension of Hours of Poll

Leeds
Mole Valley

Weekend Voting

Watford[1]

All Postal Ballots

Bolton (3 wards)
Doncaster (1 ward)
Gateshead (2 wards)
Norwich (2 wards)[1]
Salford (1 ward)[1]
Stevenage (2 wards)
Swindon (4 wards)
Wigan (3 wards)

Extension of Postal Vote Entitlement

Amber Valley (2 wards)
Eastleigh
Gloucester (3 wards)
Milton Keynes

Mobile Polling Facility

Norwich[1]
Sunderland (8 wards)[1]
Watford[1]
Windsor and Maidenhead (2 wards)

Freepost

Watford[1]

[1]Councils running more than one scheme.

Most of the local authorities concerned were informed of my provisional decision on 14 February. In a number of cases where I was not yet in a position to reach a provisional decision, the information was communicated to the local authority later in that week.

On 15 February, the Local Government Association were given details of the provisional decisions that had, by that point, been taken, as were a number of journalists. No Home Office press notice has been issued since final decisions have yet to be made.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) was not correct to say that newspapers, the Press Association and other bodies were told before Parliament about which pilot schemes will take place in May, as the final decisions have yet to be made.

Correspondence

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Parliamentary questions have been asked by hon. Members regarding correspondence which has not been replied to by his Department in each month from May 1997 onwards; what was the average time taken to reply to the correspondence; and what was the time taken to reply to each individual item of correspondence raised by hon. Members in this way. [112028]

Mr. Straw: On the basis of the information available, hon. Members have asked 91 Parliamentary questions since May 1997 about correspondence to which they had not received a reply at the time of tabling the question. The number of such Parliamentary questions asked in each month for each year is given in the table.

Parliamentary questions tabled by month

	1997[1]	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*[2]
January	—	2	1	16
February	—	5	2	5
March	—	5	4	—
April	—	1	2	—
May	—	—	2	—
June	—	3	4	—
July	2	3	5	—
August	—	—	—	—
September	—	—	—	—
October	—	—	4	—
November	3	3	10	—
December	2	2	5	—
Total	7	24	39	21
Overall total		91		

[1] From May
[2] To end February

Information on the time taken to deal with the individual items of correspondence about which the Parliamentary questions were asked is held centrally in only 69 of cases. The average time taken to reply to these items of correspondence was 64 working days.

The time taken to reply to each item of correspondence (in working days) where information is available is given in the table.

Time taken for reply in working days	*Number of items*
6	1
15	1
22	3
23	1
27	2
30	1
31	1
32	1
33	1
36	1
37	1
38	2
39	1
40	3
41	3
42	1
44	2
45	1
46	1
47	1
48	1
51	1
56	1
58	1
62	1
63	1
65	2
66	1
69	1
71	1
74	1
78	3
80	2
82	1
84	1
85	1
86	3
88	1
89	1
90	1
91	2
97	3
103	1
104	2
108	2
109	1
115	1
131	1
134	1

My Department deals with large amounts of correspondence each year from both hon. Members and members of the public. In 1999, we replied to 17,703 letters from hon. Members. We aim to send a substantive reply to all correspondence as quickly as possible, and we are committed to monitoring and achieving a high standard of performance in this area.

SCOTLAND

Assisted Areas

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Network about the non-publication of the new assisted areas map of Great Britain. [111327]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* I have received representations from Highlands and Islands Enterprise about various aspects of the assisted area map proposals. At the present time, the absence of a new assisted area map should have little practical impact on the processing of applications for financial assistance to business developments in the Highlands and Islands.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what factors underlay his proposal that the 1993 assisted area map for the Highlands should be extended from 54 per cent. to 100 per cent. [111329]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Highlands and Islands Enterprise area was proposed as a whole for inclusion in the new assisted areas map in recognition of the problems arising from its population sparsity.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact on proposed business developments in the Highlands of the non-publication of the new assisted areas map of Great Britain. [111328]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* I understand that Highlands and Islands Enterprise had prepared on a contingency basis for the possibility that there might be a delay in approval of the new Assisted Areas map and issued formal advice to Local Enterprise Companies within its area in December 1999. At the present time, there is little practical impact on the processing of applications for financial assistance to business developments in the Highlands.

Highlands and Islands

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measurement of need he made in proposing the inclusion of the Inverness travel-to-work area in the proposed designation of the Highlands and Islands under Article 87(3)c (Tier 2) of the Amsterdam Treaty. [111330]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Highlands and Islands Enterprise area was proposed as a whole under Article 87(3)c in recognition of the problems resulting from its sparse population.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the value of regional selective assistance to enterprises in the Highlands and Islands paid in each quarter of 1999. [111331]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* In the quarter from January to March 1999, Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) payments to businesses in the Highlands and Islands Enterprise area amounted to £800,000. In the quarter April to June, no payments of RSA were made. From 1 July 1999, the administration of RSA has been the devolved responsibility of the Scottish Executive.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Rules Committee

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the *(a)* names, *(b)* qualifications, *(c)* experience and *(d)* specialist professional expertise of the members of the Rules Committee; for what term each member of the Committee is appointed; and what procedure is employed in the selection and appointment of members of the Committee. [111588]

Mr. Lock: This reply relates to the Civil Procedure Rule Committee established by the Civil Procedure Act 1997.

Lord Woolf, the master of the Rolls and Sir Richard Scott, Vice-Chancellor, are members of the Committee by virtue of the judicial offices they hold.

Under section 2(2) of the Civil Procedure Act 1997, the Lord Chancellor is required to appoint:

(a) One judge of the Supreme Court

Lord Justice May, a judge of the Court of Appeal. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2000.

(b) One Circuit Judge

Judge Richard Holman, designated civil judge in Manchester. Formerly a solicitor in private practice. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2000.

(c) One district judge

District Judge Godfrey Gypps. Sits mainly in Southend county court. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2001.

(d) One person who is a Master of the Supreme Court

Master John Leslie. Appointed deputy Master in 1992 and full-time Master in 1996. Originally appointed in July 1997 until July 1999. Re-appointed until July 2001.

(e) Three persons who have a Supreme Court qualification, including at least one with particular experience of practice in county courts

David Foskett QC, called to the Bar in 1972, taking Silk in 1991. Practises in commercial and common law and sits as a Deputy High Court Judge. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2001.

Michael Black QC, called to the Bar in 1978, taking Silk in 1995. Practises mainly in commercial law and professional liability claims arising from construction disputes. Appointed a Recorder in 1999. Appointed to fill a vacancy in February 2000 until August 2002.

Henrietta Manners, called to the Bar in 1981. Particular experience of practice in the county courts in general common law and landlord and tenant. Previously a member of the County Court Rule Committee and sits as a deputy district judge. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2000.

(f) Three persons who have been granted the right to conduct litigation in relation to all proceedings in the Supreme Court, including at least one with particular experience of practice in county courts

David Greene of Edwin Coe, Solicitors. Admitted as a solicitor in 1980 and became a partner in 1984. Now Senior Litigation Partner. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2000.

Peter Watson of Allen & Overy, Solicitors. Admitted as a solicitor in 1981 and became a partner in 1987. Specialises in commercial and administrative law litigation. Originally appointed in July 1997 until July 1999. Re-appointed until July 2001.

Peter Haworth, of Southerns, Solicitors. Admitted as a solicitor in 1975 and became a partner in 1978. Particular experience of practice in county courts in personal injuries, construction disputes and general civil litigation. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2001.

(g) One person with experience in and knowledge of consumer affairs

Harriet Kimbell. Associate Professor at the College of Law and member of the Consumers' Association Council since 1988. Appointed in July 1997 until July 2000.

(h) One person with experience in and knowledge of the lay advice sector

Olivia Morrison-Lyons. Manager of the Consumer and Money Advice Unit of Camden Citizen's Advice Bureau from 1982 to 1993. Originally appointed in July 1997 until July 1999. Re-appointed until July 2001.

The procedures for appointing members of the Committee are in accordance with the accepted principles on public appointments with advertisements in the press, the taking of references, the sifting and interviewing of candidates and the presence of an independent member on the Selection Board. Such consultation as is required by the Civil Procedure Act 1997 is undertaken.

Judges

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proportion of trials involved a change in the judge presiding in each of the last 10 years. [111990]

Jane Kennedy: This information is not held centrally, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Angela Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what monitoring the Lord Chancellor's Department undertakes of the training of judges. [112025]

Jane Kennedy: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board (JSB), which is an non-departmental public body funded by the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding, which defines the relationship of the JSB with the Lord Chancellor's Department, the JSB is required to draw up and publish, by 30 June each year, a report to the Lord Chancellor on its activities. Copies are placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Angela Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what procedures are in place for the continuous assessment of judges. [112026]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor is not persuaded that continuous assessment of full-time judges is necessary or desirable or consistent with judicial independence.

Angela Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment is made of judges' competence in interpretation of new legislation. [112027]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor only appoints judges who he is confident have the skills and experience suitable for judicial office, including the very basic ability to interpret new legislation. The Judicial Studies Board is running courses for judges on the Human Rights Act 1998 and all full-time and part-time judges are due to receive training in this Act before implementation in October 2000. Where judges err in law, the appellate courts are available to correct them.

Family Court Officers

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of the recommendations made by family court officers have been accepted by the courts in each of the last three years. [112310]

Jane Kennedy: We do not have information about what percentage of the recommendations made by family court officers have been accepted by the courts in each of the last three years. In all questions that come before the courts about the upbringing of a child, the courts are required to treat the welfare of the child concerned as their paramount consideration. Courts will take account of any recommendation made by a welfare officer, but are not bound to follow it.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Functions (Food)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if all food served at his Department's official functions meets the standards of production required of domestic producers. [109778]

Mr. Stringer: My Department and its agencies have offices, and hold official functions, in numerous locations in different parts of the country. Food is obtained from a range of professional catering undertakings appropriate to each occasion. It would be impracticable to establish that all such food meets the criteria of domestic production.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 1 March 2000

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 1 March. [111213]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meetings with Ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Prime Minister how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his office; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110676]

The Prime Minister: As at 1 April 1999, 55 members of the Senior Civil Service were from ethnic minority background (1.7 per cent.).

Information on ethnic origin in the Civil Service is collected on the understanding that it will be treated on a confidential basis. To protect the privacy of individual members of staff we do not disclose data relating to fewer than five people.

The Cabinet Office monitors ethnicity but not at individual unit level. The Cabinet Office and Number 10, which for these purposes are taken together, have fewer than five people of ethnic minority background in the Senior Civil Service.

Downing Street Receptions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Prime Minister if the cost of the Countryside Reception held at No. 10 Downing street on 2 February was borne from public funds. [112069]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Yes.

TREASURY

Stock Exchange

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he proposes to effect the transfer of the Competent Authority for listing from the London Stock Exchange to the Financial Services Authority. [112936]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Given the need for planning purposes to have a precise target date for the transfer of the Competent Authority for listing function, we have decided to make the transfer by means of Regulations made under the European Communities Act 1972. These Regulations are being laid in draft today for the approval of Parliament with the intention that the transfer should take place on 1 May. The proposed new legislative framework for the Competent Authority would then be brought into effect as soon as possible after the enactment of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the income from the vehicle excise duty levy in 1999. [111977]

Mr. Timms: Figures are available only on a financial year basis and are shown in table B9 of the 1999 pre-Budget Report, p.154.

Israel

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what investigations Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has conducted of imports to the UK during the past three years of wines produced in wineries located in *(a)* the Golan Heights and *(b)* the Israeli West Bank settlement of Barkan; and what its findings have been concerning imports under preferences during that period. [111882]

Dawn Primarolo: From examination of entry records Customs and Excise has identified small quantities of wines from the Golan Heights and the area Barkan. Details have been passed to the European Commission.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 447W, concerning imports from Israeli settlements in occupied territories, whether the documents referred to in the answer declared products imported to the United Kingdom in violation of Article 38 and the provisions of the Protocol on Rules of Origin of the EC Trade Agreement with Israel to have originated in Israel. [111874]

Dawn Primarolo: As indicated in my answer of 14 February, the documents failed to substantiate the alleged non-compliance with the provisions of the Agreement between the EC and Israel.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what post-import verification procedures Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has initiated with Israel's customs service for products imported from Israel following indications that the products in question may have been wholly obtained or significantly processed in territories occupied by Israel since 1967, including in Israeli settlements. [111883]

Dawn Primarolo: None.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has made of its ability to establish the origin of products that may have been produced in territories occupied by Israel since 1967 if Israel's customs misapply the origin rule protocol and the territorial clause in its agreements. [111884]

Dawn Primarolo: The European Commission is taking the lead in establishing the origin of products imported into the European Union, that may have been produced in territories occupied by Israel since 1967. The Commission has not yet provided an assessment of the likely outcome of this initiative.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what investigations Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has conducted and what information it has obtained concerning carpets imported to the UK under preferences from a manufacturing firm in the Israeli West Bank settlement of Barkan, or carrying the name or trademark of such a firm. [111879]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs and Excise has identified a number of consignments of carpets from the area Barkan which have been imported into the UK under preferences. Details have been passed to the European Commission.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 447W, what the information was concerning products processed in Israeli settlements in occupied territories which may have been imported into the UK in violation of Article 38 and the provisions of the Protocol on Rules of Origin of the EC Trade Agreement with Israel; and if Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has identified *(a)* importations to the UK under preferences of dates from the Israeli exporters in question and *(b)* the UK importers and consignees. [111881]

Dawn Primarolo: It comprised details obtained by the European Commission of a range of goods together with information from another source about dates produced in Israeli settlements. Customs and Excise has identified importations into the UK under preferences of dates of Israeli origin but, as indicated in my answer of 14 February, scrutiny of the customs entry documents has failed to substantiate the alleged non-compliance with the provisions of the EC-Israel trade agreement.

Agriculture (Fuel Tax)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the total revenue which the Treasury received in each of the last five years from the agricultural sector of the economy; and how much of this arose from taxation on fuel. [111789]

Mr. Timms: The estimated amount of revenue received from the agricultural sector (including the forestry and fishing sectors) for each of the last five years is:

£ million

	PAYE and NICS	*Other Taxes*[1]	*Total*
1994–95	1,000	–250	750
1995–96	1,090	–315	775
1996–97	780	–245	535
1997–98	n/a	40	n/a
1998–99	n/a	–140	n/a

[1] Capital Gains Tax, Corporation Tax, Self-employed Income Tax and VAT.

Note:

Figures of income tax and national insurance contributions collected via PAYE cover employers classified to agriculture, forestry or fishing. They are available only to 1996–97, due to problems with the NIRS2 computer system.

In addition to the revenues shown, stamp duty is payable on transactions of agricultural property, but cannot be separately identified.

It is not possible to identify the amount of excise duty or VAT relating to fuel in the agricultural sector.

DEFENCE

Video Conferencing

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what use experience of video conferencing exists in *(a)* the Army and *(b)* the RAF; and what were the locations linked and the bandwidth used; [110851]

(2) if he will list the Royal Navy ships which have video conferencing facilities, indicating the bandwidth used and the locations where video conferencing has been *(a)* successful and *(b)* unsuccessful for each ship. [110852]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 February 2000:* VideoTeleConferencing (VTC) is used both operationally and for normal business across Defence. Because it is primarily used in a joint environment, the questions are answered together.

HMS Illustrious, Invincible and Fearless are permanently fitted with VTC facilities. HMS Chatham, Campbeltown, Cumberland and Cornwall are also fitted to receive VTC, but the terminal equipment is not carried routinely unless the ship is in Flag Ship role. They typically operate at bandwidths of either 64 kilobits per second or 128 kilobits per second and use dedicated military satellite services, although some ships can also use Inmarsat if required.

The Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) is the main sponsor of deployed, operational VTC. VTC was first deployed on operations in 1997 in the form of a capability trial. The trial was successful and VTC is now routinely deployed on operations to provide the Chief of Joint Operations with one of his primary command tools. The PJHQ has a significant VTC capability and is able to conduct secure VTC with a wide range of UK and allied Headquarters and deployable formations. In addition, HQ Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps, for which UK is framework nation, is in the process of being equipped with VTC. Secure high quality VTC links also exist between the PJHQ and the Defence Crisis Management Centre that are used to conduct crisis planning and to provide operational updates to Defence chiefs. The bandwidth employed by operational VTC services varies between 64 kilobits per second and 384 kilobits per second. It forms part of the overall information exchange requirements package for a deployed formation which takes account of the operational requirement, whether or not the end user is in a mobile or static environment, and the available capacity in the overall communications planning scenario.

Within the Royal Air Force, VTC systems exist in the main Headquarters of Strike Command and Personnel and Training Command among other locations. Additionally, a Closed Circuit Television System is used in Headquarters Strike Command to support operational briefings for senior staff. Commercially available systems are employed which typically utilise a bandwidth of between 128 kilobits per second and 384 kilobits per second, connected via Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) lines. These allow dial-up connections to be established to other sites with similar facilities.

Within the Army, VTC is being used for a variety of applications including communication between the main locations of the Adjutant General's staff in Upavon, Glasgow and London and also within Headquarters Land

and at a number of garrisons. Again these systems typically utilise a bandwidth of between 128 kilobits per second and 384 kilobits per second. Initiatives are currently being studied to extend this connectivity to provide VTC facilities in other major Army headquarters to support a variety of business activities in the future.

One specific application under investigation is the use of VTC in support of Custody Hearings and Summary Appeal Courts under the control of the Courts Martial Administrative Office (CMAO) to support the processes set out in the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. On 18 February 2000, CMAO staffs completed a two week trial which included links to sites in Germany, Brunei and Canada. The purposes of this trial were: to demonstrate to the Judge Advocate General's department the proposed Custody Hearing process using VTC; to prove the principle of using VTC for Custody Hearings; to examine the possibility of taking evidence from witnesses in overseas theatres and to examine the possibility of conducting Directions Hearings by VTC. The trial report is expected to conclude that the aims of the study were achieved although some processes and procedures would need to be refined. The report will recommend that a detailed Statement of Requirement be prepared for a VTC system to be procured and installed later this year.

In the event, however unlikely, that a soldier needs legal advice on a Summary Dealing matter while in an operational theatre, it will firstly be sought from other Service lawyers in theatre (RAF or RN). Should these not be available then the use of telephone or VTC will be made available subject to operational priorities. If the matter was sufficiently serious for the CO to believe that detention is necessary, he will almost certainly wish the individual to be removed to a rear area where he can be appropriately dealt with.

Computers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 372W, on computers (1) if he will list the eight different categories of misuse by which internal hacking incidents are categorised; and the number of hacking incidents by category for each of the last five years; [111112]

(2) what information is held on his Department's incident recording system about each internal hacking incident over the last five years. [111110]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* My Department is a contributing Department to the Government wide Unified Incident Reporting and Alert Scheme (UNIRAS). Internal hacking incidents are categorised into the following eight types of misuse: access denied; browsing; password abuse; privilege abuse; data stolen/disclosed; files deleted/damaged; fraud; other.

The number of internal hacking incidents, by category, for each of the last five years is:

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Access denied	0	1	0	3	1
Browsing	0	1	0	0	0
Password abuse	0	0	0	1	0
Privilege abuse	0	5	2	1	1
Data stolen/disclosed	0	2	0	0	1
Files deleted/damaged	1	2	2	1	0
Fraud	0	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0

The following information is recorded against each hacking incident:

installation/system, main use of the system, date, intent/success, effect of incident, assets compromised, additional free text on why, how and actions taken.

Bloody Sunday

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 648W, on Bloody Sunday, what efforts his Department is making to recover the 10 rifles which were used on Bloody Sunday and were identified as having been sold to private companies. [111712]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The Ministry of Defence/West Mercia Police investigation, which I announced on 17 February, is urgently investigating the whereabouts of the Bloody Sunday rifles that have been sold and whether it might be possible to recover them.

Bagshot Park

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 729W, concerning Bagshot Park, what payment was made on surrender of the property; and what its value was at that time. [111941]

Dr. Moonie: In accordance with the terms of our contractual arrangements with the Crown Estate, my Department made a payment of £1.8 million on the surrender of Bagshot Park. The value of the property is not a matter for the Ministry of Defence.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Affordable Drugs

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with pharmaceutical companies about ensuring that developing countries have access to affordable drugs. [111509]

Mr. Byers: The issue of healthcare in developing countries and access to medicines was raised at the recent WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle, and while there I met representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and NGOs. Since Seattle I have received representatives on this issue from pharmaceutical companies and NGOs.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much ECGD cover was granted in respect of *(a)* heavily indebted poor countries, *(b)* lower middle income countries and *(c)* higher middle income countries in each of the financial years (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98 and (iv) 1998–99 indicating in each case the percentages for civil aerospace and defence cover. [111008]

Mr. Byers: The following table lists the information requested on the basis of the country categorisations which informed ECGD's recent evidence to the International Development Committee. For completeness, ECGD has included details for all Low Income countries (not all of which are HIPCs) where ECGD cover has been provided.

ECGD cover for HIPC, LMI and UMI countries

	Total business (£ million)	*Defence (%)*	*Civil (%)*	*Aero (%)*
FY 1995–96				
HIPC	190	0	100	0
LMI	2,874	15	82	3
UMI	1,086	47	36	17
FY 1996–97				
HIPC	161	0	63	37
LMI	1,950	8	77	15
UMI	465	52	30	18
FY 1997–98				
HIPC	17	0	100	0
LMI	1,156	10	44	46
UMI	914	29	67	5
FY 1998–99				
HIPC	21	0	100	0
LMI	924	3	56	41
UMI	1,249	84	15	1

Notes:
1. HIPC: Highly Indebted Poor Countries
2. LMI: Low Middle Income
3. UMI: Upper Middle Income

It should be noted that countries do move from one category to another. The case records available do not indicate the category of the market at the time the guarantees were issued.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the 10 companies in receipt of the highest level of export credit guarantees for the financial year 1998–99, indicating the amount of cover given to each company and listing the projects for which it was given. [111009]

Mr. Caborn: The information requested is in the following table:

Value of ECGD cover in respect of guarantees issued in 1998–99—top ten exporters

Company	*Nature of projects*	*Markets*	*Value of ECGD cover (£ million)*
BAe Systems	Civil Aerospace	Belgium, Canada, China, Croatia, El Salvador, Greece, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, Portugal, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United States, Uzbekistan	769
BAe Systems	Defence	Saudi Arabia, Republic of Korea	1,020
Marconi Communications; Marconi Electronic Systems	Radio Communications and Defence	India, Sweden, Brunei, United States, Japan	607
Mitsui Babcock	Power Station	China	264
Kvaerner	Media Production and Blast Furnace Equipment	Egypt, Republic of Korea	137
Vickers	Defence	Oman	131
ALSTOM	Power Generation Equipment	Mexico, Anguilla, Saint Kitts and Nevis	75
Rolls Royce	Aero Engines	China, United Arab Emirates	73
Bechtel	Power Generation	China	54
Dennis	Buses	Hong Kong	51
Coflexip	Offshore Pipelines	Brazil	38

Values shown in respect of BAe Systems include also amounts in respect of Rolls Royce aero engines.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Clean Development

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions have taken place outside the remit of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change between his Department and the Governments of developing countries relating to the design of the Clean Development Mechanism. [112170]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

Since the Fifth Conference of the Parties in Bonn in October-November 1999, there have been no discussions relating to the design of the Clean Development Mechanism between members of the UK Government and governments of developing countries. However, the intensified process in the run-up to the Sixth Conference of the Parties in November 2000 includes several opportunities for such discussions by Ministers and officials, both within and outside the formal UNFCCC process.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's definition of clean development. [112171]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

In the context of the Clean Development Mechanism established by the Kyoto Protocol, there is no agreed international definition of "clean development". However, under the Kyoto Protocol, Clean Development Mechanism projects are defined as those that contribute to the overall objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—to reduce and stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere—and assist the developing country host in achieving sustainable development.

Nuclear Power Projects

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy with regard to nuclear power projects as eligible projects in the Clean Development Mechanism, currently developed under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. [112168]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

The Government believe that all projects under the Clean Development Mechanism must contribute to the overall objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—to reduce and stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere—and assist the developing country host in achieving sustainable development. The detailed rules that will govern the Clean Development Mechanism are due to be agreed at the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in November this year. In advance of that, the Government have noted the case for prior exclusions as a way to ensure environmental integrity, and also attach importance to the need for developing countries to play a key role in determining their own sustainable development needs and priorities.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from *(a)* Commonwealth and *(b)* other Governments concerning the UK's policy on the eligibility of nuclear power projects under the rules for the Clean Development Mechanism. [112169]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

The UK Government have had recent representations from Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth Ministers regarding the potential exclusion of nuclear power projects from the Clean Development Mechanism. At the Fifth Conference of the Parties (CoP5) in November 1999, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions received representations from Indian and Chinese Ministers. Both Ministers were concerned that the UK should not support specific exclusions from the Clean Development Mechanism and that the host developing country should determine whether projects met their own sustainable development aims. At CoP5, some EU Ministers and I briefly discussed project eligibility for the Clean Development Mechanism. I understand that the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has not received any representations.

Overseas Missions

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the differences in the activities of a British Council office and a Foreign and Commonwealth Office mission abroad. [112005]

Mr. Hain: The British Council is the United Kingdom's principal agency for cultural relations abroad. Its overseas offices engage in a range of people-to-people activities in pursuit of the FCO's cultural policy objectives. Foreign and Commonwealth Office missions overseas engage primarily in government-to-government relations across the range of the Department's objectives. The activities of British Council offices and our diplomatic missions are carefully co-ordinated to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication or overlap.

UK/China Forum

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the role of the UK/China Forum in creating closer links between the UK and China. [112015]

Mr. Battle: The UK-China Forum is a high-level non-Governmental organisation, whose membership is drawn from senior individuals in the worlds of politics, business and industry, the law, education, science and technology, the media and the arts. The purpose is to develop contacts at all levels between Britain and China, with the aim of building stronger links between the two countries.

The first meeting of the Forum, held in London on 21 and 22 October 1999, identified a number of areas where bilateral contacts and joint activities could be strengthened. Preparations are now underway for the second meeting of the Forum, to be held in Beijing in October 2000.

Istanbul Summit

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list his Department's programme and that of its Agencies to implement the proposals set out in paragraph 44 of his report on the OSCE Istanbul summit relating to police activities and training. [112130]

Mr. Vaz: We currently provide 10 UK police officers to the Police Monitor Group within the OSCE Mission to Croatia. Their role is to ensure the local police force continues to improve in its professionalism. In addition, we also provided 40 UK police officers to the OSCE Police Training School in Kosovo. Their role is to recruit and train a multi-ethnic Kosovo Police Service in order to help them gain the skills and equipment needed to engage effectively in police activities.

Congo

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what role Britain is playing in international efforts to bring peace to the Democratic Republic of Congo and the surrounding states, with particular reference to Rwanda and Uganda; and if he will make a statement. [111782]

Mr. Hain: Britain is playing an active and constructive role in international efforts to resolve the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our aim now is to: help all the parties, including Rwanda and Uganda, implement the Lusaka Agreement; support the early deployment of the UN observer force to DRC as soon as conditions allow; and get the national dialogue on the future of DRC under way; and keep DRC at the top of the international agenda.

We are also providing practical support: British officers are deployed in the region as part of the UN mission; and we have made contributions of £160,000 for the Joint Military Commission, and £25,000 for the National Dialogue. We are ready to do more, as the parties actively demonstrate their commitment to the Lusaka Agreement.

Child Soldiers

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the numbers of child soldiers in Sudan; what assessment he has made of the number of other countries in Africa where child soldiers are being used in significant numbers; and what steps the Government are taking to alleviate this problem. [112324]

Mr. Hain: There are no reliable estimates of the number of child soldiers in Sudan. Over the past year, reports of the use of child soldiers in Africa, including internal conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Angola.

We are committed to bringing to an end the use of child soldiers which is in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our approach is based on a combination of: support for international efforts in this field, in particular the work of the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict; strengthening international standards; urging the governments concerned to tackle this abuse; and, with the Department for International Development, support for practical measures to address this issue.

Kosovo

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many international police officers have been deployed to Kosovska Mitrovica. [112103]

Mr. Hain: The United Nations report that on 28 February 2000 there were 541 international police officers in Kosovska Mitrovica.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many police from the United Kingdom have been deployed, and how many have been pledged to be deployed, to *(a)* Kosovo, *(b)* Pristina and *(c)* Kosovska Mitrovica. [112104]

Mr. Hain: The United Kingdom has deployed 60 police officers to the United Nations International Police (UNIP) in Kosovo. In response to a UN request, we are increasing that contribution to 120 officers. We have also recently increased our contribution to the OSCE-run school training the future Kosovo police service from 32 to 40 officers. We are also considering deployment of additional specialists to help combat organised crime in Kosovo.

The United Nations is responsible for determining where UNIP officers are deployed. Of the 60 UK officers with UNIP, 59 are based in Pristina and the surrounding area (the most densely populated region of Kosovo).

A senior UK police officer has been deployed full-time to Mitrovica (as the Deputy Regional Commander) and several officers have been on short-term secondments to the Mitrovica region. 230 UK troops, from the Royal Green Jackets, were also deployed to Mitrovica between 15 and 22 February.

British Council, Africa

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about funding for the British Council in Africa. [112327]

Mr. Hain: The grant in aid allocated by the British Council to its African directorates from 1994–95 to 1999–2000 has increased in cash terms from £13 million to £14 million (though this represents a 6 per cent. reduction in real terms). However, the overall level of activity undertaken by the Council in Africa over the same period has declined from £106 million to £59 million, as the result of a downturn in the management of development and training contracts.

Sierra Leone

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations have been made to him by the United Nations requesting troops for the Sierra Leone peacekeeping operation. [112326]

Mr. Hain: We strongly support the UN's efforts in Sierra Leone to create a climate of confidence for the implementation of the Lomé Peace Agreement.

We were asked by the UN to provide military observers and logistical support to the UN peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL. We currently deploy 15 military observers to the force Observer Group, including the Group's Chief of Staff, and an eight-man movement control detachment to assist the rapid deployment of troop contingents in-country. We have also offered the UN assistance with airlift of troops and/or equipment.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the second report of the Secretary-General, pursuant to Security Council resolution 12780 (1999) on the United Nations missions in Sierra Leone, in particular the report's assessment of the United Nations' ability to maintain a major military presence in Sierra Leone. [112325]

Mr. Hain: We agree with the Secretary-General's assessment that the establishment and maintenance of security in Sierra Leone is essential to the success of the Lomé Peace Agreement. We therefore supported his recommendation that the UN peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL, be substantially expanded to take on some of the security tasks formerly carried out by the departing Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS)' peacekeeping force, ECOMOG. We strongly backed UN Security Council Resolution 1289 of 7 February which authorised the deployment of up to 11,100 troops and observers.

We also agree with the Secretary-General that the UN, already under considerable resource pressure, will not be able to maintain a major military presence in Sierra Leone for a prolonged period; and that the responsibility for the success of the peace process ultimately lies with the people and leaders of Sierra Leone.

In order to help Sierra Leone to take responsibility for its own security, we are working closely with the Government of Sierra Leone to help rebuild new, democratically accountable Sierra Leone armed forces, and a new police force.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the situation in Sierra Leone; and if he will make a statement. [111982]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 762.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the state of human rights in Sri Lanka; and if he will make a statement. [111983]

Mr. Hain: Although the Sri Lankan Government have taken some steps to improve their human rights record, we remain concerned about continuing violations and failures to prosecute violators. We are also concerned about human rights abuses committed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and reports that they are still using child soldiers. We will continue to raise our concerns and stress the need for effective machinery to protect and promote human rights.

Turkey

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received concerning disputes between Turkey and neighbouring states over water resources. [112097]

Mr. Vaz: The governments of Syria, Iraq and the League of Arab States have registered their concern about the potential impact of the Ilisu Dam on their water supply from the Tigris river. We have also received several letters from NGOs on the same subject. Water is a sensitive issue in the region because of scarcity of supply. The Ilisu Dam is, however, a hydro-electric project, not an irrigation proposal. Continued flow of water would be needed for the dam to function.

Sombrero (Wildlife)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the ecological value of *(a)* reptiles, *(b)* grasshoppers, *(c)* beetles, *(d)* carned flies, *(e)* scorpions and *(f)* lizards on the Island of Sombrero. [111172]

Mr. Hain: No assessment of these matters has yet been carried out. However, information on the ecological value of the fauna and flora of Sombrero is being gathered for the review of Beal Aerospace's proposal for a commercial space rocket launch complex on the island. This review is being carried out for the Government of Anguilla by a UK Planning Inspector. It will cover material in the Environmental Assessment submitted by Beal Aerospace as well as other reports, including ones submitted by the Royal Society for the protection of Birds on invertebrates and lizards.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds about the development of Sombrero Island near Anguilla. [111171]

Mr. Hain: The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (and others) have made a number of representations to HMG and to the Government of Anguilla expressing concern about the Environmental Assessment submitted by Beal Aerospace in support of its proposal to develop a commercial rocket launch site on Sombrero. At the request of the Government of Anguilla we have therefore arranged for a UK Planning Inspector to review the evidence, so that decisions can be taken with the benefit of his advance on environmental aspects of the proposal.

The most recent representations followed surveys of the island in November 1999 and included reports by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds on Seabirds, by Fauna and Flora International on Lizards and by Dr. Michael Ivie of the University of Montana on Invertebrates.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the escalators that were not working on 14 February 2000,

on the London Underground; for what reasons each was not working; and what measures will be pursued to ensure that all escalators are in full working order. [110745]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* This is an operational matter for London Transport. However, I understand that at 14 February 2000, 47 escalators out of 381 were out of service.

These are as follows:

Station	*Number of escalators*	*Reason*
Old Street	1	[1]—
Oxford Circus	1	[1]—
Victoria	1	[1]—
Notting Hill Gate	2	[1]—
Warren Street	1	[1]—
Bethnal Green	1	[1]—
Kings Cross	1	[1]—
Holborn	2	[1]—
St. John's Wood	1	[1]—
Tottenham Court Road	1	[1]—
Hyde Park Corner	1	[1]—
Manor House	2	[2]—
Wood Green	1	[2]—
London Bridge	1	Power supply problems
Canada Water	4	Station construction work
Shepherds Bush	1	[3]—
Oxford Circus	1	[3]—
Waterloo	1	[3]—
Old Street	1	[3]—
South Wimbledon	1	[3]—
Clapham North	1	[3]—
Clapham South	1	[3]—
Euston	2	[3]—
Baker Street	3	[3]—
Oxford Circus	4	[3]—
Kings Cross	1	[3]—
Brixton	1	[3]—
Vauxhall	1	[3]—
Walthamstow	2	[3]—
Highbury	1	[3]—
Victoria	1	[3]—
Seven Sisters	1	[3]—
Charing Cross	1	[3]—

[1] Planned replacement or refurbishment

[2] Tracking and guidance system repairs

[3] Replacement of machine drive shaft

London Underground is implementing a new programme of expenditure on escalator maintenance and repair of nearly £140 million over the years 1998–99 to 2000–01 (1998–99 £26 million, 1999–2000 £44.8 million, 2000–01 £66.1 million).

Revenue Support Grant

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the percentage contribution from central Government funds towards local authority expenditure in England in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; and if he will give the estimated percentage in 2000–01. [111617]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is as follows.

Government funds as a percentage of English local authority revenue expenditure [1]

Year	*Central government funds* [2] *(Percentage)*	*Non-domestic rates* [3] *(Percentage)*
1997–98[4]	50.4	25.5
1998–99[4]	50.3	24.9
1999–2000[5]	48.1	25.3

[1] Local authority expenditure is defined as "revenue expenditure to compare with TSS" which is expenditure to be met from Revenue Support Grant, Specific and Special Grants in Aggregate External Finance, SSA Reduction Grant, Police Grant. Central Support Protection Grant (1999–2001), Non-domestic rates, council tax and appropriations from reserves.

[2] Central Government Funds comprise Revenue Support Grant. Police Grant and Central Support Protection Grant (1999–00 to 2000–01).

[3] This represents the distributable amount from the non-domestic rates pool and City Offset.

[4] Outturn

[5] Budget

Note:

The percentages for 2000–01 will depend on how much local authorities spend.

Clean Development

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the Government's policy on the handling of radioactive waste from nuclear power stations in developing countries: and what account he has taken of the environmental and health impact of radioactive waste in formulating his position on the eligibility of nuclear power projects for inclusion in the Clean Development Mechanism. [112075]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have made no generic assessment of the impacts of radioactive waste in the context of the suitability of nuclear power projects for inclusion in the Clean Development Mechanism. Although international rules for the Clean Development Mechanism have yet to be agreed, the Government have noted the case for prior exclusions of certain project types, including nuclear power, as a way to ensure environmental integrity. The Government also attach importance to the need for developing countries to play a key role in determining their own sustainable development needs and priorities.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the Government's policy on the design of the Clean Development Mechanism being developed under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, with particular reference to the inclusion of nuclear power and large hydro projects in the Mechanism. [112074]

Mr. Meacher: This Government believe that all projects under the Clean Development Mechanism must contribute to the overall objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—to reduce and stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere—and assist the developing country host in achieving sustainable development. The design of the Clean Development Mechanism, including the eligibility of certain project types, will not be agreed until the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in November 2000. In advance of that, the Government have noted the case for prior exclusions of certain project types as a way to ensure environmental integrity, and also attach

importance to the need for developing countries to play a key role in determining their own sustainable development needs and priorities.

Biodiversity

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he expects the Government to sign up to the OECD agreement on The Global Biodiversity Information Facility; [111991]

(2) what commitments the Government have made to implement the terms of the agreement on The Global Biodiversity Information Facility. [111992]

Mr. Meacher: We recognise that there is a need for global biodiversity data to be collected and managed, and therefore used to underpin the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The National Biodiversity Network, to which the Government have announced a £250,000 contribution, aim to do this for the UK. We recognise too that there is already much work going on globally producing many results and outputs. However, because there is no set protocol of compilation or standardisation of such work, its full potential, particularly when coupled with modern information technology, is not being realised.

The OECD has usefully identified this gap through its Mega Science Forum and has carried out some preliminary work in suggesting ways for promoting a mechanism to meet these needs.

Plans for the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) are still being drafted and will not be ready for adoption and signature until the end of the year. We have, however, demonstrated our interest by playing a full part in the discussions so far and shall continue to do so. Our aim is to secure a GBIF which will meet its objectives cost effectively, and through collaboration with all information providers and collectors, all interested countries, and other arrangements and institutions including those associated with the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Buses

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the effect of introducing buses with a maximum width of 2.55 m on existing bus services, with particular reference to the impact of such a change on the number of bus routes that would have to be discontinued. [112408]

Mr. Hill: Following an extensive consultation, the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 were amended in 1995 (SI 1995 No. 3051) to allow vehicles to operate at a maximum width of 2.55 m. No problems were raised at the time of the consultation in respect of this increase. The dimension is a maximum allowance and, therefore, it is permissible to operate buses at less than 2.55 m on routes that require narrower vehicles to be used.

Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy in respect of the addition of methyl tertiary butyl ether to petrol; and if he will make a statement. [111892]

Mr. Hill: The Government remain neutral on the use of MTBE in petrol. It can provide worthwhile improvements in air quality through the reduction of vehicle pollutants, e.g. carbon monoxide by 25 per cent. and hydrocarbons by 15 per cent. On the other hand, not all petrol sold in the United Kingdom contains MTBE. The average concentration of MTBE in UK petrol is about 1 per cent., well below that permitted under EU law.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the maximum concentration of methyl tertiary butyl ether allowed in petrol. [111893]

Mr. Hill: Directive 98/70/EC stipulates that member states may not prevent, restrict or discourage production, marketing and free movement of blended petrol that contains 15 per cent. or less MTBE by volume. This requirement has been implemented in UK law by the Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) Regulations 1999.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the locations where methyl tertiary butyl ether has been found in groundwater supplies in excess of maximum safe levels in the past three years. [111894]

Mr. Mullin: Environment Agency monitoring of groundwater has not encountered any concentrations of MTBE which the Agency considers excessive. The Agency is currently undertaking a research project on the incidence of MTBE in England and Wales, the results of which will be available this summer.

Road Safety

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made in developing the Government's road safety strategy; and if he will make a statement. [112908]

Mr. Hill: Today, we have published our road safety strategy, "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone". This sets stretching new targets to reduce the number of casualties on our roads, particularly child deaths and injuries. By 2010 we want to see a 40 per cent. overall reduction in the number of people killed or seriously injured and a 50 per cent. reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured, compared with the average for 1994–98. We also want to see a 10 per cent. reduction in the rate of slight injuries, measured per 100 million vehicle kilometres.

Measures to achieve these objectives include:

expecting local authorities to use their powers to introduce self-enforcing 20 mph zones around schools and in residential areas;

a robust package of measures to further reduce drink driving;

strengthening enforcement of drug driving, including a commitment to legislate to give police the powers to test for drugs at the roadside;

consulting the public on a package of measures designed to encourage young and new drivers to take a more structured approach to learning to drive;

continuing to monitor the driving test to ensure it is sufficiently stretching and appropriate for modern driving conditions;

developing information schemes and advice for older drivers and publicity on the dangers of driving while using a mobile phone;

expecting a 30 mph speed limit to be the norm for villages;

increasing resources for Local Transport Plans, which will include local road safety plans and targets, to £1 billion next year;

setting up a Road Safety Advisory Panel which will include representatives of the main stakeholders and will help us to review our targets and strategy; and

raising the standard of road safety education, particularly promoting child pedestrian training in deprived areas, where we know children are at greater risk.

Enforcement of road traffic law will have a major part to play in improving road safety. The Home Office is conducting a major review of all road traffic penalties, including those for speeding and careless driving, which will report in due course.

The Government's detailed review of speed policy has also been published today. "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone" reflects the findings of this review. It does not recommend blanket changes to existing speed limits, but acknowledges that there is a place for lower limits in specific areas where there is an accident problem.

Copies of the documents published today—the Government's detailed review of speed policy; the Government's response to the ETR Select Committee's report, "Young and Newly Qualified Drivers: Standards and Training"; the Government's response to the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety's report, "Road Traffic Law and Enforcement; the Highways Agency's safety plan, "Making the network safer—Highways Agency strategic plan for safety" and a report by the Transport Research Laboratory, "The numerical context for setting national casualty reduction targets"—have all been placed in the Library.

Motorcycle Licensing

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to revise motorcycle licensing rules following the safer motorcycling consultation exercise undertaken by the Driving Standards Agency last year. [112909]

Mr. Hill: The document, "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone", which is published today, sets out the broad context for how we propose to deliver road safety improvements for motorcyclists. A detailed report of the decisions taken in response to the consultation exercise has also been issued today, and I shall place copies in the Library of the House.

We are removing unnecessary restrictions while improving training and testing for learner riders. We shall abolish the rule that means learner riders lose their provisional licence after two years, and we shall improve the training they receive. New licences will be valid until age 70 years, providing the rider holds a current training certificate. New car drivers will have basic safety training before riding a moped.

British Waterways Board

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the External Financing Limit for the British Waterways Board. [112973]

Mr. Mullin: The 1999–2000 External Financing Limit for the British Waterways Board will be increased by £340,000 from £58,690,000 to £59,030,000. This will enable them to replace a life expired pumping facility at Gloucester Docks. It will be funded by an increase in grant in aid to the Board arising from savings elsewhere on Class III, Vote 3.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets for the Millennium dome have been sold from outlets based in Wales to date; and what percentage they represent of overall sales to date. [110849]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 28 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 85W. This represents around 1.16 per cent. of the total sales to 6 February.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he has revised his estimate that the Millennium dome will attract 12 million visitors this year. [112050]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company continues to aim for 12 million visitors for the year.

Right of Reply

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to introduce a statutory right of reply in respect of factual inaccuracies in the media. [109996]

Janet Anderson: The Government have no plans to introduce a statutory right of reply in respect of factual inaccuracies in the media. We believe that current self-regulatory arrangements on the media are working satisfactorily.

Tourism Summit

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what is the budget for his Tourism Summit; [112086]

(2) what is the catering budget for the Tourism Summit. [112085]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The budget for the Summit is £1,000. This includes the cost of catering, which will be provided by the in-house catering service at the Globe Theatre. We have chosen the most economical of the lunch options available.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the agenda for the Tourism Summit. [112079]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* There are four main parts to the agenda. Ministers collectively will review the progress made in implementing Tomorrow's Tourism, and consider what ought to be done over the next year. There will be a progress report on the work of the better Regulation Task Force in this area, and a discussion of its implications. Progress in improving accommodation quality following the launch of the harmonised gradings will be discussed, and Ministers will receive the report of the Tourism Consumer Working Group and decide on their response to it. As promised in the original strategy document, we will then publish a report setting out our conclusions on progress to date and detailed recommendations for the future.

Dome Celebrations (Transport)

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on transport arrangements for the dome celebrations on new year's eve 1999. [105980]

Janet Anderson: Over 10,000 guests were invited to the dome opening celebration. Some of those arriving via Stratford suffered lengthy delays, although everyone arrived in time for the opening show. The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) and the Metropolitan police have apologised for the delays and NMEC has offered free dome tickets to all those who used Stratford.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Public Services (Modernisation)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for taking forward work on the modernisation of public services. [112802]

Mr. Nick Brown: Like all members of this Government, I am committed to delivering efficient and responsive modern public services that provide excellence for the many, and not just the few. My Department has published a booklet today on what it has done and is planning to do to take forward the Government's long-term programme of reform to modernise the public service. These plans, which will evolve over the coming months, will lead to changes in the way MAFF does its business. Copies of this booklet, "MAFF's Part in Modernising Government", are being placed in the Library of the House.

Modernising Government gives MAFF an opportunity to deliver better services to our many customers. We will make the most of this opportunity.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many times bad weather was forecast for planned sailings of ships carrying live sheep for export from Dover Port to the continent in 1999; how many times his inspectors discussed the weather with the master of vessels carrying live sheep; how many such sailings were undertaken when winds were force 7 or higher or when the state of the sea was rough; and how many such sailings were postponed due to bad weather. [111373]

Mr. Morley: Ministry staff track forecasts of weather and sea conditions on all occasions when there are plans to take live food animals out of Dover by sea. The trigger for the Department's inspection staff at Dover to initiate discussions with the master of the vessel is a clear forecast, when the master imminently intends to sail with animals, that force 7 winds and/or rough sea conditions are likely to prevail. Inspection staff discuss the conditions with the master of the vessel to ensure that the master has exercised his judgment as to whether animals are likely to be caused injury or unnecessary suffering as a result of weather and/or sea conditions likely to be encountered during the voyage (as required by article 4(2) of the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997). The 1999 discussions were initiated with the master on 24 occasions. Thirteen sailings commenced in force 6–7 winds and/or rough sea conditions and nine in calmer conditions. Two sailings were postponed.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many notices were served by his staff under Article 18 of the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 at Dover Port in respect of live sheep destined for export; how many such sheep were removed at his inspectors' instructions from livestock vehicles at Dover Port and for what reasons; and how many documentary queries were made by his inspectors at Dover Port in respect of consignments of live sheep destined for export in 1999; [111371]

(2) how many *(a)* live sheep and *(b)* live pigs destined for export from the United Kingdom in 1999 were declared to be unfit to travel by (i) his inspectors at Dover Port and (ii) Local Veterinary Inspectors when carrying out inspections prior to issuing an export health certificate. [111372]

Mr. Morley: Seventy-eight (78) notices were served by MAFF staff during 1999 at Dover Port on consignments of slaughter/further fattening sheep. 257 sheep were removed. 160 of these were removed to improve stocking densities; 82 were removed because they were unfit; 15 dead animals were removed. There were 19 documentary queries.

Separate figures for animals declared unfit for travel by Local Veterinary Inspectors are available only from 31 May 1999 when changes to pre-export inspection arrangements were introduced. Between then and 31 December 1999 12,558 sheep and 188 pigs were rejected as unfit to travel.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has taken a decision in the case of Senator Pinochet. [110636]

Mr. Straw: I expect to make a decision in the case of Senator Pinochet at 8.00 am tomorrow. I will give full reasons for my decision.

Waterhouse Tribunal

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he was told by the Waterhouse Tribunal of the urgent need to instruct police authorities to search for those persons named as being unsuitable to work with children; and if he will make a statement. [111370]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Waterhouse Tribunal made no such proposal. The desirability of tracing those concerned was recognised by the Government on publication of the report.

CS Spray

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will suspend the use of CS spray on people known to be in mental distress until research into the effects of CS on people using neuroleptic drugs has been carried out. [111803]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police officers need some means of protection against attacks, even when committed by people who are mentally disturbed, and the safety of CS spray to all concerned must be compared with that of alternatives, such as physical restraint or use of batons, which themselves involve an element of risk. Nor is it always clear when an attacker is suffering from a mental disorder which might require medication. The Guidance on the use of CS spray in such circumstances are set out in paragraphs 6.5, 8.4 and 8.5 of the guidance published by the Association of Chief Police Officers on this subject, a copy of which is in the Library.

Police Radio Communications Project

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on the Police Service Radio Communications Project; and if he will make a statement. [112636]

Mr. Straw: On 13 January, I laid before Parliament a Departmental minute notifying a non-statutory liability arising from the issue by the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO) of a letter of instruction to proceed to British Telecom plc. This letter authorised them to invest in the project infrastructure, pending satisfactory conclusions of the final contract negotiations. I can now confirm that yesterday evening PITO signed a contract with British Telecom plc for the provision of the Public Safety Radio Communications Service (PSRCS) to all police forces in England, Wales and Scotland. I will be announcing shortly further details on the scope and timetable of the project.

Racing Greyhounds

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what safeguards exist concerning the welfare of racing greyhounds *(a)* during their working lives at (i) registered tracks and (ii) independent tracks and *(b)* after they retire; and if he will make a statement. [112391]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Provisions safeguarding the welfare of all domestic and captive animals in this country, including greyhounds whether on course or in retirement, are included in the Protection of Animals Act 1911 and the Abandonment of Animals Act 1960.

The British Greyhound Racing Board and the National Greyhound Racing Club, who are responsible for the sport, have regular meetings with the major animal welfare organisations. The industry also supports the work of the Retired Greyhound Trust, which is currently concentrating on expanding and properly financing local home finding schemes for retired greyhounds.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will establish an independent public inquiry into the collapse of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress. [112464]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have asked the incoming Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, Gurbux Singh, to consider urgently the lessons to be learned from the collapse of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and to produce a report. I hope to indicate the time scale for the report shortly.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the report of the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality into the collapse of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress to be completed; and if he will place the report in the Library when it is available. [112463]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have asked the incoming Chairman, Gurbux Singh, to undertake the review as a matter of urgency. The terms of reference and timetable for the review will be published shortly and the key findings of the review will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he plans to take in respect of the civil servants and members of the Commission for Racial Equality who are directors of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.; and what role his Department and the Commission for Racial Equality had in their appointment. [112462]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My Department was not involved in the appointment of its Directors and no Home Office officials are Directors of the company.

The role of the Commission will be examined in the context of the review which I have asked the incoming Chairman, Gurbux Singh, to conduct.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 863W, to the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), if he will place the accountants' report on Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. in the Library. [112465]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are no plans to do so.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which Ministers and officials in his Department were responsible for supervising the organisation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress by Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.; what was the nature of that supervision; and if he will make a statement. [112461]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Commission for Racial Equality decided to stage the Cultural Diversity Congress and took a collective decision to set up Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. to organise the event.

Operational supervision of the arrangements was a matter for the Commission.

Metropolitan Police

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the change in the total number of police officers in the Metropolitan Police Service over the next three financial years; and if he will make a statement. [112394]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the revenue budget for 2000–01 should be sufficient to enable him to maintain police officer strength at around 25,600. He also aims to maintain front-line policing strengths for the following two years, subject to sufficient funding.

From 3 July 2000 budgets for the Metropolitan Police Authority will be a matter for the Greater London Authority, subject to my reserve powers to set a minimum budget.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that there should be more police officers in the Metropolitan Police Service at the end of this Parliament than at the start; and if he will make a statement. [112458]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994, it is for the Commissioner to determine the actual number of police officers in the Metropolitan Police Service at any one time. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out his policy as regards the number of police officers in all forces in England and Wales in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 172–74W.

Mike Tyson

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department further to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 419–20W, and his letter to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and the Weald of 18 February 2000, what assessment he has made of the compatibility of his instruction to admit Mike Tyson under paragraph 1(3) of schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971 with the Immigration Rules. [112401]

Mr. Straw: My instruction under Paragraph 1(3) of schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971 to admit Mr. Tyson was entirely compatible with the Immigration Rules, including paragraph 320(18). Whereas under that paragraph refusal of entry should normally follow in the case of someone with a criminal conviction of the sort prescribed in the absence of strong compassionate reasons, the paragraph leaves a residual discretion, confirmed by the courts, to depart from that normal course.

Stansted Hijacking

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his considerations of the claims for political asylum made by some passengers on the aeroplane recently hijacked to Stansted airport. [112937]

Mr. Straw: Of the total 170 people on the aircraft, 73 returned voluntarily to Afghanistan on 14 February. Four members of the flight crew are due to return with the aircraft when necessary clearances have been given. Two passengers have also asked to return to Afghanistan. Arrangements are being made for them to do so. 14 individuals are the subject of criminal charges in relation to the hijacking. This leaves 44 passengers who have made a claim for asylum under the 1951 Geneva Convention together with some 33 dependants.

I have postponed a decision in six claims made by the relatives of those charged because I have been advised that the effect of considering their claims could prejudice the trials of the hijackers. I have postponed a decision in two cases in which I am expecting further information from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and a further six cases in which further inquiries need to be made.

I have personally considered each of the remaining claims, including the representations made by the legal advisers representing each applicant. I have also taken into account advice I have received from Counsel and the Home Office Afghanistan country assessment. I have now reached my decisions. I have decided to grant refugee status in two cases, because I am satisfied that their applications disclose a well-grounded fear of persecution on a ground set out in the 1951 Convention. In both cases, as it happens, the applicant's case for asylum arose before they had boarded the flight, and it was a matter of chance for them that it was hijacked. Indefinite leave to enter will be granted to the wife of one of these applicants as his dependant, although she had claimed asylum in her own right. The claimants in these cases have five children who will also be given indefinite leave to enter. I have rejected the claims in the remaining 27 cases on the grounds that I am not satisfied that they have a well-founded fear of persecution by reason of their race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

In considering each of these claims, I have taken proper account of the United Kingdom's obligations under the 1951 Convention. I have taken account of all necessary legal requirements. These requirements are such that it would have been improper in the cases I have considered for me to take into account at that stage other factors, such as the need to deter future hijackers, and I have not done so. However, in determining the future status of those whose claims I have rejected, I have a different duty, to take into account all relevant information including public interest points in deterring future hijackings.

In these cases, I have decided that the public interest in deterring future hijacks for the purposes of claiming asylum is a very strong one and, therefore, I have decided that they should not be given permission to stay in this country. Accordingly, I have given instructions that they should not be granted Exceptional Leave to Enter, which would give them this permission. We are ready to make arrangements for them to return to Afghanistan voluntarily. Given the current situation in Afghanistan, it is not proposed immediately to set directions for their enforced removal to Afghanistan. Instead, we are continuing to explore the possibility of removing these individuals to other countries. In the meantime they will be offered bail conditions to be set by a Chief Immigration Officer involving a recognisance, restrictions on their

address, and conditions for regular reporting to the Immigration Service. Arrangements for accommodation will be made centrally and the cost will not be borne by local authorities. For the time being we will continue to detain those on whom no decision has been made.

The events surrounding this terrorist act of hijacking have shown serious weaknesses in the way in which international conventions relating to refugees, terrorism and human rights operate. We shall be raising our concerns with like-minded countries and with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Education (Asia)

6. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's support for education initiatives in Asia. [111178]

Clare Short: The Government are working to strengthen the international effort to meet the International Development target of achieving universal primary education by 2015 and gender equality in primary and secondary schooling by 2005. To meet targets we must make greater progress in Asia where 50 million children are still out of school. The UK has major projects working to improve state systems in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal and we are working hard to try to ensure that the UN led Conference in Dakar on 26–27 April drives forward progress in meeting the 2015 target across the world.

Globalisation White Paper

7. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consultations she intends to carry out prior to the publication of the White Paper on Globalisation. [111179]

Clare Short: We will consult widely as part of the preparation of the White Paper on Globalisation and Development. We will provide an outline of the White Paper and establish a website containing the outline. We will invite submissions widely from individuals and organisations in the UK and from developing countries and international organisations.

World Bank Development Report

8. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what has been the response of her Department to the World bank development report 2000–01 consultation draft, "Attacking Poverty", with particular reference to population issues. [111180]

Clare Short: I welcome the draft World Development Report and I welcome the fact that for the first time the World bank has put it out for wide consultation on the internet before publication in September. My Department has fed in detailed research to the report team, including a major study of the views of the poor across the world. We alongside others have suggested that the contribution of demographic change to economic growth should receive greater attention within the report.

Kosovo (Health Services)

9. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on health services in Kosovo. [111181]

Mr. Foulkes: Medical services in Kosovo suffer from 10 years of neglect and poor maintenance, the dismissal of Albanian Kosovars from health administration and from the aftermath of the conflict. Our immediate priority is to ensure that access to urgent medical assistance is widely available. The UK is taking the lead in essential services at Pristina University Hospital under a neutral international management team, and is supporting primary health care provision for some 800,000 people. We are working closely with Joint Administration and key donors to develop longer-term sustainable health programmes.

EU Development Work

10. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress in reforming the EU's development work. [111182]

Clare Short: I welcome the commitment of the new European Commission to major improvement of the European Union's development programmes. Most of the damaging splits in responsibility within the Commission have been removed, a development policy statement will be tabled this month, and the structure of the European Development Fund was significantly improved during the negotiations on the next Lomé convention.

The UK advocated all these changes in the strategy we published over a year ago. But the impact of these measures has not yet been felt on the ground or reflected in the allocation of EC development spending. We will continue to press for much greater effectiveness and efficiency in EC programmes so that the EU plays a more effective role in meeting the international poverty eradication targets.

Monitoring

11. **Mr. Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what monitoring her Department will carry out of the uses to which funds which are released as a result of debt cancellation are put. [111183]

Clare Short: The revision to the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative agreed last year requires countries to develop national poverty reduction strategies. Resources arising from debt relief will be spent within this framework. I place great importance on civil society and the international community being able to monitor the implementation and outcomes of these strategies, and I recognise that increased international support will be required to ensure that this takes place. We are devoting additional resources to improve the statistics essential for monitoring progress in HIPC countries, as part of the new Partnership for Statistics for Development in 21st Century initiative, launched in November 1999.

Zimbabwe

12. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received relating to UK aid to Zimbabwe; and if she will make a statement. [111184]

19. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what non-financial assistance she is giving to Zimbabwe; and if she will make a statement. [111191]

28. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the future of the aid programme to Zimbabwe. [111200]

Clare Short: Appalling economic management has brought Zimbabwe to a crisis. The International Financial Institutions are urging the Government to take action to improve economic management and focus on the reduction of poverty. We have also made it clear that there is a strong case for land reform and that we would provide support for a programme that was fully transparent and focused on helping poor farmers.

Some 70 per cent. of Zimbabwean households fall below the poverty line. Cutting aid would hurt the people who have suffered most through economic mismanagement. We will continue to work with progressive forces in Zimbabwe, where we judge our aid can be effective.

Debt Reduction

13. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received on the reduction of third-world debt. [111185]

Clare Short: I have discussed debt relief, and the contribution it can make to poverty reduction, on a number of occasions recently ranging from a meeting with the Ugandan High Commissioner to children from Rhyl school. On 21 December, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I hosted a seminar for representatives of the UK faiths and non-governmental organisations to discuss these issues. I continue to receive many letters on debt from members of the public.

School of Tropical Medicine (Liverpool)

14. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the contribution made by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine to international development. [111186]

Clare Short: The Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, alongside other UK institutions, is a valued partner in our work to improve the health of the poorest and our efforts to attain the international development targets.

The school has responded to international needs for applied research and training in Malaria, Child Health, Reproductive Health, Filariasis (Elephantiasis), Onchocerciasis (River Blindness), TB and HIV/AIDs, as well as Health Sector Development.

Gender Inequality

15. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the progress being made towards eliminating gender inequalities in basic education. [111187]

Clare Short: In the 10 years since the first Education for All conference in Jomtien considerable progress has been made in spreading support for the education of girls in developing countries. Countries themselves are increasingly convinced of the need to include girls and progress is being made. The research evidence is clear that educating girls leads to major development gains as the girls grow up in smaller families, improved child survival and enhanced household income. We are committed to mobilising increased international commitment to the international development targets of universal primary education by 2015 and gender equity in primary and secondary schooling by 2005.

Sierra Leone

16. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what humanitarian assistance Her Majesty's Government plans for Sierra Leone during 2000. [111188]

Clare Short: Our Programme in Sierra Leone is directed mainly at supporting the peace process and assisting with the preparations for elections in 2001.

We are continuing to support a number of international and local non-government and civil society organisations which are working in the country on food security, basic health care, basic education and water and sanitation projects. During the last 18 months we have committed over £5 million towards these humanitarian assistance activities.

The deployment of the expanded United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone force and continuing progress with the disarmament and demobilisation process will improve the prospects for access to areas which have until now been behind the rebel lines. DFID will continue to support effective co-ordination of humanitarian assistance and will be ready to respond to sensible, well-targeted proposals.

Security Sector Reform

17. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the progress of her Department in promoting security sector reform. [111189]

Clare Short: Our policy on security sector reform in developing countries is set out in our policy statement on "Poverty and the Security Sector" which was launched in March 1999.

In many countries bloated, ill-disciplined security sector forces, absorbing disproportionate resources, abuse their power and sometimes lead to coups and conflict which hold back development and cause the growth of poverty. We are focused primarily on providing assistance to strengthen the democratic accountability and transparency of the security sector and where appropriate to facilitate the transition to peace. We are also working to improve objective assessment of threat and security services of appropriate size and that are properly trained.

We are currently working in this way with the FCO and MOD in Sierra Leone. We have funded a number of projects involving both UK and Commonwealth officials who are working very closely with the Government of Sierra Leone on a wide range of governance and security sector reform measures. Positive steps are also being

made in Nigeria, where the three Departments are supporting the Government of Nigeria in its efforts to reform the security sector.

A copy of DFID's policy statement on Poverty and the Security Sector, along with the two papers and speeches from the February symposium have been placed in the Library of the House.

Debt Relief

18. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries have agreed to adopt poverty relief or education programmes to qualify for debt relief and further aid. [111190]

Clare Short: The revision to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative requires the 41 countries to develop and implement national poverty reduction strategies to qualify for debt relief. Other counties who access the most concessional resources of the IMF and World Bank will also need to produce these strategies, which will then form the basis for IMF and Bank lending operations. These strategies will be centred on achieving the international development targets, including the provision of universal primary education. The development of these strategies is now underway across the world.

24. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact of multilateral debt relief on development projects funded by her Department. [111196]

Clare Short: The revision to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative requires countries to produce national poverty reduction strategies to qualify for their debt relief. These strategies will set out policies and priority actions for governments, and provide a framework for all donor assistance. Where they are credible, the international community should support them wholeheartedly. I welcome the decision of the World bank and the IMF to tie their assistance to these strategies.

Sanctions

20. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she will reply to the second report from the International Development Committee, Session 1999–2000 (HC 67) on "The Future of Sanctions"; and if she will make a statement. [111192]

Clare Short: I welcome the Committee's report and commend its proposals. We will be considering the conclusions and recommendations carefully and we will produce a detailed response in due course. The Department for International Development (DFID) is already taking action on some of the recommendations. There will be a joint FCO/DFID mission, probably in the last week of March, to the UN to explore how the UN Secretariat can be assisted in offering better advice to the Security Council on the design and implementation of sanctions, and what role the UK may play in this.

Pakistan (Ophthalmic Services)

21. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance she is giving to the Government of Pakistan to help to set up and maintain ophthalmic services in rural areas. [111193]

Clare Short: We are not currently giving any such assistance to help set up and maintain ophthalmic services in rural areas of Pakistan. Such services have benefited indirectly in the past from our contributions to Pakistan's Social Action Programme which aims to improve basic social services including health. Since last October's military coup, our development assistance to the Pakistan Government has been frozen. We have advised the new administration that if they make clear commitment to action on poverty reduction—requiring better economic management, action against corruption and an early transition to democracy, we will reinstate our support.

Agriculture (Africa)

22. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received about her Department's policies on the development of the agricultural sector in Africa. [111194]

Clare Short: Officials maintain regular contact with developing country governments, civil society and the private sector on the development of the agricultural sector in Africa. We seek to improve the livelihoods of the rural poor and reduce poverty.

We have recently commissioned an independent evaluation to assess the impact of our sustainable agriculture strategy. The study will be completed later this year.

Mozambique Floods

23. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's response to the recent floods in Mozambique. [111195]

Clare Short: Since my statement to the House on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 21, the situation in Mozambique has continued to deteriorate and is likely to get worse.

The UN is providing a senior administrator who will arrive today to improve co-ordination. The UK has provided a further five helicopters, 76 boats and 39 life rafts with a team of expert volunteers. We stand ready to do more.

UN Education Conference

25. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the United Nations conference on education to be held in Senegal in April. [111197]

Clare Short: The World Education Forum in Dakar from 26–28 April will assess progress achieved in the 10 years since the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien. This International Consultative Forum has been convened by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World bank. I will attend the Forum.

Our priority in Dakar is to obtain a strong commitment from North and South to the implementation of strategies for achieving effective primary education for all by 2015. In assessing the progress that has been made since Jomtien, it is important that the Forum pays particular attention to analysing why some countries, including some of the poorest, have managed to achieve considerably more than others.

UNCTAD Conference

26. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the recent UNCTAD conference in Bangkok. [111198]

Clare Short: The UNCTAD X Conference was devoted to the theme of globalisation and how developing countries can best take advantage of it. Its concluding Declaration emphasised the importance of the multilateral trading system and of building the capacity of developing countries to participate in it fully. The Conference also agreed a Plan Of Action, which sets out the priorities for UNCTAD's work for the next four years. This will increase the complementarities between the work of UNCTAD and that of the WTO, strengthening its ability to contribute to efforts to build developing countries' capacity to manage their integration into the global economy.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade spoke in the interactive debate on 13 February. I attended the conference on 16 February and spoke in the interactive debate on trade and development. My statement (a copy of which is in the Library of the House) stressed the importance to developing countries of attracting investment, of maintaining the momentum of the multilateral trade system and of starting a new round of trade negotiations in which the developing countries can advance their interests. My bilateral conversations with the heads of multilateral agencies and developing countries' trade ministers were supportive of the priorities outlined in my speech.

Both the UNCTAD Secretary General and his staff, and the Thai authorities are to be congratulated for preparing and organising this constructive and forward-looking conference.

Fair Trade Fortnight

27. **Mr. Martlew:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to support Fair Trade Fortnight. [111199]

Clare Short: My Department takes every opportunity to promote fair trade products and support ethical trading in mainstream business. We support the efforts of the Fair Trade Foundation, Comic Relief, the Co-Operative Bank and others, to inform consumers of how they assist poor producers in the developing world by purchasing fair trade purchases. Tomorrow I will be attending the launch of Fair Trade Fortnight, at St. Martin in the Fields in London, where I will sign the Fair Trade Pledge promising to buy a different Fair Trade product every month. I would urge members to follow suit and help ensure that farmers in the developing world are being paid a fair wage, without exploitation or damage to their environment, that their families have access to education, and that they are able to invest in improving basic health and well-being.

Water

29. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the work her Department is doing to promote poor people's access to water in developing countries. [111201]

Clare Short: Access to clear, safe water is a major focus for our programme as it is crucial to health, agriculture and industry and freeing women and girls' time for education and production. We are giving increased priority to water and sanitation in our work. One billion people still lack access to clean water and three billion to sanitation. It is estimated that by 2025 one in three people will be living in countries subject to chronic water scarcity unless water resources are used more efficiently.

Kenya (Schools)

30. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to support the development of schools in Kenya. [111202]

Clare Short: We have recently made a grant of £13.36 million over a period of three years to assist the Kenyan Ministry of Education to strengthen primary education. In partnership with the Ministry of Education we will provide textbooks for the poorest schools in 25 of the poorest districts as well as implement a schools-based teacher development programme. Through this project we will work with the Ministry of Education to encourage key reforms and strengthen our dialogue with the Government of Kenya.

We are also supporting management training of all primary head teachers and all women primary deputy head teachers throughout Kenya in order to help increase the efficiency of primary school management and contributing to improved attitudes towards girls, and children with special needs.

Aid Statistics

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of British *(a)* bilateral and *(b)* multilateral aid was allocated to states in (i) Africa, (ii) Asia, (iii) Latin America and (iv) Europe in (1) 1996, (2) 1997, (3) 1998 and (4) 1999; and what is her estimate of the equivalent figure in 2000. [112114]

Clare Short: The information requested is given in the table for the Department for International Development expenditure only (other UK aid is excluded as we do not have the required details for the later years). Multilateral assistance cannot be readily broken down by region but we conduct special exercises periodically to estimate the geographical distribution of our contributions to multilateral institutions. The latest exercise was conducted in 1997.

DFID programme expenditure

Percentage going to	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000 estimated outturn* [1]	*2000–01 plans* [1]	*1997 imputed multilateral share* [2]
Africa	32	33	39	32	35	37
America	6	9	9	6	6	10
of which:						
Caribbean	4	6	6	—	—	0
Central	1	1	1	—	—	5
South	2	2	2	—	—	4
Asia	30	28	27	23	25	28
Europe	13	11	7	6	6	24
Other Bilateral	19	19	18	32	28	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

[1] General allocations (eg humanitarian assistance, scholarship schemes) which cannot be assigned to regions in advance are included in 'other bilateral'.

[2] Includes contributions from other government Departments to multilateral institutions.

Note:

Columns may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Congo

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps the Government are taking to alleviate the suffering of those people in the Congo who are under immediate threat of severe hunger. [112322]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 27 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 320W.

China

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what assessment she made of the human rights record of the People's Republic of China before her Department became involved in the exchange arrangements between the Scottish Police College and the State Police of the People's Republic of China; [112455]

(2) if she will make a statement about the role of her Department in the exchange arrangements between the Scottish Police College and the State Police of the People's Republic of China. [112454]

Clare Short: My Department has played no role in any exchange arrangements between the Scottish Police College and the State Police of the People's Republic of China.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the local authorities inspected by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate which were found to have Housing Benefit application forms that did not ask for a claimant's *(a)* income and *(b)* National Insurance number. [111240]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* To date the BFI have completed 41 local authority inspections. They found:

no cases where the Housing Benefit application form did not ask for any details of a claimant's income, although there were examples where the claim form did not request information on all relevant income required to determine entitlement to benefit;

one case (London Borough of Croydon, inspected in June 1998) where the form did not ask for the National Insurance number. There were other examples where the request for the National Insurance number was restricted to specific circumstances.

Since 6 September 1999, a person making a claim for Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit must provide (in relation to themself and any partner in respect of whom they are claiming benefit) a National Insurance number and evidence that that number has been allocated to them; or information to allow one to be to be traced or allocated. LAs should, therefore, now have procedures in place to ensure that claimants meet this requirement and to be able to show that this procedure has been followed.

The Verification Framework, available to all LAs as good practice guidance and a mandatory set of instructions for those LAs which receive additional funding, requires that the claim form should collect the NINO for the claimant and the partner.

Welfare Reform

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many *(a)* widows and *(b)* widowers will benefit from the Welfare Reform Bill and by how much in (i) Shrewsbury and Atcham and (ii) Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [111447]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimates of the numbers of widows and widowers who will be affected by the Welfare Reform Act in Great Britain, and the average gain

	Widows		*Widowers*	
	Numbers affected	*Average gain (£)*	*Numbers affected*	*Average gain (£)*
Bereavement Payment	40,000	1,000	15,000	2,000
Widowed Parents Allowance	—	—	25,000	[1]45–50
Bereavement Allowance	—	—	10,000	[1]30

[1] Per week (net)

Notes:

1. Figures shown are for the first full year (2002–03), assuming implementation date of April 2001.
2. Numbers affected are rounded to the nearest 5,000.
3. Bereavement Payment numbers are total payments made over the financial year. Weekly benefit numbers are an average stock figure for the financial year.
4. Not all the numbers affected will be financial gainers as there may be offsetting income-related benefit reductions. Average weekly benefit gains are net of income-related benefits.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the amount of housing benefit paid to each local authority in respect of non-local authority rented housing for the years *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97, *(c)* 1997–98, *(d)* 1998–99, and *(e)* 1999–2000, indicating the average number of recipients for each authority. [110949]

Angela Eagle: The information has been placed in the Library.

CSA

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many compensation payments from the Child Support Agency have been awarded since its establishment of *(a)* under £100, *(b)* £101 to £500, *(c)* £501 to £1,000 and *(d)* £1,001 to £5,000; and what has been the total amount paid in compensation payments. [111437]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Douglas Alexander, dated February 2000:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

You ask about the number of compensation payments that have been awarded since the establishment of the Agency within certain pay-bands. The Special Payments section was introduced in 1995 and the data provided has been given from April of that year.

I am sorry I am not able to give you the information in the format you requested. Information that is available is provided in a table at the attached Annex.

The second table provides figures for advance payments of maintenance. These are payments made to the parents with care to provide redress where maladministration has caused substantial arrears to accrue. A payment is made which is equivalent to the amount of maintenance the parent with care would have received had maladministration not taken place. These payments are subsequently recovered from future maintenance payments made by the non-resident parent.

The number of compensation payments has increased as a result of our action to clear the backlog of maintenance applications which were over 52 weeks old. The number of these cases currently stands at 39,246, compared with over 225,000 which were outstanding at the end of March 1997.

Additionally, we have increased our customer awareness of special payments by advising them, where appropriate, how to apply. This has also had an effect on the number of compensatory payments made.

Breakdown of compensatory payments into pay-bands

£

	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	[1]1999–2000
Under £250	63	455	1,341	3,630	2,257
£250-£499.50	42	136	311	690	256
£500-£999.99	37	180	205	327	118
£1,000-£4,999.99	41	203	266	643	206
Over £5,000	3	9	13	225	64
Total	186	983	2,136	5,515	2,901
Total amount paid in year	114,979	655,821	1,101,313	4,373,295	1,471,955

Advance payments of maintenance

	Number of payments	Total amount paid (£)
1998–99	151	458,206
1999–2000[1]	216	395,323

[1] Up to 30 September 1999

Child Benefit

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the combined value of child dependency addition and child benefit for the child of a widowed mother *(a)* in cash terms, *(b)* in real terms and *(c)* as a percentage of average earnings, in (i) November 1979 and (ii) April 1997; and what is his estimate of the equivalent figure in April 2000. [111809]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

The combined value of child dependency addition and child benefit for the child of a widowed mother (a) in cash terms, (b) in real terms, (c) as a percentage of average earnings, in November 1979 and April 1997

	(a) Actual rate of child dependency addition and child benefit (£)	(b) Real value of (a) uprated to April 2000 prices[1] (£)	(c) Actual rate of (a) as a percentage of average earnings[2]
First child			
November 1979	11.10	31.15	11.0
April 1997	20.95	22.65	5.5
April 2000	26.35	26.35	n/a
Subsequent children			
November 1979	11.10	31.15	11.0
April 1997	20.20	21.85	5.5
April 2000	21.35	21.35	n/a

[1] The Retail Prices Index (all items) has been used as published by the Office for National Statistics.

[2] Average Earnings are taken from the New Earnings Survey (NES) estimates of earnings for all full-time adult employees, as published by the Office for National Statistics.

n/a = Not available.

Note:

The figures are rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating date.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 787W, what percentage of compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when peat compost will be phased out by his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [111932]

Mr. Bayley: The Department estates partner Trillium has now confirmed that only peat substitutes are used in the Department. A further re-check of suppliers has been instigated and if any peat usage is found it will be phased out by June 2000.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Literacy and Numeracy Poster

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the cost of *(a)* reprinting the recent poster on literacy and numeracy and *(b)* additional postage. [111952]

Ms Estelle Morris: The cost of reprinting and distributing the "Every lesson counts" posters is £20,000. The cost has been met by the Centre for British Teachers which has a contractual responsibility for proofing and publishing the posters.

Class Sizes (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many classes of 30 and over for five to seven-year-olds were recorded for schools in Shrewsbury and Atcham *(a)* in May 1997 and *(b)* at the latest available date; and if he will make a statement. [111916]

Ms Estelle Morris: The latest available information on infant class sizes in the parliamentary constituency of Shrewsbury and Atcham is shown in the following tables. The class size count for January 2000 is currently being undertaken and provisional national estimates are expected to be published in April.

The Government are well on course to limit all infant classes for five, six and seven-year-olds to 30 or below by September 2001 at the latest.

Number and percentage of Key stage 1 classes taught by one teacher with 30 or more pupils in maintained Primary Schools in the parliamentary constituency of Shrewsbury and Atcham 1997 and 1999

Position as at January	*1999*	*1997*
Number of classes with 30 or more pupils	19	31
All classes	113	123
Percentage of classes with 30 or more pupils	17	25

Number and percentage of Infant classes taught by one teacher with 30 or more pupils in maintained Primary Schools in the parliamentary constituency of Shrewsbury and Atcham 1997 and 1999

Position as at September	*1999*	*1997*
Number of classes with 30 or more pupils	7	[1]—
All classes	117	[1]—
Percentage of classes with 30 or more pupils	6	[1]—

[1] Information was not collected

Network Consultancy Group

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many meetings of the New Local Government Network consultancy group on new models of local education have been held in his Department; [112006]

(2) if he will list the councillors who are members of the New Local Government Network research project on new models of local education; [112007]

(3) on what basis his Department is participating in the New Local Government Network consultancy group on new models of local education; [112008]

(4) what staff, material and other support has been extended by his Department to the New Local Government Network consultancy group *(a)* in the course of its research project on new models of local education and *(b)* otherwise; [112009]

(5) how many civil servants are members of the New Local Government Network consultancy group on new models of local education; and on how many occasions they have attended meetings of the group; [112010]

(6) what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of his Department's participation in the New Local Government Network's consultancy group on new models of local education. [112011]

Ms Estelle Morris: One member of the DfEE's staff agreed to be a member of the group established by the New Local Government Network, and has met a member of the secretariat, but has not so far attended any meetings. This involvement was intended to improve the group's understanding of relevant central Government policy and activity. No meetings of the group have been held in the Department and no staff, material or other support extended to the group or to the Network, so there has been no cost to public funds. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools is also a member of the group, but has not attended any meetings. The full membership of the group is a matter for the New Local Government Network.

Dyslexia

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he has taken to support children with dyslexia in schools; and if he will make a statement. [111979]

Jacqui Smith: Under the Education Act 1996, schools and local education authorities have a duty to identify and make suitable provision for all children with special educational needs, including children with dyslexia. The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, which came into effect on 1 September 1994, gives guidance to schools and local education authorities on how to meet this duty. Paragraphs 3:60 to 3:63 provide guidance on specific learning difficulties and have particular reference to dyslexia. The Code is currently being revised to update the guidance and provide examples of good practice, with an increased emphasis on early identification and support.

In recognition of the need for partnership working to address children's dyslexia a seminar was held in July 1999 bringing together the main Government Departments and agencies, and external partners for an exchange of views on the key educational issues. Ways in which individual expertise and resources can be pooled were identified, and a consensus reached over a shared agenda for tackling issues in the areas of early identification, teacher training, and the use of ICT. An informal working group has since been focusing on the training of teachers of children with dyslexia.

To assist schools in recognising dyslexia we have produced simple guidance which provides hints to primary school teachers to help them identify children who may be dyslexic. In addition the Department has recently provided a grant to help the British Dyslexia Association reprint the schools resource pack entitled "Achieving dyslexia friendly schools". Two copies of the pack have been distributed to all local education authorities in England. With funding from the Department, the Dyslexia Institute is undertaking a two year study programme which seeks to evaluate the effects of structured programmes of intervention for seven-year-old pupils who are experiencing specific difficulties in learning to read, write and spell. Two key aspects of the programme are to develop activities that parents can do at home and to share the knowledge and skills of specialist teachers more widely.

New Deal Plaques

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the projected costs of supplying plaques to schools which receive improvement grants under the New Deal for Schools. [111499]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The average cost of a plaque is £29.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were the reasons behind the decision to supply plaques to schools which receive improvement grants under the New Deal for Schools. [111498]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* It is normal practice to acknowledge the source of funding in public building projects. Projects completed with funding from the European Union and National Lottery also have plaques displayed.

Supported Employment

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on *(a)* the extra demand for and *(b)* the extra provision of supported employment places in each year since 1997 and projected forward to 2003. [112117]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* A report on research conducted by the Institute of Employment Studies into the Supply and Demand for Supported Employment was published in July 1998. A copy is available in the Library.

Some 22,234 Supported Employment places were provided in 1996. In 1997 this rose by 506 places to 22,740 (a 2.2 per cent. increase) and in 1998 by a further 184 places to 22,924 (3 per cent. over 1996). Figures for 1999 are not yet available but for this year and for the period to 2003 I expect numbers to continue to increase.

Access and Hardship Funds

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements he will put in place for monitoring, standardising and accounting for payments of access fund bursaries for *(a)* mature and *(b)* young students. [112120]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* We will issue guidance on the bursary schemes for higher education institutions which will include the monitoring and accounting arrangements. It will be for HEFCE to publish this guidance. Arrangements for awarding the bursaries will be at the discretion of institutions, within the guidance provided.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will issue revised guidance to the HEFCE and higher education institutions on the use of the Access and Hardship Funds. [112119]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* We plan to issue guidance on the Access Funds in March, and on the Hardship Funds shortly after Easter. It will be for the HEFCE to pass this on to the higher education institutions.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if Scottish students studying at English universities will be eligible for *(a)* Access Fund bursaries and *(b)* the Hardship Fund. [112121]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Access Funds and Hardship Funds in England are administered by higher education institutions, following guidance provided by the Department. We have no plans to change the current eligibility conditions for payments from the Hardship Fund. Eligibility for the Access Fund Bursaries will be set out in Guidance to be provided to higher education institutions.

Special Educational Needs (Sittingbourne and Sheppey)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the provision for special educational needs in Sittingbourne and Sheppey. [111085]

Jacqui Smith: Children with special educational needs in Sittingbourne and Sheppey are usually placed either at one of the 64 mainstream primary and secondary schools or at one of the two special schools or at one of five special educational needs units, all of which are within the Swale District of Kent local education authority.

Child Care Places

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if places on holiday play schemes and privately financed sports weeks are included within his Department's figures for the number of child care places created; and if he will list the number of such places included in, and the proportion they represent of, the total new child care places announced since May 1997. [111027]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Since May 1997 we have announced the creation of 149,606 new child care places.

Between May 1997 and March 1999 a total of 73,316 new child care places were created. Most of these places were created through the Out of School Childcare Initiative (OSCI). We do not hold separate figures on holiday play schemes. Privately financed sport weeks would not have attracted OSCI funding.

Between April and September 1999 Early Years and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) reported the creation of around 76,000 new child care places. Of these 29,724 (39 per cent.) were holiday play scheme places. Some 60 per cent. of these holiday places were in the voluntary sector, 25 per cent. were in the private sector and 15 per cent. were in the maintained sector. Some of the play scheme places in the private sector may have included privately financed sports weeks, but we do not hold separate figures.

Employment Zones

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allow the Employment Service to bid for new contracts as part of the Employment Zone initiative; and if he will make a statement. [111022]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* In our bidding guidance for both rounds of the competition to run Employment Zones, we invited bids from the private, public and voluntary sectors. The Employment Service chose to bid under the name of 'Working Links' in partnership with two leading private sector companies. They proceeded to win eight out of fifteen Zones, subject to post-tender negotiations.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the successful bidders for Employment Zone contracts for the long-term unemployed. [111007]

Ms Jowell: Subject to negotiation, contracts will be awarded to: Working Links (a consortium of Ernst and Young, Manpower plc and the Employment Service) in Heads of the Valleys and Caerphilly, Brent, Brighton and Hove, Glasgow, Plymouth, Southwark, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Tower Hamlets; Reed and Partners in Haringey, Liverpool and Sefton, Newham and Doncaster; Pertemps in Birmingham; the North West Wales Partnership in North West Wales and the Nottingham Employment Zone Partnership in Nottingham.

Remploy

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on current developments at Remploy. [110371]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* A new Chairman, Alan Pedder, took up appointment on 5 January 2000. He has been working with his Board to develop a strategy for the Company.

The key elements of the strategy are to:

create more opportunities for disabled people, including continued expansion of Interwork and support for disabled people to progress to unsubsidised jobs;

use existing Remploy factories more effectively to provide training and development, as well as work, for their employees, thus supporting people to progress both within and outside Remploy;

continue to modernise factories to drive for increased business opportunities;

streamline the commercial management and administration of the Company;

increase marketing initiatives to generate new sales.

Education Funding (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the cash and percentage funding variance of Leicestershire county council from the county council Standard Spending Assessment average in each year between 1991–92 to 2000–01. [110840]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following table:

Variance in Education SSA

	Cash £ million	*Percentage*
1990–91	49.2	21.6
1991–92	56.6	21.4
1992–93	61.4	21.7
1993–94[1]	56.4	22.1
1994–95	53.3	20.5
1995–96	52.8	20.0
1996–97	64.5	24.0
1997–98[2]	−50.1	−19.9
1998–99	−35.5	−14.2
1999–2000	−30.2	−11.7
2000–01	−31.5	−11.6

[1] In 1993–94 Education Standard Spending was reduced by the creation of the Further Education Funding Council and the subsequent reduction in post-16 funding.

[2] In 1997–98 £527 million was removed from Education Standard Spending for the Nursery Voucher Scheme. Leicestershire was also affected by Local Government Reorganisation—the old Leicestershire LEA was split into Leicester City, Rutland and 1997 Leicestershire. The figures from 1997–98 to 2000–01 quoted in this table are for 1997 Leicestershire.

Citizenship Education

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans he has to issue guidance for teachers on the teaching of controversial subjects as part of Citizenship education at key stages 3 and 4; [110936]

(2) what assessment he has made of the amount of curricular time needed for the teaching of Citizenship as a foundation subject at key stages 3 and 4; [110937]

(3) what factors underlay his decision to require pupils at key stage 3 to be taught about regional identities in the United Kingdom as part of the programme of study for Citizenship; [110938]

(4) what plans he has to implement the recommendation of the Advisory Group on Citizenship for the establishing of a Commission on Citizenship Education to monitor and scrutinise the implementation of Citizenship education; [110939]

(5) what estimate he has made of the number of additional teachers who will need to be recruited in order to teach Citizenship at key stages 3 and 4; [110940]

(6) what estimate he has made of the annual cost of implementing Citizenship education at key stages 3 and 4. [110941]

Jacqui Smith: The introduction of Citizenship education in schools was supported during the consultation on the review of the National Curriculum. We are actively taking forward plans to implement the new arrangements for the introduction as a statutory subject at Key Stages 3 and 4 in 2002. I chair a working party in the Department for Education and Employment developing a package of measures to support schools in delivering the Citizenship programme. The Working Party's membership is drawn from head teachers, advisers, Citizenship education groups and the churches. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) is also a member. It includes representatives from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Office for Standards in Education and the Teacher Training Agency. It is considering the requirements for teachers and teacher training for Citizenship education as part of its remit along with other issues such as assessment, community involvement and resources.

Standards Funds of £18 million have already been made available from April 2000 to support schools in implementing the revised National Curriculum—some £12 million of that will support Citizenship and Personal, Social and Health Education, of which £5 million is for Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4. The wider costs to the Government of introducing Citizenship education are being considered as part of the Citizenship Education Working Party's work.

Pupils will be taught, within the Citizenship programme, about the regional identities in the United Kingdom as part of learning about the diversity of our society and the need for mutual understanding and respect. The teaching of controversial issues arises in other subjects as well as in Citizenship. There are well established safeguards in law to guard against biased and unbalanced teaching. The report of the National Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools acknowledged these in its final

report in September 1998 and included a note on the teaching of controversial issues. Guidance for schools on this and other matters will be provided as part of initial planning guidance to be issued by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

There are no current plans to establish a commission to monitor and scrutinise the implementation of Citizenship education but the matter is to be kept under review. Teaching and learning in Citizenship will be monitored in the same way as for other subjects. Citizenship comes under the remit of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to monitor and review the curriculum and the teaching of it in schools will be inspected by the Office for Standards in Education.

Sure Start

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many of the local Sure Start programmes already *(a)* announced and *(b)* running, operate in rural areas. [110789]

Yvette Cooper: Of the 60 'trailblazer' and 69 Round 2 local authority districts announced to date as eligible for a local Sure Start programme, five can be classed as 'remoter mainly rural' (Boston, Fenland, Sedgemoor, Penwith and Kerrier). In addition, the trailblazer Sure Start programme in East Cleveland covers what is essentially a rural area, while a further seven districts are a mix of urban and rural, and coalfield areas (Isle of Wight, Easington, Wear Valley, Sedgefield, Derwentside, Ashfield, Bolsover). The trailblazer programmes in Fenland and East Cleveland are up and running now and Minsters hope to agree the programmes in Penwith and Sedgemoor soon. The remaining programmes are part of the second round and should be up and running by the summer.

New Deal

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate how many 18 to 24-year-olds have benefited from the New Deal in the Vale of York. [111377]

Ms Jowell: To the end of December 1999, 168 young people had benefited from the New Deal in the Vale of York constituency. Eighty-one of these have gained jobs through the New Deal and 51 have gained valuable training and work experience through the New Deal options.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people had left the New Deal for Young People for unsubsidised jobs up to the end of October 1999. [109704]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* Between January 1998 and the end of October 1999, 104,380 people left the New Deal for Young People for unsubsidised jobs.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in Wales have had their benefits stopped for failing to take up a New Deal option. [111688]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* In Wales, from April to the end of September 1999, the latest date for which data are available, 239 sanctions were imposed for failing to take up a New Deal Option.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement regarding the cost per participant of the New Deal. [109612]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The New Deal for Young People is designed to provide the help and support each individual joining the programme needs. Accordingly the cost of participation varies greatly from individual to individual.

We estimate that the overall average cost of helping a young person who takes part in New Deal is about £2,000.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to enhance the functioning of the New Deal Gateway. [111124]

Ms Jowell: The New Deal Gateway is already working effectively—almost 116,000 young people have already moved into work from this first stage of the New Deal.

We intended to use our continuous improvement strategy to build on this success. From spring 2000 there will be a nationwide expansion of the intensive Gateway approaches currently being piloted, which will take into account lessons learned from the evaluation of these pilots. In addition we have already developed the New Deal Gateway by ensuring early diagnosis of any literacy and numeracy needs, and by strengthening our arrangements to ensure that young people are moved with pace and purpose through the Gateway.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many injuries related to participation in the New Deal have been reported by New Deal participants since April 1998. [111123]

Ms Jowell: Since April 1998, there have been 149 injuries reported by New Deal participants. 128 of these injuries were classified as minor.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of those leaving the New Deal for Young People for jobs lasting less than 13 weeks have found jobs lasting less than *(a)* one week, *(b)* two weeks, *(c)* four weeks and *(d)* eight weeks. [109812]

Ms Jowell: The information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of those lone parents who have been sent a letter inviting them to join the New Deal for Lone Parents have gone on to find jobs on the scheme; how this figure relates to Government targets; and if he will make a statement. [109277]

Ms Hodge: Invitation letters are sent to those lone parents whose youngest child is aged over five years and three months, after they have received Income Support for eight weeks. Other lone parents with younger children are able to join the programme but are not sent invitation letters. These invitation letters are not appointment letters; their aim is to tell lone parents about NDLP and the benefits that can be gained from participating in the programme.

There have been 443,700 invitation letters issued to lone parents. Of these, 36,990 have attended an initial interview, of which, 4,680 have left the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) to go into employment. At the end of November an additional 6,070 were receiving support from their personal advisers while in work on NDLP. These 10,750 lone parents represent 2.4 per cent. of those sent a letter.

In addition, 74,320 lone parents who did not receive an invitation letter attended an interview. Therefore, total interviews and/or letters was 518,020, total jobs found was 32,710, which is 6.3 per cent. of those who were either interviewed or sent a letter.

In total, 112,570 lone parents have attended an initial interview, of whom 89 per cent. have agreed to participate in the programme.

The Employment Service has a target to place 15,000 New Deal for Lone Parents participants into work during 1999–2000. The Employment Service is currently expected to exceed this target. As a result of NDLP, many lone parents are also gaining jobs without a direct Employment Service referral.

Austria (Bilateral Meetings)

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many bilateral meetings were held between his Department and its Austrian counterpart in each of the last five years; and what was discussed at each meeting since May 1997; [109875]

(2) if he will list those previously planned meetings and their subject, between his Department and its Austrian counterpart which have been cancelled since the formation of the new Austrian Government. [109896]

Ms Jowell: Before the formation of the new Austrian Government the Department for Education and Employment or its predecessor Departments had a range of bilateral contacts with the relevant Austrian Ministries. Since May 1997 discussions have concentrated on education and training policies and programmes and were mostly in the context of the Austrian Presidency of the EU.

No DfEE bilateral meetings had been arranged at the time that the new Austrian Government was formed.

Farmers

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent assessment he has made of the need of farmers who are employed on a part-time and seasonal basis to find employment in periods when they are out of work. [109809]

Ms Jowell: Although no specific assessment of this kind has been made, a national network of Employment Service Jobcentres exists to provide all individuals who need it help with finding work, including those who work on a part-time or seasonal basis. This is successful in enabling most people to leave unemployment quickly.

Part-time and seasonal work are valuable forms of employment and income. For those who, nevertheless, face substantial labour market disadvantage, there is a wider range of programmes and other individualised help designed to overcome the barriers that may prevent people from being in work.

Nursery Education

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the annual cost of providing nursery education for all three-year-olds who are not in early years education; and if he will make a statement. [108864]

Ms Hodge: We are making £390 million available over three years to increase by 190,000 the number of free, good quality, early education places for three-year-olds. This new money is being phased in over the financial years 1999–2000 to 2001–02. The priority is to reach those three-year-olds in social need who would most benefit from a free nursery place. The additional funding will enable 66 per cent. of all three-year-olds to have access to a free place by March 2002, as the first stage of the Government's strategy to provide free early education places for all three-year-olds. The estimated annual cost of achieving universal provision is approximately £450 million.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many asylum-seeking children are being provided with education in each of the state primary and secondary schools in London; and what proportion of pupils in each school this represents. [108793]

Jacqui Smith: Local education authorities do not routinely keep information on the number of asylum seeker children in their area so it is not possible to provide details on the numbers of children who have been offered school places.

The Department does not instruct local education authorities to return information about asylum seeker children educated in schools. The figures are volatile which means that they are out-of-date soon after collection. This and the inevitably high costs for LEAs of carrying out frequent counts renders such an exercise as being of limited value.

Higher Education (UK Component Countries)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many undergraduate students in each of the component countries of the United Kingdom are enrolled on a course in another component country. [110394]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The most recent information available is shown in the following table.

Undergraduate students [1] from the component countries of the United Kingdom enrolled on a course in another component country of the United Kingdom 1998–99

	Country of institution				
Country of domicile	*England*	*Wales*	*Scotland*	*Northern Ireland*	*Total*
England	981,106	26,964	16,808	255	1,025,133
Wales	24,552	42,167	476	9	67,204
Scotland	16,501	284	97,604	42	114,431
Northern Ireland	9,032	422	5,580	29,178	44,212
Total	1,031,191	69,837	120,468	29,484	1,250,980

[1] Full-time and part-time students

Teacher Training

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment who will be responsible for leading the INSET training days in schools in connection with the new pay arrangements for teachers; and if he will make a statement. [111583]

Ms Estelle Morris: Schools are free to arrange INSET days in the way that best suits their needs. They will have a range of written materials available and my Department will be issuing further guidance. Some schools may wish to use the additional INSET day to work through the threshold arrangements with staff. Others may wish to use it to develop a performance management policy for the school with staff and governors. Headteachers and representatives of LEAs have been invited to one of a series of threshold training events taking place between 27 March and 14 April. At these events they will be given training packs and a "tool-kit" to take back to schools to help them explain the threshold process to teachers and governors. We are also arranging for trained performance management consultants to be available later in the summer to offer training and support including a one day training conference for a representative from each school.

Education Initiatives

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 275W, on education initiatives, if he will list the individuals and organisations that have carried out consultancy and advisory work for his Department on a non-commercial basis. [109090]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

HEALTH

BCG Vaccine

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the existing arrangements with Medeva Pharma for supply of the BCG vaccine. [107989]

Yvette Cooper: Medeva Pharma is the sole United Kingdom licensed manufacturer of BCG vaccine. The shortage of this vaccine is clearly unsatisfactory. The previous Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), met senior staff from Medeva twice in 1999 asking them to provide detailed explanations for their manufacturing problems and sought details of the plans for their resolution. The Department continues to be in close contact with Medeva monitoring the manufacturing progress. It is of considerable concern that despite numerous interventions supply of BCG vaccine is not forthcoming. Opportunities for alternative supplies from across the world are being investigated.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons there is a shortage in the supply of manufactured BCG vaccine; what action he will like to restart the programme of vaccination in schools; and how he will ensure that supplies of the vaccine remain *(a)* constant and *(b)* sufficient. [107997]

Yvette Cooper: There is only one licensed manufacturer of BCG vaccine in the United Kingdom—Medeva Pharma. Over the past months, this company has experienced severe manufacturing problems with their BCG production facility in Speke, Liverpool. Medeva has indicated to the Department that the production volumes are not currently sufficient to support the routine schools programmes. Until manufacturing resumes in sufficient quantities, stocks are being used specifically for those at higher risk of tuberculosis. The Department has had no alternative but to request health authorities to suspend their routine schools immunisation programme.

As soon as the problems with the manufacturing facility have been resolved and this has been demonstrated by stocks becoming available in sufficient quantities, the Department will advise health authorities to recommence their routine schools programmes.

Since vaccines are biological products whose manufacture can never be guaranteed, continuity of supply can only be assured by having sufficient stock manufactured in advance, preferably from more than one manufacturer. The Department is in contact with Medeva Pharma to offer any assistance in resolving their manufacturing problems. The Department is also investigating the possibility of alternative suppliers who can produce licensed, batch released vaccine for the UK market.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 335W, on BCG vaccinations, what is the procedure for a doctor to apply for BCG vaccinations; to whom the application is made; who takes the decision on issuing the vaccination; and who monitors and records the results of the vaccination programme. [108673]

Yvette Cooper: BCG vaccine is ordered in the same way as for childhood vaccines. This may be direct from the distributor, Farillon, or via a local hospital pharmacy, dependent on local policy.

BCG will continue to be issued as now, as it becomes available, for higher risk groups, in particular to maintain selective neonatal immunisation of infants at higher risk of exposure to tuberculosis.

Uptake of BCG vaccine is recorded by National Health Service trusts and the information collated by the Department on central return KC50. Figures are published annually in the Department's Statistical Bulletin, "NHS Immunisation Statistics". Surveillance of tuberculosis is the responsibility of the Public Health Laboratory Service, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre. Vaccine uptake and the incidence of tuberculosis are monitored by both the Department and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, the independent expert committee that advises the United Kingdom Health Departments on immunisation matters.

NHSnet

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the development of NHSnet; and if he will make a statement. [108212]

Ms Stuart: NHSnet is the National Health Service's own secure internal network for voice and data services. It already links most NHS trusts and health authorities, and a proportion of GP practices. Increasingly it will become the main vehicle for communications between the Department and the NHS, and between and within NHS organisations. Development plans include:

to connect all computerised general practitioner practices with full e-mail and internet access

to use NHSnet for appointment booking, referrals, discharge information, radiology and laboratory requests and results in all parts of the country

to open a national electronic Library for Health with accredited clinical reference material on NHSnet to support clinical decision-making

in the longer term to support the development of telemedicine services between hospitals and GP surgeries.

NHS Dentistry

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that NHS dentistry is available throughout the UK. [109836]

Mr. Hutton: We recognise the problems of access to National Health Service dentistry which exist in parts of the country and which it inherited in 1997. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that, by the end of 2001, everyone should be able to find an NHS dentist simply by calling NHS Direct. We have already addressed the problem with the Investing in Dentistry initiative which generated up to 800,000 patient registrations with dentists, and the Personal Dental Service projects which include "phone and go" dental access centres. By the end of the year there will be about forty access centres in the areas which need them most, providing the full range of high quality NHS dentistry to patients who are not registered with a dentist. Further measures will be set out in the forthcoming strategy for NHS dentistry in England.

Dental Amalgams

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the toxic elements included in mercury-based amalgams in dentistry. [110484]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The principal elements used in dental amalgam are mercury, silver, copper and tin. All of these can be toxic at high doses but, apart from a few cases of hypersensitivity, there is no evidence of risk of systemic toxicity at the levels released from dental amalgam.

Shropshire Health Authority

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each year from 1992 the *(a)* total funding and *(b)* percentage increase in funding for Shropshire Health Authority; and if he will make a statement. [111917]

Mr. Denham: Health authorities have existed in their current form since 1 April 1996. Prior to 1 April 1996 allocations were made to Regional Health Authorities.

The table gives the information from 1996–97 onwards:

Year	*Total allocation (£000)*	*Percentage increase in allocation*
1996–97	162,708	4.05
1997–98	169,555	4.06
1998–99	178,325	4.86
1999–2000[1]	247,650	6.51
2000–01	265,676	6.89

[1] Allocations for 1999–2000 are not comparable with those for 1996–97 to 1998–99, which cover hospital and community health services only. 1999–2000 is the first year of unified allocations which cover hospital and community health services, prescribing and general practice infrastructure.

"Fit for the Future?"

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning the Centre for Policy on Ageing report, "Fit for the Future?", on standards for care homes; and if he will make a statement. [111781]

Mr. Hutton: The consultation period ended on 21 January 2000. A further two weeks grace was given for late arrivals and the 1,250 responses received within this period have been analysed. In total, 1,400 responses were received. The responses are being carefully considered before the standards and the timetable for their implementation are finalised. We hope to publish the finalised standards and the timetable for their implementation later this year.

NHS Trust Boards

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the real terms change in remuneration for NHS Trust Board members over the last three years *(a)* nationally and *(b)* for each region. [112449]

Mr. Denham: National Health Service trusts and health authorities are placed into one of three bands according to their turnover (for trusts) or their total cash

allocation (for health authorities). Remuneration for non-executive members of NHS boards between 1993 and 31 March 1999 was as follows:

Band	*Remuneration (£)*
Chairs	
1	19,285
2	17,145
3	15,125
Non-executives	
all bands	5,000

Remuneration was increased from 1 April 1999 by 2.8 per cent., giving the following current levels:

Band	*Remuneration (£)*
Chairs	
1	19,825
2	17,625
3	15,550
Non-executives	
all bands	5,140

These rates apply to all NHS regions.

NHS Vacancies

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many NHS vacancies there are for *(a)* doctors, *(b)* health visitors and *(c)* the professions allied to medicine; and how many such posts in each category have been vacant for longer than six months; [112456]

(2) how many vacancies there are in the NHS for managerial and administrative staff; how many have been vacant for longer than six months; and if he will make a statement. [112459]

Mr. Denham: The available information is contained in the table.

Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey: vacancies in NHS trusts by England; doctors, health visitors PAMs and admin. and estates staff at 31 March 1999

Whole time equivalents

	Total vacancies [1]	*Three month vacancies* [2]
Consultants[3]	930	440
Other doctors and dentists[4]	270	60
Health visitors	270	100
Professions allied to medicine (PAMs)	2,580	860
Admin. and estates staff	3,250	640

[1] Posts that Trusts were actively trying to fill at 31 March 1999
[2] Posts that had been vacant for three months or more at 31 March 1999
[3] Excludes dental consultants
[4] Excludes training grades
Note:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
Source:
Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey 1999

NHS Employment

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many managers and administrators were employed by the NHS in each of the last five years; at what cost; what was the total cost to the NHS of management and administration in each of those years; and if he will make a statement. [112400]

Mr. Denham: The available information is contained in the tables.

National Health Service Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): Administration and estates staff working in the senior manager, manager, and clerical and administrative areas of work, in England as at 30 September of each year

whole-time equivalent

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Senior Managers and Managers	20,050	20,590	21,430	21,850
Administrative and Clerical	133,12	132,29	131,86	132,96

Notes:
Figures are rounded to the nearest ten
Figures from before 1995 were not collected on a comparable basis
Source:
Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Paybill for Administrative and Clerical Staff, Managers and Senior Managers, in the NHS in England for 1994–95 to 1998–99

£ million

	Managers and Senior Managers	*Administrative and Clerical*
1994–95	716	1,582
1995–96	792	1,647
1996–97	867	1,731
1997–98	912	1,766
1998–99	953	1,866

Source:
Health Authority and NHS Trust financial returns

Paybill costs of staff in senior management, management and administrative and clerical grades are not a reliable indicator of overall administration costs because they include, for example, large numbers of support staff employed to enable medical staff to concentrate on treating patients. In addition, salary measures do not include the non-staff costs of management, such as Health Authority accommodation.

Expenditure against the published definition of NHS management costs is the most reliable indicator of the cost of administration in the NHS. The definition of management costs includes the staff costs of managers in Health Authorities, Primary Care Groups and NHS Trusts, as well as non-staff of HAs and PCGs.

Total NHS Management costs in 1998–99 prices

	£ million
1995–96	2,063
1996–97	1,949
1997–98	1,846
1997–98	[1]1,928
1998–99	1,870

[1] Rebased
Note:
The definition of management costs was revised for 1998–99 to capture some management activity previously excluded, mainly related to NHS Trusts purchasing private sector support services. To provide a consistent time series, the 1997–98 figure was rebased on the new definition.
Source:
Health Authority and NHS Trust annual accounts

Long-term Care

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to respond to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care; and if he will make a statement. [111999]

Mr. Hutton: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 2 December that the Government were broadly accepting one of the Royal Commission's main recommendations by establishing a National Care Standards Commission. We are also implementing several of the Royal Commission's other recommendations—such as extending direct payments to people over 65. We are looking at other changes as part of the Year 2000 Spending Review, which will be completed this summer. We will then publish a White Paper.

Dental and Optical Examinations

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people, who do not qualify for free examinations, have received *(a)* dental and *(b)* eye examinations in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [112398]

Mr. Hutton: Data on dental examinations in England is available only for the last two years.

The estimated number of claims for a standard or extensive examination for charge paying patients under the General Dental Service is shown in the following table. The figures are for claims scheduled for payment by the Dental Practice Board for the year's 1997–98 and 1998–99, for England. The number of people will be smaller because some will have more than one examination in a year. Charge payers include some patients whose charges are partly remitted.

England

Million

	1997–98	*1998–99*
Standard examination	13.0	13.6
Extensive examination	1.6	1.7

The Department started an annual sample survey of private sight tests in 1993. Estimates of the number of tests undertaken in Great Britain are as follows.

Year	*Million*
1993–94	6.589
1994–95	6.465
1995–96	7.009
1996–97	6.689
1997–98	7.115
1998–99	7.430

Since 1 April 1999, everyone aged 60 and over has been eligible to receive a free, National Health Service sight test and numbers of NHS sight tests have increased by some 50,000 per week in England alone. We expect to see some reduction in the number of private sight tests in 1999–2000 as a result of the increased NHS activity.

Patients Charter

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations have been cancelled in breach of the patients charter in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [112460]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is available in the Library.

Hospital Closures

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those *(a)* NHS community hospitals and *(b)* other NHS hospitals which have closed since May 1996; and if he will make a statement. [112399]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Integrate Services, Warrington

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the papers relating to Integrate Services in Warrington which are currently held by the North-West Regional Executive; [111822]

(2) what steps his Department has taken to review the legal status of holiday assets currently owned by Integrate Services in Warrington and purchased from Section 64 grant; and if he will make a statement; [111818]

(3) if he will set up an inquiry into the destruction of papers relating to Integrate Services by the Warrington Community Healthcare Trust; and if he will make a statement; [111819]

(4) what discussions his Department has had with the North Cheshire Health Authority on ways of ensuring that residents currently cared for by Integrate Services in Warrington continue to benefit from assets purchased with money given for their care; and if he will make a statement; [111820]

(5) what discussions he has had with *(a)* the North-West Regional Executive and *(b)* North Cheshire Health Authority on the case of Integrate Services since 9 February; and if he will make a statement. [111823]

Mr. Hutton: Integrate Services is currently the subject of an inquiry by the Charity Commissioners. I understand that the Commissioners have confirmed that the organisation enjoys full legal ownership of these holiday assets.

While I am concerned by the apparent lack of robust handover arrangements for documentation when management responsibility for the Section 64 grant changed hands, there are already clear guidelines on record keeping by National Health Service bodies. At the time of the transfer from Warrington Community Healthcare NHS Trust to North Cheshire Health Authority, HC(89)20 was in force. I am, therefore, instructing North Cheshire Health Authority to investigate the continuity of record keeping with regard to this Section 64 grant.

The NHS Executive North West has had, and continues to have, ongoing discussions with North Cheshire Health Authority and briefs Ministers accordingly. There have been no direct discussions between Ministers and the health authority on this subject.

Papers held by the Regional Office include correspondence from the Royal College of Nursing, two members of the management committee of Integrate Services and the new Chair of that Management Committee; the health authority paper; the independent report; and related briefing material.

Midwives

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of practising midwives are aged under 30 in *(a)* England, *(b)* the North-west Region and *(c)* North Cheshire Health Authority. [111817]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): All registered midwives by ageband, within the north-west region, north Cheshire health authority and in England as at 30 September 1998

Percentage

	Under 30	*30 and over*
England total	11	89
North-west region	9	91
North Cheshire HA	7	93

Notes:
1. Percentages are calculated from figures expressed as whole-time equivalents
2. Figures exclude learners and agency staff

Source:
Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Dentistry (Pensions)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health If he will make a statement on the effects which staging the fee increases to general dental practitioners for the financial years 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 will have on general dental practitioners' pensions. [112031]

Mr. Denham: National Health Service pensions are based on actual levels of pensionable remuneration and not on deemed or notional earnings. Where staging occurs, only earnings actually received are taken into account in the calculation of pensions. The effect of staging, therefore, is slightly to reduce the pension from the figure that would be payable had staging not occurred. The degree to which this happens for an individual will depend on when that person retires and their earnings in the years before the staging and during the years when the staging applied. General Dental Practitioners' pensions are calculated on total career earnings uprated in accordance with a formula agreed with the profession.

Locums

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* numbers of and *(b)* cost to the NHS of employing locum doctors in (i) general practice and (ii) hospital medicine for each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [112395]

Mr. Denham: Figures on the number of locum staff working in the hospital medical sector are no longer collected centrally. The figures were last collected in September 1996 when there were 2,500 hospital medical locums. Figures on the number of locum staff working in general practice are not collected centrally.

The latest available information on costs to the National Health Service for locum medical staff in the Hospital and Community Health Service is shown in the table.

Breakdown of Locum doctors (Medical/Dental) for HCHS expenditure

£000

	TFR3	*HFR 25*	*Total*
1994–95	108,851.61	164,250.81	273,102.43
1995–96	109,321.44	1,876.80	111,198.24
1996–97	116,581.75	409.23	116,990.98

Notes:
Data after 1996–97 is not available
Data provided by FPB-ATA

Locum costs in general practice are not separately identified from other practice expenses. Information is available only on locum allowances paid to GPs in respect of attendance at training courses, prolonged study leave, sickness and confinement. Expenditure was as follows:

Analysis of General Medical Service Non Cash Limited Expenditure for Locum Allowance, England 1994–95 to 1998–99

£

	For single handed rural GPs attending training courses	*Sickness*	*Confinement*	*Prolonged study leave*	*Total*
1994–95	95,761	4,112,600	2,199,685	624,455	7,032,501
1995–96	122,616	4,629,919	2,167,949	623,081	7,543,565
1996–97	213,320	4,157,683	2,197,246	748,824	7,317,073
1997–98	419,450	3,898,453	2,524,973	1,032,067	7,874,943
1998–99	238,260	4,545,889	3,051,148	1,438,380	9,273,677

Sources:
1. Annual financial returns of family health services authorities, 1994–95 and 1995–96
2. Annual financial returns of health authorities, 1996–97 to 1998–99

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 2 March 2000

DEFENCE

Cadets

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he is taking to improve recruitment to the cadet branch of HM armed forces. [105144]

Mr. Spellar: Recruitment to the cadets is undertaken through the local and national initiatives of each individual cadet force. The three Services provide funding and advice to these national youth organisations, with the help of the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Associations.

Army funds support Army Cadet Force recruitment, including the recent "Attitude" marketing campaign. Phase 2 of this successful national campaign to recruit cadets and adult instructors will start later this year.

RAF funding and advice supports local recruiting initiatives by the Air Training Corps. Advice and support from the Services and MOD is available where required to units of the Combined Cadet Forces. Although the Sea Cadet Corps is an independent charitable body, the Royal Navy provides support and advice in the context of recruitment.

In addition, we fully expect that the additional £3 million we have made available over a four-year period following the Strategic Defence Review, for a range of manpower, training equipment, and infrastructure enhancements for all cadet forces, will further encourage cadet recruitment.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [110727]

Dr. Moonie: In line with the MOD's Departmental Plan on the Greening Government Initiative, my Department is looking at ways to ensure that any use of peat in the maintenance of its grounds is substituted by organic waste. This reflects the advice within the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Greening Operations Guide.

Defence Catering Agency

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to transfer the Defence Catering Agency to York. [109444]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 7 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 33W, to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key).

Nuclear Weapons Exercises

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names, dates and locations of the nuclear weapons exercises being organised by his Department during 2000. [112366]

Mr. Spellar: The following nuclear weapon accident response exercises are planned to be held during 2000:

Date	*Name*	*Location*
May 2000	Exercise BOWLINE	Coulport
June 2000	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	Wiltshire
July 2000	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	Oxfordshire
July 2000	Exercise SENATOR	North of England
September 2000	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	South Glamorgan
September 2000	UK/US Exercise	Norfolk
October 2000	RAF Station NAR team Standardisation[1]	Suffolk
November 2000	RAF nuclear weapon convoy Standardisation	To be decided

[1] RAF Station Nuclear Accident Response (NAR) teams provide immediate response forces for the air transportation of nuclear weapons

European Peacekeeping Corps

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence further to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 63W, on the European Peacekeeping Force, what is his policy on the level of capabilities the European Peacekeeping Corps should attain, in terms of *(a)* operational deployment range and *(b)* optimal UK commitment. [112387]

Mr. Hoon: As explained in my answer of 24 January, there is no intention of creating a "European Peacekeeping Corps". At the Helsinki European Council EU states committed themselves to being able, by 2003, to deploy rapidly and sustain up to 50,000–60,000 troops capable of the full range of Petersberg tasks.

The operational range of these forces and the question of national contributions are being discussed as part of the follow-up work to Helsinki under the Portuguese Presidency. No decisions have yet been taken.

Embassy Staff

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies have been carried out since 1 January 1995 on the value for money provided by defence attachés and advisers at British embassies; and on what dates each of them was concluded. [112368]

Mr. Hoon: The MOD in conjunction with the FCO carried out a detailed and comprehensive review of attaché and adviser placement and their roles as part of the follow up work to the Strategic Defence Review. This review, which was approved by the Defence Council on 20 September 1999, determined where British Defence attachés and advisers should be accredited to best serve British Defence interests abroad. The Official Committee for Service Attachés and Advisers (OCSAA) subsequently scrutinised each post in every Defence Section prior to approving, on 20 October 1999, the implementation plan which will bring into effect the changes agreed in the review.

Dimming Sun

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the nuclear weapon accident exercise, Dimming Sun, will be held, and where. [112365]

Mr. Spellar: It is planned to hold the UK/US joint nuclear weapon accident response exercise Dimming Sun in Norfolk in June 2003. The precise date and location have not yet been finalised.

Royal Irish Regiment

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what has been the outcome of the investigation by the officer in command into the appearance in photographs of members of the Royal Irish Regiment in uniform with banners of the Orange Order; [112686]

(2) if members of the Royal Irish Regiment have been disciplined as a result of their appearance in photographs in uniform with banners of the Orange Order. [112685]

Mr. Spellar: The circumstances surrounding the publication of a photograph of the Royal Irish Regiment in the Andersonstown News on 15 January 2000 are currently under investigation by the Special Investigations Branch of the Royal Military Police. The investigation is in its final stages and a report is expected later this month.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence further to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 67W, on the Royal Irish Regiment, when the Royal Military Police will complete its investigation; and if he will publish its conclusions. [111945]

Mr. Spellar: The investigation by the Special Investigations Branch of the Royal Military Police is in its final stages and a report is expected later this month. I will write to my hon. Friend in the light of the outcome and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Microwave Communications Link

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what purpose and at what cost he has purchased a microwave communications link between Shrewton telephone exchange and Salisbury Plain training area. [112546]

Mr. Spellar: This microwave telephone link will allow greater access to the public telephone system for troops wishing to make welfare calls from the training facility at Copehill Down. The cost to the Ministry of Defence was £6,674.

HMS Vigilant

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the naval and other vessels that were within one hour's sailing distance from the site of the Solway Harvester disaster on 11 January; what was the precise location of HMS Vigilant at this time; what was the cause of damage to the radar system of HMS Vigilant and what was the time taken for repairs carried out before docking at Faslane, while in harbour, and elsewhere; and if he will place a copy of the submarine's log for the period from 8 to 15 January in the Library. [111949]

Mr. Spellar: No Royal Navy ships or submarines were within one hour's sailing distance from the site of the Solway Harvester disaster on 11 January. At the time the mayday was raised, the nearest vessel was the RFA Bayleaf, which was some 30 miles west of the Solway Harvester's position. HMS Vigilant was in the Atlantic Ocean conducting training in deep water. I am withholding her precise location under exemption 1 (Defence Security and International Relations) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. HMS Vigilant returned to Faslane on 14 January for repairs to a defective seal on her radar mast, sailing again on 16 January.

Private Security Companies

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the private security companies employed *(a)* currently and *(b)* in the past three years by his Department; for what purpose they have been employed; at what cost; and at which locations. [112547]

Mr. Spellar: The following private security companies are currently employed by the Ministry of Defence:

Burns International Security Services (UK) Ltd.

Chilport (UK) Ltd.

Chubb Guarding Services

Dardan Security Ltd.

Initial Security Ltd.

Medway Ports

RCO Support Services

Reliance Security Services Ltd.

Securicor Guarding Ltd.

Securi-Guard Ltd.

Serco

Solo Security Services

Thorn Security.

Other private security companies employed by the Ministry of Defence in past three years (who are no longer employed) are:

Centuryan Security Ltd.

Guarda Security plc.

Private security companies have been employed on general guarding duties at some 40 sites (just under half of which are awaiting disposal) throughout Great Britain. The total whole life cost of current contracts is £32 million.

Private security companies are employed at the following sites:

Alamein Barracks

Ashford Barracks

Cambridge House

Cheadle Hume (Pay and Pensions Agency)

Cwrt-Y-Gollen Training Camp

Defence Clothing and Textile Agency, Caversfield

Defence Munitions Depot, Broughton Moor

Defence Storage and Distribution Centre, Aston Down

Distribution Outlets, Aldershot

Finningley and Harrogate (Army Site and Government Buildings)

Garats Hay Barracks
Glen Parva Barracks
HMS Forest Moor
HMS Forward
HMS Osprey
Holton Heath
Merryfield Airfield, RNAS Yeovilton
NATO Mooring and Support Depot, Fairlie by Largs
Norton Manor Camp, Taunton
Oakington Bks
Ordnance Support Unit, Burscough
Pembroke Dock
RAF Cowden
RAF Edzell
RAF Greenham Common
RAF Kemble
RAF Macrihanish
RAF Oakhanger
RAF Quedgeley, Moreton and Stirling Lines
RAF West Raynham
RAF Wroughton
RM Sites, Plymouth
RMB Chivenor
RN Sites, Plymouth
RN Sites, Portsmouth
Saighton Camp, Chester
Shoeburyness (Army Site)
St. Georges Bks, Gosport
Support Engineering Facility, Exeter
Waste Disposal Site, Gillingham
Woodbridge (Army Site).

Mozambique

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date he received requests for help in disaster relief in Mozambique; what his response was; and what personnel and equipment have been provided. [112693]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence (MOD) was approached by the Department for International Development (DfID) on Saturday 26 February as to the availability of British military equipment in and around Mozambique. We advised them that there were no military assets in the region. Since then we have been examining, in conjunction with DfID, options for the deployment of MOD personnel and equipment from beyond the immediate area. An MOD team was sent to the region on 29 February to carry out reconnaissance and planning work.

As a result, on Wednesday 1 March we jointly announced a decision to provide four Puma helicopters and around 100 aircrew and support personnel to assist in the immediate rescue operation. We are continuing to work closely with DfID to determine what further help we can provide.

WALES

Local Government Remuneration

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has held with the First Minister on issuing guidance to *(a)* councillors, *(b)* council leaders and *(c)* elected mayors on future levels of remuneration. [104847]

Mr. Hanson *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* My right hon. Friend has discussions on issues affecting Wales with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on a regular basis. The Secretary of State has had no discussions with the First Secretary on issuing guidance to councils on future levels of remuneration or allowances. The setting of members' allowances is a matter for individual councils.

Under the present draft of the Local Government Bill, the National Assembly will have the power to make regulations to require councils in Wales to establish an independent panel to review councillors' allowances and pensions.

Child Poverty

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what research he has initiated into child poverty in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [107419]

Mr. Hanson: I have not initiated any research into child poverty in Wales. However, the Government are committed to tackling poverty and social exclusion in the UK. The Government's Poverty Strategy Report "Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion" launched in September 1999 set out a concerted cross-Government drive to highlight the underlying cases of poverty and social exclusion.

The National Assembly for Wales has set up a Social Exclusion Unit to look at poverty issues and will promote effective joint working to combat family poverty and social exclusion in Wales.

In addition, the Joint Ministerial Committee on Poverty has agreed to future joint working between the UK Government and the devolved administrations to tackle poverty across the UK.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent representations he has made to the Lord Chancellor concerning the future of magistrates courts in rural areas and small townships in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [107422]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have made no such representations to the Lord Chancellor.

The Government consider that magistrates courts are best managed locally by magistrates courts committees under the provision of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. Decisions concerning the future of magistrates courts in Wales, whether rural or urban, are for the relevant magistrates courts committee to determine, in consultation with the paying authority or authorisations.

Uniform Business Rate

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for *(a)* each local authority in Wales and

(b) Wales as a whole the amount of revenue that will be raised from the uniform business rate in (1) 1990–2000 and (2) 2000–01. [112306]

Mr. Hanson: Estimated figures for the amount of revenue that will be raised from the uniform business rate in 1999–2000 are as follows:

	£000
Isle of Anglesey	7,517
Gwynedd	29,616
Conwy	17,027
Denbighshire	14,135
Flintshire	29,315
Wrexham	23,850
Powys	16,504
Ceredigion	8,144
Pembrokeshire	20,032
Carmarthenshire	22,331
Swansea	40,712
Neath Port Talbot	26,524
Bridgend	25,450
The Vale of Glamorgan	16,934
Rhondda Cynon Taff	31,849
Merthyr Tydfil	8,505
Caerphilly	20,099
Blaenau Gwent	9,055
Torfaen	13,864
Monmouthshire	12,587
Newport	38,186
Cardiff	90,481
Wales	522,717

Since July 1999 business rates in Wales have been the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), of 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 524W, what comparators he used to calculate the PPP infrastructure companies' estimated efficiency improvement of 20 per cent. [11592]

Mr. Hill: The briefing note PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) published in December 1999 assumed that under the Public Private Partnership for London Underground the private sector infrastructure companies will bring efficiency improvements of 20 per cent. The PwC note, which has been placed in the House Library, sets out the basis for assuming this level of efficiency savings, which is in line with the experience of other industries where the financing and management of infrastructure programmes has been transferred to the private sector.

Since the PwC briefing note was published, Arthur Andersen and the London School of Economics have completed a report for the Treasury Taskforce called "Value for Money Drivers in the Private Finance Initiative". This shows the PFIs of all types are, on average, delivering efficiency savings of 17 per cent.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 521W, covering investment in London Underground, if he will list the specific projects envisaged, indicating the estimated cost of each. [111591]

Mr. Hill: Under the terms of the Public Private Partnership (PPP) for London Underground, infrastructure companies will be required to implement a combination of specific projects and performance enhancements specified in output terms. The PPP will not, therefore, in general specify particular amounts of money to be spent, nor particular works to be carried out. It will be for bidders to decide what they have to do to meet the performance specification for each infrastructure company.

However, when the PPP competition was launched in June 1999 London Underground published a briefing document containing estimates of how much they then believed it would cost over the first 15 years to implement the performance regime under development for the PPP. This was broken down as follows:

Indicative projection of 15 year investment expenditure

£ million 1999–2000 prices

	Stations	*Lifts and escalators*	*Trains*	*Track*	*Civil infrastructure*	*Communications*	*Management systems*	*Signalling*	*Total*
Bakerloo	100	50	90	60	40	10	20	20	390
Central, Waterloo and City	220	90	100	160	100	30	10	70	780
Victoria	220	30	250	90	40	10	10	250	900
Northern[1]	320	70	—	180	40	10	20	310	950
Jubilee[2]	80	50	—	40	60	20	20	10	280
Piccadilly	220	50	500	180	50	20	20	150	1,190
Metropolitan, Circle, Hammersmith and City	330	20	590	210	170	40	10	330	1,700
District	210	20	250	130	100	30	10	220	970
East London[3]	50	—	—	10	130	—	10	—	200

[1] Northern Line train investment costs are contracted for under a separate PFI scheme and are excluded from these figures.
[2] Excludes operating and maintenance costs for the Jubilee Line Extension project.
[3] Excludes costs from potential project for extending East London Line.

Aircraft Near-misses

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the definition of a near miss between aircraft; how many such incidents have taken place at Heathrow in the past three years; and how many of those incidents occurred within three miles of Wargrave in Berkshire. [111259]

Mr. Mullin: The definition of a near miss (or Airprox) applied by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) is

> a situation in which, in the opinion of a pilot or controller, the distance between aircraft as well as their relative positions and speed have been such that the safety of the aircraft involved was or may have been compromised.

In the last three years (1997–99) there were four reported Airproxes in the London Heathrow (LHR) Zone, an area 24 nautical miles (nm) East-West by 16 nm North-South, centred on Heathrow. Wargrave does not lie in the LHR Zone but in the same period there were two reported Airproxes within a circle radius 3 nm centred on the town.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112145]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary on 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 233W.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list, for each of the last 10 years for which figures are available, the total amount NATS has *(a)* borrowed from and *(b)* repaid to the Civil Aviation Authority and HM Treasury and *(c)* the total amount of capital investment made by NATS; [112393]

(2) what profits NATS has made in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [112392]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* NATS was incorporated as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Civil Aviation Authority on 1 April 1996—figures are not available for NATS as a separate entity before that time. The relevant figures for NATS for financial years 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 are as follows:

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Profits after interest and tax	13.7	14.7	30.9
Borrowed from CAA	0	2.1	12.0
Repaid to CAA	31.3	28.2	67.9
Capital Investment	56.5	42.7	35.7

Profits in 1998–99 were up due to higher than expected levels of traffic, and a reduction in NATS' operating costs. Borrowing repayments increased in order to allow NATS to carry increased funds forward to 1999–2000, to prepare for the higher levels of capital expenditure on the New Scottish Centre expected in that year. Profits in 1998–99 were up due to higher than expected levels of traffic, and a reduction in NATS' operating costs. Borrowing repayments increased in order to allow NATS to carry increased funds forward to 1999–2000, to prepare for the higher levels of capital expenditure on the New Scottish Centre expected in that year.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112661]

Ms Armstrong: The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those bodies in existence prior to May 1997, and the 1998 and 1999 editions list bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of "Public Bodies" have been placed in the Library of the House. They are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet—office.gov.uk/quango).

Marine Accidents Investigation Branch

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase the staff and funding of the Marine Accidents Investigation Branch; and if he will make a statement. [111824]

Mr. Hill: The staffing and funding requirements of the Marine Accident Investigation Branch are kept under constant review.

Three additional staff were recruited in 1999—one accident investigator and two administrative staff. A further accident investigator has been recruited this year and is expected to be in post within the next few months. Another investigator may be recruited later in the year for one year to assist with Lord Justice Clarke's inquiries into the Marchioness disaster.

London Mayor

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the cost to public funds is of the leaflet "Your questions answered about electing a Mayor and Assembly for London"; how many copies of the leaflet *(a)* have been and *(b)* will be printed; how the leaflet will be distributed; and at what cost to public funds. [112490]

Mr. Hill: Six million copies of the leaflet have been printed. They are available in nine languages, including English, as well as in braille, large print and on audio cassette. Just over three million leaflets are being distributed to households in London. Two million are being distributed to customers involved in transactions with Post Office Counters in London. The rest are being distributed through local authorities, voluntary bodies and in response to requests for information through a telephone help line and a website. The total cost of printing, translating and distributing the leaflets through the Post Office's commercial direct mail service is estimated to be £475,000.

Flooding, Melton

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide financial assistance to Melton Borough Council

under the Bellwin Scheme in respect of costs incurred following flooding in the area on 25 December 1998 and 16 January 1999. [113149]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified in this case given the exceptional circumstances. A scheme will, therefore, be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant has generally been paid to authorities at a rate of 85 per cent. of their eligible expenditure above a threshold. However, a Bellwin scheme was activated for Melton as a result of the 1998 Easter floods. Since Melton have already spent over their threshold for 1998–99 in dealing with that emergency, it seems reasonable that they should not have to do so in dealing with further incidents in the same financial year. I therefore propose to waive the threshold.

Trains

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if there is an exemption order for the fleet of new Class 175 trains to be introduced into service by First North Western Trains Ltd. in respect of any of the provisions of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998; and if he will make a statement. [113284]

Mr. Hill: As my predecessor explained in her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) on 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 167W, we are expecting to receive a number of exemption applications from train and tram operating companies whose designs for new rail vehicles were well advanced prior to the 1998 Regulations coming into force.

We have received an application from First North Western Trains Ltd. relating to the new Class 175 trains they wish to introduce into service. The exemptions, have been discussed with our statutory advisers the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. An exemption Order relating to the exemption of these trams has been laid in Parliament today. Copies are available from the Library.

The exemptions will not prevent disabled people from using the new trams or trains. Indeed, we believe that their introduction will make a significant contribution to improving mobility opportunities for disabled people.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Judicial Review (DPP)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General in how many instances in the past three years decisions of the Director of Public Prosecutions have been subject to judicial review; what the outcome was in each instance; and in what percentage of reviews the original decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions has been upheld. [111947]

The Solicitor-General: The information requested is not collated centrally. The table shows the information for the last three years (i.e. 1997–99) which has been collated from various sources and is the best available information at present. Percentages may not give an accurate picture as such small numbers are involved but, where leave for judicial review was granted, the decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions was fully upheld in 56 per cent. of the cases and partly upheld in 6 per cent. of cases.

Year	*Number of DPP's decisions subject to judicial review*	*Outcome*
1997	6	3 applications dismissed 2 applications allowed 1 application withdrawn
1998	2	2 applications allowed
1999	8	1 application allowed 6 applications dismissed 1 application dismissed in part

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General in how many instances in the past three years decisions of the Director of Public Prosecutions have been subject to judicial review; what the outcome was in each instance; and in what percentage of reviews the original decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions has been upheld. [111943]

The Solicitor-General: During the years 1997, 1998 and 1999, four applications have been made for judicial review of decisions of the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland in connection with his functions under the Prosecutions of Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. In one case, the application for review was dismissed after a full hearing. In two cases, the application was withdrawn following upon correspondence between the parties. In one case, leave to apply has been granted pending a full hearing. The percentage of reviews where the original decision of the Director has been upheld by the Divisional Court in the three years considered is 100 per cent.

A decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland not to prosecute a case was successfully challenged by judicial review in 1996. Although the court gave an oral judgment in December 1996 quashing the Director's decision, a written judgment was not handed down until February 1998.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement concerning the Crown Prosecution Service as prosecuting authority and the case of Senator Pinochet. [106948]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service as prosecuting authority for England and Wales has advised the Metropolitan Police Service that the material provided by the Kingdom of Spain for the purposes of the extradition proceedings would not be admissible in a criminal prosecution in England and Wales and could not be put into admissible form without a full police investigation. On the material presently available to the CPS, therefore, there is no realistic prospect in this jurisdiction of convicting Senator Pinochet of any criminal offence.

The Crown Prosecution Service has also advised the Metropolitan Police Service that, in view of the independent medical report on Senator Pinochet commissioned by the Home Secretary and taking into

account representations made to the Home Secretary concerning the reports, no court in England and Wales would allow a trial of Senator Pinochet to take place, whatever the evidence.

The CPS advised the police further that the allegations contained in the Swiss, both French and both Belgian requests did not disclose offences which could be tried here since the conduct alleged in each of the requests occurred before the relevant legislation came into force.

I was consulted about this matter by the DPP and agree with these conclusions.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Trade Union Recognition

1. **Mr. Ottaway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received regarding the adequacy of the consultation period for statutory trade union recognition. [111530]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have received no representations on this matter.

E-commerce

22. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to provide a network of support for those businesses which trade on the internet. [111553]

25. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what further measures he intends to take to assist small businesses to take advantage of e-commerce. [111556]

Ms Hewitt: We have established a network of 100 support centres throughout the UK under the Information Society Initiative (ISI) at which businesses can get impartial, jargon-free advice and support. In England, these Centres will be fully integrated into the new Small Business Service.

We have also worked with the digital content sector—which includes many key service and content providers for e-commerce based businesses—to agree with them an Action Plan for Growth. This was published on 29 February and copies are available in the Library of the House. We are now working in partnership with the newly formed Digital Content Forum to take forward the Plan's proposals.

Beyond this, work is under way to develop a new, industry led mentoring scheme for internet based start-ups, building on recommendations in the Performance and Innovation Unit's report e-commerce@its.best.uk.

Mineworkers Pension Funds

23. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the use of surpluses from the mineworkers pension funds. [111554]

Mrs. Liddell: Surpluses in the coal pension schemes (The Mineworkers' Pension Scheme and the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme) are split 50/50 between the membership of the schemes and the Government in our role as guarantor to the schemes.

In accordance with Coal Industry Act 1994 (Sch.5, paragraph 2(10)), all surpluses received by the Secretary of State must be paid into the Consolidated Fund. However, under Government Accounting rules, receipts can be used to offset related expenditure by the Department concerned. In this case, the Treasury has agreed that DTI may, for the present, retain pension fund receipts to help offset expenditure on liabilities inherited from British Coal.

Family-friendly Employment Policies

26. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he is making on encouraging businesses to adopt family-friendly employment policies. [111557]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will shortly be announcing details of the Government's campaign to promote good practice that both benefits the business and enables employees to balance work and the rest of their lives better. It will be delivered in partnership with leading employers and others.

The campaign will build on the framework of rights to maternity leave, parental leave and emergency time off which came into force last December.

National Minimum Wage

28. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy that the purchasing power of the national minimum wage including the 10p increase recently announced is maintained in future. [111559]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government have always made clear that there should be no automatic mechanism for making changes to the national minimum wage rate.

We have asked the independent Low Pay Commission to continue monitoring the minimum wage and to examine the case for an increase.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate how many 21-year-olds would be entitled to the full minimum wage if they were treated as adults rather than young people; what estimate he has made of the impact of such a change *(a)* nationwide and *(b)* in the constituency of Hereford; and if he will make a statement. [112430]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The total number of 21-year-olds entitled to the national minimum wage is, according to Autumn 1999 Labour Force Survey figures, around 440,000. Of these fewer than 20,000 would benefit from being entitled to the full national minimum wage rate rather than the rate for young people, according to the Low Pay Commission's estimate, which covers Great Britain. There are no figures available for individual constituencies.

I also refer the hon. Member to the Government's detailed response to the Low Pay Commission's report, placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament on 22 February 2000, which explains the Government's position on 21-year-old workers and the national minimum wage.

Nuclear Safety

29. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure safety at nuclear installations. [111560]

Mrs. Liddell: The primary responsibility for ensuring safety at nuclear licensed sites falls to the licensee. Safety is independently monitored and regulated by the Health and Safety Executive's Installations Inspectorate.

Both for licensees and for Ministers, safety at nuclear installations is the top priority. In particular, in their capacity as shareholder of BNFL and sponsor of UKAEA, Ministers make it clear they expect licensees to respond in a constructive and timely way to any regulator concerns.

Hi-tech Electronics Firms (South Devon)

30. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to assist the development of a centre for high technology electronics firms in South Devon; and if he will make a statement. [111561]

Ms Hewitt: Although I am not aware of a proposal for such a development, my Department, through the Government Office for the South West, stands ready to advise on assistance that may be available, for example, through the Enterprise Fund.

Part-time Workers

34. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's consultation on its proposals to extend the rights of part-time workers. [111565]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The consultation on part-time work began on 17 January and ended on 27 February. We will now be looking closely at the responses before taking the next steps in implementation of the Directive.

Design and Innovation

35. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he next plans to meet chairmen of the regional development agencies to discuss their role in encouraging higher levels of investment in design and innovation. [111566]

Mr. Caborn: The Secretary of State met Regional Development Agency Chairmen on 13 December 1999. He has no immediate plans for further meetings. However, I meet with them regularly to discuss a broad range of economic development issues, including both investment and innovation.

Consumer Protection

36. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what account he takes of the interests of consumers in forming his Department's policies. [111567]

Dr. Howells: Our White Paper "Modern Markets: Confident Consumers" set out how we would bring the interests of consumers to the heart of government. We recognise that well-informed, empowered consumers are good for business. They help promote innovation and stimulate better value. Our policies reflect this important role of consumers in a modern economy.

Technology-based Companies

37. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to extend the availability of venture capital for technology-based companies. [111568]

Ms Hewitt: The Government have created a £180 million Enterprise Fund to address the difficulties growth businesses face in accessing appropriate finance. This Fund will complement existing market provision, using public resources to partner private sector funds to address acknowledged gaps in the market.

An integral part of the Enterprise Fund is the UK High Technology Fund. The Fund will raise some £105 million from the private sector alongside some £20 million of Government money to invest in the United Kingdom's early stage high technology businesses.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 10 November last year that Westport Private Equity Ltd. had been appointed to manage the UK High Technology Fund.

The Fund Manager has already secured over £50 million of private sector investment alongside the Government's investment of £20 million.

Post Offices

38. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the future of the sub-post office network in Britain. [111569]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are fully committed to a nationwide network of post offices, and are contributing nearly £500 million towards the cost of equipping the network with a modern, automated, online IT platform. This system, which will be installed at nearly 40,000 counter positions in some 18,000 post offices throughout the country, will enable the Post Office to improve its services to existing clients and to take advantage of new business opportunities in the marketplace. Under the provisions of the Post Office Reform Bill, the Postal Services Commission, assisted by the Post Office Users National Council will monitor developments in the network of post offices against published access criteria. In addition, the Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office is carrying out a study to identify the contribution made by post offices to the vitality of local communities, and to consider how the network can best contribute to the Government's objectives for the future.

Competition Policy

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received regarding the conduct of competition policy. [111550]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend and the Secretary of State and I receive a number of representations covering a variety of competition policy matters.

Single European Currency

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has

had with representation of business and commerce on the cost of replacing the pound with the single European currency. [111552]

Mr. Byers: I have regular meetings with business representatives to discuss a range of issues including the single currency.

Labour Market Reforms

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on business competitiveness of labour market reforms introduced since May 1997. [111558]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government's labour market policies help people into work and provide additional flexibility and security for those in work. These policies are good for individuals, good for business and good for the economy as a whole. Employment is at its highest ever level. Unemployment is at its lowest level for 20 years. Decent minimum employment standards promote employee commitment, reduce absenteeism and staff turnover and increase incentives for individuals and employers to invest in training and lifelong learning.

Textile Industry

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to assist the textile sector. [111562]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The DTI is currently funding around 30 projects to encourage the growth and competitiveness of the UK textiles and clothing industry. These projects cover research into product innovation and development, design, education and training, benchmarking and the development of supply chain partnerships.

On a national level, my Department has been actively involved in an industry led-group, the Textile and Clothing Strategy Group (TCSG), which has been established in direct response to concerns from the industry about its future. A draft report containing several recommendations aimed at helping safeguard the future of the sector has recently been produced by the Group and is currently out for consultation among the industry.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the Government's response to the recent consultation exercise upon the future for renewable energy. [101071]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) on 1 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 536–37W.

Clean Development Mechanism

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the potential for increased British exports under the Clean Development Mechanism of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. [112067]

Ms Hewitt: The UK Government fully support the aims of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM): to help achieve sustainable development and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We wish to see the CDM operate in a way that fully encourages business involvement to help achieve these goals.

It is too early usefully to quantify the effect of CDM activity on UK exports, since the rules for its operation will not be agreed until the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Sixth Conference of the Parties in November 2000.

However, we are already promoting business awareness of the CDM through, for example, our work with the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment (ACBE) and a joint DTI-DETR website and named contact points. Furthermore, British Trade International are appointing an Export Promoter for Energy and the Environment, who will work closely with the Power Sector Working Group and with two existing renewable energy Export Promoters, to raise awareness of, and developing, export opportunities arising from the Kyoto provisions.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he or officials of his Department have received from representatives of the British or foreign nuclear industry concerning the eligibility of nuclear power projects under the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol. [112068]

Ms Hewitt: My Department has received representations from a number of organisations, including representatives of the British nuclear industry, about the eligibility of nuclear power projects for the Clean Development Mechanism and has noted their concerns. Neither I, nor my officials, have received any representations from representatives of foreign nuclear industry.

Objective 2

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes were made in the draft map of authorities designated for Objective 2 status, including internal ward changes, prior to publication of the final map; and how such changes were made. [111920]

Mr. Caborn: The Government made some small changes in England and some in Scotland to the UK Objective 2 proposals which were submitted to the Commission on 8 October. The changes set out below were made following discussions with the European Commission, in order to meet the requirements of the Structural Fund Regulation on statistical data and size of each proposed area. The changes were made with the agreement of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for England, and of the Scottish Executive for Scotland.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if ECGD support has been *(a)* discussed, *(b)* requested and *(c)* granted for any projects of the South East Anatolia Development Project in Turkey other than the Ilisu Dam. [112329]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD support has not been granted for any project in the South East Anatolia Development Project, including Ilisu.

There are no current applications for projects in the South East Anatolia Development Project other than Ilisu and the wastewater treatment plant at Diyarbakir.

An informal preliminary inquiry was received in 1999 regarding a possible application for a subcontract on the Cizre project; no application has been received.

Because applications/records of discussions which do not result in a guarantee are kept for only a limited time after the exporter has advised that they may be closed, it is not possible to state definitively that no discussions were held, or requests for cover received, in the early years of the South East Anatolia Development Project.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money has been spent by his Department to date in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months; and what steps his Department has taken to encourage businesses to make preparations for the introduction of the euro. [112149]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer which the Economic Secretary gave to him on 29 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 233W.

Arms Exports

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what export credit support is *(a)* currently allocated and *(b)* under consideration, in respect of arms export decisions. [112411]

Mr. Caborn: As at the end of January 2000, guarantees in respect of defence-related exports accounted for £3,875 million of ECGD's amounts at risk, representing 22.3 per cent. of ECGD's total amounts at risk.

Information relating to business under consideration is commercial in confidence.

Zero Hours Contracts

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on *(a)* his Department's policy in respect of the House of Lords decision in the case of Carmichael and another *v.* National Power and *(b)* zero hours contracts. [112675]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The House of Lords decided the case of "Carmichael and another *v.* National Power" in the light of its own particular facts. Whether a particular contract between a worker and a work provider is one of service or for services, or some other type, remains a common law question of mixed fact and law to be assessed on a case by case basis.

The Government consider that zero hours contracts can contribute to the flexibility necessary for a modern labour market, provided there are mutual benefits for employers and employees. The National Minimum Wage and the Working Time Regulations have significantly reduced the scope for abuse of zero hours contracts, as will the regulations implementing the Part Time Work Directive when they come into force.

Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme. [111539]

Ms Hewitt: The Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme is a very successful scheme which, since its introduction in 1981, has guaranteed over 70,000 loans valued at around £2.5 billion.

It is now one of the component parts of the new Enterprise Fund and continues to play an important role in the Government's support for small businesses.

Shipbuilding

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what matters he discussed relating to domestic and international shipbuilding markets at his last meeting with representatives of management and trade unions in the United Kingdom shipbuilding industry. [111542]

Mr. Alan Johnson: On 13 October 1998, I attended the most recent meeting of the Shipbuilding Forum which comprises representatives of management and trade unionists in the shipbuilding industry, its suppliers and customers, as well as key Government Departments. At the Forum, I discussed a wide range of topics including the domestic and international ship market, UK competitiveness, productivity and employment, improvements the Department had made to the Shipbuilding Intervention Fund and the Home Shipbuilding Credit Guarantee Scheme and individual prospective orders. I also received reports on the projects which my Department is supporting to enhance the competitiveness of the industry.

Since that formal meeting, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have had other meetings with industry representatives—management and unions—as well as interested hon. Members. Again, discussion has included the wide range of topics I have just outlined.

TREASURY

ECOFIN

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 28 February; and if he will make a statement. [111885]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer attended the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers.

The Council agreed to publish the Code of Conduct Group (Business Taxation) Report of 23 November.

The UK and Danish Convergence programmes and the Stability programmes of Italy, Germany, Belgium and Spain were agreed. The UK Convergence programme was commended. The Council thought it appropriate that the programme stresses the securing of macro-economic stability supported by a sound budgetary position and

continued structural reform. The Council noted that the monetary framework of inflation targeting has been an important condition for securing low inflation expectations. The Council further noted that the UK convergence programme was fully in line with the Broad Economic Guidelines.

Discussion on the Broad Economic Guidelines and the Lisbon European Council showed general agreement on the need to push ahead with structural reforms, particularly in the labour market. The Chancellor's proposal to include timetables and benchmarking in Lisbon conclusions received wide support.

The Commission presented their report on the Functioning of Product and Capital Markets (the Cardiff Process). The Presidency concluded that this report was an important contribution to the Lisbon European Council.

Bio-diesel

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the impact on tax revenue of giving bio-diesel produced through recycling waste edible oils parity with fossil-based low petroleum gas; and if he will make a statement. [112452]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* A reduction of duty on bio-diesel produced through recycling waste edible oils, from the current diesel duty rate to the rate applicable to road fuel gas, would cost £35 million in a full year if 90,000,000 litres were to be produced. This is the maximum estimated UK production capacity, and does not take account of any possible imports. There is little information available to support the case for a duty reduction to the same level as road fuel gas.

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each year since 1978 the number of women who have exercised their right for the married women's option in national insurance. [112162]

Dawn Primarolo: The numbers of women in Great Britain who paid class 1 National Insurance Contributions at the reduced rate for each year since 1978–89 are given in Table 11 of "Contributions and Qualifying Years for Retirement Pension 1995/96—Volume 2", a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Employment Trends

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in work have been with their present employer for *(a)* three, *(b)* four, *(c)* five and *(d)* six or more years. [112153]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Frank Field, dated 2 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the length of time people have been with their present employer. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the ONS's major source of labour market data on individuals. Estimates from the LFS of the number of employees who had worked for their current employer for three, four, five or six or more years are given in the table below. The figures are for the United Kingdom and for the autumn (September to November) 1999 quarter, and are not seasonally adjusted.

Length of time employees had worked for their current employer UK, autumn 1999, not seasonally adjusted

	Thousand
Less than 3 years	10,066
3 years, but less than 4	1,616
4 years, but less than 5	1,283
5 years, but less than 6	1,117
6 or more years	10,002
All employees[1]	24,144

[1] Includes some employees who did not state how long they had worked for their current employer

Source:
ONS, Labour Force Survey

Earnings

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the (i) number and (ii) proportion of people in work who were below the *(a)* lower earnings limit and *(b)* the tax threshold for each of the last 30 years. [112154]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Frank Field, dated 2 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the people earning below the lower earnings limit and the tax threshold for the last thirty years.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the ONS's major source of labour market data on individuals. It can provide information on the earnings of employees and the number and proportion of employees earning below (a) the lower earnings limit for National Insurance contributions and (b) the tax threshold. This information is given in the attached table.

The LFS provides fuller coverage of people on low pay than another major source of earnings data, the New Earnings Survey (NES), and is the most appropriate source of data to answer this question. However, data on earnings in the LFS are only available from the winter (December to February) 1992/3 quarter onwards. The table gives data for autumn (September to November) quarters from 1992 to 1999. The data are for Great Britain and are not seasonally adjusted.

Employees with gross weekly earnings[1] below the National Insurance lower earnings limit and the tax threshold Great Britain, autumn quarters 1993 to 1999, not seasonally adjusted

Autumn quarters	*Weekly limit (£)*	*Thousands*	*Proportion of all employees[2]*
National Insurance lower earnings limit			
1993	56	2,340	10.9
1994	57	2,191	10.2
1995	58	2,265	10.3
1996	61	2,490	11.2
1997	62	2,449	10.8
1998	64	2,375	10.2
1999	66	2,210	9.4

Employees with gross weekly earnings [1] below the National Insurance lower earnings limit and the tax threshold Great Britain, autumn quarters 1993 to 1999, not seasonally adjusted

Autumn quarters	Weekly limit (£)	Thousands	Proportion of all employees [2]
Tax threshold [3]			
1993	66	2,782	13.0
1994	66	2,668	12.4
1995	68	2,753	12.6
1996	72	2,954	13.2
1997	78	3,143	13.8
1998	81	3,172	13.7
1999	83	2,947	12.6

[1] LFS earnings are based on those employees earning less than £100 per hour

[2] Bases for calculation of percentages exclude employees who did not give a valid response regarding their hourly or weekly earnings

[3] Single persons tax threshold

Source:

ONS, Labour Force Survey

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the numbers and proportions for full-time men and women workers who earned below two-thirds of average earnings for each of the last 30 years. [112157]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Frank Field, dated 2 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question regarding earnings of full-time male and female employees. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The New Earnings Survey (NES) is based on a one per cent. sample of employees in the PAYE system and is therefore likely to under-represent relatively low paid staff earning below the tax threshold, and in particular those who work part-time. Below is a table showing the requested information from the 1986 to 1999 New Earnings Surveys. This information is not available from 1970 to 1985.

We are only able to give percentages earning below specific thresholds, rather than numbers, because appropriate grossing factors for the NES sample are not available.

New Earnings Survey, April of each year (GB)

Full-time employees on adult rates, whose pay for the survey period was unaffected by absence. Percentage earning less than two-thirds of average gross weekly earnings

	Males	Females
1986	23.0	19.6
1987	24.4	20.8
1988	25.7	22.8
1989	26.1	23.7
1990	26.4	24.0
1991	27.2	23.8
1992	27.5	24.8
1993	28.4	25.3
1994	29.0	25.4
1995	29.2	25.5
1996	29.8	25.7
1997	29.5	25.7
1998	30.4	26.1
1999	30.3	26.7

Income Trends

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the proportions of income from work, social security and dividends, which make up total income; and if he will list the equivalent data for *(a)* 10, *(b)* 20 and *(c)* 30 years previously. [112161]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Frank Field, dated 2 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on proportions of income from work, social security and dividends.

The information available from the Family Expenditure Survey shows the proportions of income deriving from work, social security and investments as follows.

Proportion of gross income

Percentage

Source of income	1968	1978	1988	1998–99
Wages and salaries (including self-employment)	84	80	77	76
Social security benefits	9	12	12	12
Investments	3	3	5	4

Note:

The balance is made up of annuities and pensions, and other sources.

Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sampling variability.

SCOTLAND

Murder Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 743W, on murder statistics, if the entry in the table for 1996 includes the murders committed at Dunblane. [112165]

Dr. Reid: Yes. The entry for 1996 includes the 17 victims who were murdered at Dunblane.

Departmental Staff

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland in the last five years, what proportion of women employees in (i) his Department and (ii) executive agencies under the control of his Department, *(a)* returned to work after childbirth; *(b)* returned to work after childbirth before the end of maternity leave, indicating the (1) time-range and (2) mean time, *(c)* returned to work after childbirth on reduced working hours, indicating the average hours worked and *(d)* returned to work after childbirth full-time and subsequently reduced their hours. [109236]

Dr. Reid: The Civil Service as a whole is striving for an improved balance between work and family life. I understand that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office has provided my hon. Friend with some information in respect of the family friendly policies being developed as part of the Civil Service Reform programme. My own Department

follows the arrangements of the former Scottish Office. Wherever possible, we try to accommodate the wishes of those who take or return from maternity leave. This includes arrangements for alternative work patterns. However, I am afraid that detailed information in the form requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

PRIME MINISTER

Drug Misuse

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Prime Minister which Minister has responsibility for policy on *(a)* drug misuse and schools and *(b)* drug misuse and young people. [112382]

The Prime Minister: A number of Government Departments have interests and policy responsibilities for drug misuse and young people, principally the Home Office, the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment. Work across Government is co-ordinated by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, advised by the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister on what dates he has visited the United States since 25 April 1999; and on which of these occasions he met President Clinton. [112334]

The Prime Minister: I have not visited the United States since April 1999.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister on what dates since 3 September 1998 President Clinton has visited Britain to meet him. [112333]

The Prime Minister: President Clinton has not visited the United Kingdom since September 1998.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Prime Minister what additional projects are planned for the Performance and Innovation Unit; and if he will make a statement. [113147]

The Prime Minister: I have asked the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) to undertake a further project looking at effective leadership in delivering public services.

The project will look across the public sector and at international and private sector organisations. It will consider the needs of public sector leadership in the future; carry out an audit of the extent to which current activity aimed at developing leaders can be expected to meet those needs; make recommendations on the action needed across the public sector to get good leaders into place and enable them to operate effectively; and identify practical ways of increasing the diversity of public sector leadership.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards is the Sponsor Minister.

The PIU aim to complete the project work in the summer.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will answer the questions on Millennium Dome attendance and ministerial responsibility tabled by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead for answer on 17 January. [108039]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 February 2000]:* I refer my right hon. Friend to the replies I gave on 21 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 800W, and 28 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 84W.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what requirement there was that all foods sold meet the standards required of domestic producers in the contracts with the operators of catering outlets that operate in and around the Millennium Dome at Greenwich. [110506]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 10 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 237W.

Free Television Licences (Alyn and Deeside)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many families in Alyn and Deeside will benefit from the introduction of free television licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [111293]

Janet Anderson: This information is not available. 1991 Census information is out of date and no household survey has a sample size sufficient to make reliable estimates of qualifying households at a constituency or local authority level.

Tourism Summit

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will publish the list of invitees to the Tourism Summit; [112080]

(2) which Ministers will be attending the Tourism Summit; [112087]

(3) how many invitations to the Tourism Summit have been issued; and how many *(a)* acceptances, and *(b)* refusals have been returned. [112078]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* All Members of the EA Cabinet Committee and the Foreign Secretary were invited to nominate a Minister to attend the Summit. Ministers from the Scottish and Welsh devolved Administrations and from the Northern Ireland Assembly were also invited. Further invitations were also issued to Lord Haskins and Teresa Graham, Chairman and Deputy Chair of the Better Regulation Task Force, to David Quarmby, the Chairman of the British Tourist Authority; Alan Britten, Chairman of the English Tourism Council; Sir Ron Watson, Chairman of the Tourism Executive at the Local Government Association and Bob Cotton, the Chief Executive of the British Hospitality Association.

The following Ministers accepted invitations to the Summit which I chaired: Patricia Hewitt MP, DTI; Beverley Hughes MP, DETR; Tessa Jowell MP, DfEE;

Mike O'Brien MP, Home Office; Patricia Scotland, FCO; Stephen Timms MP, Financial Secretary, HM Treasury; Joyce Quin MP, MAFF; and Alasdair Morrison MSP.

Lord Haskins, Teresa Graham, David Quarmby, Alan Britten, Sir Ron Watson, and Bob Cotton also attended.

A number of officials were also present.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the total cost of providing and administering free television licences for over 75-year-olds, for each of the first five years of the scheme. [112164]

Janet Anderson: Estimates of £117 million in 2000–01 and £283 million in 2001–02 formed part of the pre-Budget Report. Updated estimates are being prepared and will be incorporated in the Department of Social Security's Departmental Report which is due for publication following the Budget. These are likely to be higher than the earlier estimates as a result of the final structure of the scheme.

Free Television Licences (Wirral, South)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many families in Wirral, South will benefit from the introduction of free television licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [110906]

Janet Anderson: This information is not available. 1991 Census information is out of date and no household survey has a sample size sufficient to make reliable estimates of qualifying households at a constituency or local authority level.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Industrial Injuries Scheme

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what plans he has to reform the industrial injuries scheme in respect of self-employed workers; and if he will make a statement. [111589]

(2) what recent *(a)* consultations he has conducted and *(b)* representations he has received concerning reforms of the industrial injuries scheme with respect to self-employed workers; and if he will make a statement. [111590]

Mr. Bayley: We continue to see a case for reforming the industrial injuries scheme to reflect better the needs of today's labour market and to improve incentives for prevention of work-related accidents and diseases, and incentives for rehabilitation back into work. Initial discussions with key stakeholders last year have confirmed our belief that there is scope for reform. However, much work remains to be done to decide the best way forward. Against the background of the current major programme of reform to other parts of the Social Security system, the work cannot be completed quickly.

The basis of the current scheme is that Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit is payable to employed earners who suffer a loss of faculty through an industrial accident or disease, and that those who undertake self-employment do so knowing that provision against industrial injury is their own responsibility.

We have not conducted further consultation, nor received recent representations, about reform of the industrial injuries scheme with respect to self-employed workers.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish a code of practice for use by the Child Support Agency of deduction from earnings orders for the enforcement of payment of child support arrears. [111778]

Angela Eagle: Deduction from earnings orders are an effective way of ensuring payment of child support where a non-resident parent chooses to pay in this way, or where other methods have failed.

Guidance for Child Support Agency staff on the use of such orders is contained in volume 9 of the Child Support Guide, a copy of which is in the Library.

Benefits Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the (i) numbers and (ii) percentages of single parents on *(a)* Income Support, *(b)* Income Support and the remainder of a Family Credit/Working Families Tax Credit award, *(c)* Income Support and Housing Benefit, *(d)* Working Families Tax Credit and Housing Benefit, *(e)* Housing Benefit and *(f)* other benefits. [112167]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Single parents receiving various benefits, Great Britain at a point in time [1]

	Number of claimants	*Percentage of single parents* [2]
Benefit		
Income Support	1,042,000	65.1
Income Support and Family Credit/ Working Families Tax Credit	14,000	0.9
Income Support and Housing Benefit	826,000	51.6
Working Families Tax Credit and Housing Benefit[3]	151,000	9.4
Housing Benefit	1,016,000	63.5
Other benefits		
Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance	14,000	0.9
Widow's Benefit	47,000	2.9
Family Credit	405,000	25.3
Disability Working Allowance	2,511	0.2

[1] Numbers are given at a point in time. For all benefits except Widow's Benefit and Housing Benefit information is given at August 1999. Housing Benefit and benefit combinations with Housing Benefit are given at May 1998 (latest figures available), and Widow's Benefit is given at March 1999.

[2] Percentage of lone parents is based on the caseload, as a proportion of official best estimates of the lone parent population for 1996 (provisional).

[3] Housing Benefit with Working Families Tax Credit information is not yet available as the Housing Benefit data predates the introduction of WFTC. Figures represent Housing Benefit with Family Credit.

Notes:

1. There will be a significant overlap between recipients of some benefits as a claimant may be in receipt of more than one Social Security Benefit.

2. Income Support, Family Credit/Working Families Tax Credit, Widows Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance information is based on a 5 per cent. sample and is therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Disability Working Allowance (DWA) figures are based on a 100 per cent. count of claims and are unrounded.
4. Widows Benefit information is based on a 1 per cent. sample and is therefore subject to a degree of sampling error. Figures are for those widows resident in GB and overseas and are in thousands.
5. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand, except DWA where exact figures are quoted.
6. Figures are based on all single parents with dependants, and not just those with a lone parent premium.
Sources:
1. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999.
2. Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999.
3. Family Credit Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999.
4. Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. count of claims.
5. Official Best estimates of the lone parent population taken from Population Trends.
6. Housing Benefit Management Information System annual 1 per cent. sample enquiries, taken on the second Thursday of May 1998.
7. Pensioners Strategy Computer System, March 1999.

Income Support/Supplementary Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the average number of children in single parent families claiming income support/ supplementary benefit for each of the last 30 years. [112158]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Average number of children in supplementary benefit/income support lone parent families, 1969–99

Year	*Average number of children*
1969	1.95
1970	1.93
1971	1.97
1972	1.92
1973	n/a
1974	1.94
1975	1.90
1976	1.89
1977	1.85
1978	1.80
1979	1.76
1980	1.73
1981	1.68
1982	1.69
1983	1.66
1984	1.65
1985	n/a
1986	1.64
1987	1.65
1988	1.68
1989	1.65
1990	1.68
1991	1.68
1992	1.69
1993	1.70
1994	1.72
1995	1.73
1996	1.74
1997	1.76
1998	1.77
1999 May	1.78
1999 November (latest)	1.79

Notes:
1. Lone parents are classified as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premium. Children are classified as aged 0–15 years.
2. The average number of children per lone parent family, is based on the Income Support lone parent caseload as a proportion of the total number of children in such families.
3. Average number of children figures have been rounded to 2 decimal places.
4. All numbers are given at a point in time. For 1969–74 and 1977–79 the month was November, for 1975–76 and 1980–84 the month was December, for 1986 the month was February, and for 1987 to the present time the month was May.
5. n/a = information not available.
6. Supplementary Benefit was replaced by Income Support in 1988.
Sources:
Income Support Statistics Annual Enquiries, 1969 to 1993.
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, 1994 to 1999.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of single parents were drawing income support or supplementary benefit in each of the last 30 years. [112166]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Percentage of lone parents receiving Supplementary Benefit/Income Support (IS), 1971–99

Year	*Percentage of IS lone parents receiving benefit*
1971	37
1972	n/a
1973	n/a
1974	n/a
1975	n/a
1976	40
1977	n/a
1978	39
1979	36
1980	36
1981	41
1982	45
1983	48
1984	52
1985	n/a
1986	57
1987	60
1988	64
1989	65
1990	64
1991	67
1992	70
1993	70
1994	69
1995	68
1996	66
1997	63
1998	60
1999	58
1999[1]	58

[1] November (latest)
Notes:
1. Numbers are given at a point in time. For 1971–74 and 1977–79 the month was November, for 1975–76 and 1980–84 the month was December, for 1986 the month was February, and for 1987 to the present time the month was May.
2. Lone parents are classified as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premium.
3. Sample sizes: 1971–76 Supplementary Pension cases 1 in 160 and Supplementary Benefit cases 1 in 40 1977–87 Supplementary Pension cases 1 in 200 and Supplementary Benefit cases 1 in 50 1988–92 1 in 100 1993–99 1 in 20.
4. Supplementary Benefit was replaced by Income Support in 1988.
5. 'N/A' information not available.
6. Population estimates upon which percentages have been based—official best estimates of the numbers of one parent families published in population trends—for the years 1995 and 1996 are provisional. These official best estimates are not available for 1983,

1997 and subsequent years; the best estimate for 1982 has been used for the 1983 percentage and the provisional best estimate for 1996 used for subsequent years from 1996.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Annual Enquiries, 1971 to 1993.
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, 1994 to 1999.
Official Best Estimates from Population Trends.

Lowest Income Decile

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the percentages of *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* households with children and *(c)* households without children who (i) are currently in the lowest income decile and (ii) were in that decile for 10, 20 and 30 years previously. [112160]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Percentage of individuals in each family type in the bottom decile

	Including the self-employed		*Excluding the self-employed*	
	BHC	*AHC*	*BHC*	*AHC*
1979				
Pensioners	22	19	23	21
Families with children	9	10	9	9
Families without children	5	6	5	6
1988–89				
Pensioners	14	8	15	9
Families with children	11	12	11	12
Families without children	7	8	7	9
1997–98				
Pensioners	11	6	12	6
Families with children	12	12	11	12
Families without children	8	10	7	9

Notes:

1. Information is derived from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data sets. 1979 is the earliest year for which DSS statistics are available.

2. Estimates for 1979 and 1988–89 are derived from the Family Expenditure Survey and relate to the United Kingdom. Estimates for 1997–98 are taken from the Family Resources Survey and relate to Great Britain. All estimates are subject to sampling error. Results for individual years are sensitive to the precise way in which household incomes are adjusted for household size and composition; the picture of changes over time is generally not sensitive to this.

3. Individuals are classified by the family types in which they live. Pensioners are here defined as a single person is of State pension age or over, or a couple where the man is of State pension age or over. A child is defined as an individual aged under 16 or an unmarried 16 to 18-year-old on a course up to and including 'A' levels or 'Highers' in Scotland.

4. The estimates are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs in line with HBAI conventions. Figures are also provided including and excluding the self-employed reflecting concerns over the accuracy of income information for the self-employed at the bottom of the income distribution. All figures for the bottom decile should be treated with caution; the bottom decile of reported incomes cannot safely be construed as the bottom decile of living standards.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the proportions of pensioners, unemployed, sick and disabled, single parents who compose the lowest decile in the distribution of income; and if he will list the equivalent data for 10, 20 and 30 years previously. [112330]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

The composition of the lowest decile of the income distribution based on available households below average income (HBAI) data
Percentage of bottom decile whose family type/economic status is:

	Including the self-employed		*Excluding the self-employed*	
	BHC	*AHC*	*BHC*	*AHC*
1979				
Pensioners	36	31	40	36
Head or spouse unemployed	15	16	17	17
Sick and disabled	8	8	8	9
Single with children	9	9	10	9
1988–89				
Pensioners	23	14	28	17
Head or spouse unemployed	27	30	31	35
Sick and disabled	6	5	7	6
Single with children	9	10	11	12
1997–98				
Pensioners	19	9	23	11
Head or spouse unemployed	18	23	21	27
Sick and disabled	5	4	5	5
Single with children	13	14	15	18

Notes:

1. Information is derived from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data sets. 1979 is the earliest year for which DSS statistics are available.

2. Estimates for 1979 and 1988–89 are derived from the Family Expenditure Survey and relate to the United Kingdom. Estimates for 1997–98 are taken from the Family Resources Survey and relate to Great Britain. All estimates are subject to sampling error. Results for individual years are sensitive to the precise way in which household incomes are adjusted for household size and composition; the picture of changes over time is generally not sensitive to this.

3. Individuals are classified by the family types in which they live and/or their economic status. Families may belong to more than one group. Pensioners are here defined as a single person who is of State pension age or over, or a couple where the man is of State pension age or over. A child is defined as an individual aged under 16 or an unmarried 16 to 18-year-old on a course up to and including 'A' levels or 'Highers' in Scotland. The sick and disabled in this analysis are those in receipt of at least one of the following benefits relevant to the period: invalidity benefit, incapacity benefit, disability living allowance, disability working allowance; war disability pension, attendance allowance, industrial injuries disablement benefit, mobility allowance, severe disability allowance, statutory sick pay and sickness benefit.

4. The estimates are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs in line with HBAI conventions. Figures are also provided including and excluding the self-employed reflecting concerns over the accuracy of income information for the self-employed at the bottom of the income distribution. All figures for the bottom decile should be treated with caution; the bottom decile of reported incomes cannot safely be construed as the bottom decile of living standards.

New Deal for Lone Parents

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many lone parents in *(a)* the target group and (ii) the non-target group who have gained employment under the New Deal for Lone Parents are now in receipt of Income Support and have no earnings; [112755]

(2) have gained employment under the New Deal for Lone Parents; and how many of these have subsequently claimed Income Support. [112754]

Angela Eagle: From the national launch in October 1998 to December 1999, 20,400 lone parents from the target group and 14,800 lone parents from the non-target group have obtained jobs through NDLP.

The number of those who obtained jobs through NDLP and subsequently claimed Income Support is not available.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a further statement on the case of Senator Pinochet. [110637]

Mr. Straw: I have today decided that I will not order the extradition of Senator Pinochet to Spain. I made this decision under section 12 of the Extradition Act 1989. I have referred the case to the Director of Public Prosecutions for consideration of a domestic prosecution, in accordance with Article 7 of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. I have also decided not to issue Authorities to Proceed in respect of the extradition requests from Switzerland, Belgium and France. Full reasons for my decisions are contained in the letters to the parties concerned from one of my officials as set out:

Letter to the Spanish Ambassador:

2. I am writing to inform you that the Secretary of State has this morning decided pursuant to section 12 of the Extradition Act 1989, to make no order for the return of Senator Pinochet to Spain. This letter sets out the Secretary of State's reasons. He reserves the right to expand on them should it become necessary to do so.

The Secretary of State's approach to his decision

3. On 14 April 1999, the Secretary of State issued an Authority to Proceed under section 7 of the Act on certain of the charges made in Spain's extradition request. On 8 October 1999, Senator Pinochet was committed by the Bow Street Magistrate on all charges covered by the Authority, to await the decision of the Secretary of State as to whether he should be extradited to Spain. A habeas corpus application was made on Senator Pinochet's behalf on 22 October 1999, which has not yet been heard.

4. The Secretary of State is precluded by the Act from making an order for Senator Pinochet's extradition while his habeas corpus application is still pending. In the ordinary course, the Secretary of State would not make a decision to refuse such an order until all proceedings arising out of the habeas corpus application had been completed. However, he has a discretion to do so in appropriate cases and a duty to consider whether this is such a case. In approaching that discretion, he has proceeded on the basis that he should not at this stage decide against making an extradition order unless it is already clear that there is some decisive factor which would lead him to refuse such an order at the end of the day. The only factor militating against the extradition of Senator Pinochet which is potentially decisive at this stage is the state of his health, and in particular his mental fitness to stand trial.

Representations

5. On 11 January 2000, the Secretary of State informed those acting for Senator Pinochet and the Kingdom of Spain that he had commissioned a medical report on Senator Pinochet, which had been delivered to the Home Office on 6 February 2000. He informed them that the report indicated that Senator Pinochet was unfit to stand trial, and that no significant improvement to that position could be expected. Subject to representations to be received at the Home Office by 5 pm on Tuesday 18 January 1999, he said that he was minded to conclude that no purpose would be served by continuing the current extradition proceeding arising from the Spanish request. Similar letters were sent to representatives of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other human rights organisations, which invited them to make such representations if they wished. A statement to the same effect was made to the press on 11 January 2000, and in the House of Commons on the following day.

6. The Secretary of State has received representations from most of those who were expressly invited to make them, as well as from a large number of other parties. He has taken careful account of them. He has also taken account of the points in recent judicial review proceedings in the High Court. In addition, he has reminded himself of the representations which were made to him on the two occasions, in December 1998 and April 1999, when he considered whether an Authority to Proceed should issue under section 7 of the Act in respect of Spain's extradition request.

7. On 15 February 2000, the High Court decided that the Secretary of State was bound to disclose copies of the medical report in confidence to the authorities of Spain, Belgium, France and Switzerland, all of whom have made requests for the extradition of Senator Pinochet. Copies of the report, together with certain ancillary material, were supplied to the Crown Prosecution Service on behalf of Spain and to the embassies of Belgium, France and Switzerland later on the same day. They were invited to make any representation on the report by 5 pm on Tuesday 22 February 2000. Representations were received in response to this invitation from all four requesting states. In the case of Spain, Belgium and France these included opinions from medical practitioners about the material sent to them on Tuesday 15 February 2000. In addition, some other representations on the medical report have been received. The Secretary of State has carefully considered these representations and the opinions annexed to them, with the benefit of expert advice.

Senator Pinochet's health

8. At the time when the Secretary of State was considering his first and second Authorities to Proceed, he received representations and a certain amount of information about Senator Pinochet's state of health from his solicitors. The tenor of this material was that Senator Pinochet was in some respects frail, as was to be expected in a man of his age. It did not, however, suggest that he was either physically or mentally unfit to stand trial. The Secretary of State did not regard this information as justifying the refusal of either of the Authorities to Proceed which he then issued.

9. The first sign that a serious problem about Senator Pinochet's health might be developing came on 6 October 1999, when, two days before judgment was given in

the committal proceedings, the Bow Street Magistrate excused him from attending the judgment in person. This decision was based on evidence given to the court by the general practitioner attending Senator Pinochet.

10. On 14 October 1999, shortly after the decision of the Magistrate to commit Senator Pinochet, the Secretary of State received through diplomatic channels representations from the Chilean Embassy, supported by medical reports, which suggested that there had been a recent and significant deterioration in Senator Pinochet's health. The Secretary of State did not regard this material as conclusive. It did, however, suggest the possibility that Senator Pinochet might be unfit to stand trial. He therefore decided to invite Senator Pinochet to submit to a medical examination by a team of clinicians appointed by him. The object was to obtain an independent, comprehensive and authoritative report on the relevant clinical facts. Senator Pinochet consented to undergo an examination, and the Secretary of State then selected, with the assistance of the Chief Medical Officer's advice, a team of clinicians to carry it out, having the required range of specialisations and no inappropriate personal interest in the case. They were:

Sir John Grimley Evans FRCP, Professor of Clinical Geratology at the University of Oxford. He is a former Vice President of the Royal College of Physicians and serves on the World Health Organisation expert panel on the care of the elderly. The Chief Medical Officer identified him as probably the most respected individual in British geriatric medicine.

Dr. Michael Denham MD, FRCP (Lond., Edin.), FRSA, Consultant Physician in Geriatric Medicine at Northwick Park Hospital, London. He is a former President of the British Geriatrics Society and the author of numerous papers on the care of the elderly.

Professor Andrew Lees MD, FRCP, Professor of Neurology at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London. Professor Lees is a specialist in movement disorders and dementia. He is medical adviser to, and Co-Director of, the Parkinson's Disease Society.

All three are independent practitioners of outstanding national and international reputation in their fields. On their advice and with the agreement of the Chief Medical Officer, Maria Wyke MA, PhD, Consultant Neuropsychologist, was added to the team. Professor Lees and Dr. Maria Wyke are fluent Spanish speakers.

11. The clinicians were instructed to undertake the examinations and procedures which they judged desirable in order to provide the Home Secretary with a fully comprehensive report on the state of Senator Pinochet's health. In particular, they were asked to advise the Secretary of State whether, in their view, there were any aspects of Senator Pinochet's state of health which, separately or together, suggested that he was not then fit, or was likely to become unfit, to stand trial in Spain. They were told that the Secretary of State was particularly interested in Senator Pinochet's ability to follow a line of questioning, to recall events, some of which took place as long ago as the 1970s, and to give coherent evidence. To the extent that any of the contents of their report were influenced by observation of Senator Pinochet's conduct and manner, they were asked to advise the Secretary of State on the extent to which that conduct and manner were capable of being consciously influenced by the Senator himself.

12. It should be pointed out that the clinicians were not expected, in reaching their conclusions, to take responsibility for the legal test of fitness for trial, nor does the Secretary of State consider them to have done so. Their function was to ascertain the clinical facts. The test of fitness for trial which has been applied, both in framing their instructions and in assessing their report, is the responsibility of the Secretary of State, who in turn has drawn extensively upon the opinions of his legal advisers.

13. The medical examination was conducted in Spanish at the Northwick Park Hospital in London over a period of some six hours on 5 January 2000, and the report was delivered to the Home Office on the following day. Certain information supplementing the report was supplied afterwards. This comprised (i) a short account of the procedures followed at the examination, which was supplied by Professor Grimley Evans on 7 January 2000; (ii) a copy of the neuropsychological report of Dr. Wyke, which had been summarised in the principal report but not annexed to it; and (iii) an explanation of neuropsychological testing by way of introduction to Dr. Wyke's report. This material was supplied to the four requesting states with the principal report on 15 February 2000. In addition, the Secretary of State has referred to Professor Grimley Evans and his colleagues the representations received on their report, and medical opinions annexed to those representations, and he has received their comments.

14. As the Secretary of State disclosed in his announcements on 11 and 12 January 2000, the conclusions of the medical report indicated that Senator Pinochet was unfit to stand trial and that no significant improvement to that position could be expected. The Secretary of State has considered the matter afresh in the light of all the material referred to in the preceding paragraph, and in the light of representations which he has received on the subject. Having done so, he is satisfied that the conclusions of the original report were correct and that it is right to regard Senator Pinochet as unfit to stand trial.

15. The critical facts are as follows:

(1) Senator Pinochet was born on 25 November 1915. He is 84 years old. The Secretary of State does not regard Senator Pinochet's age as being in itself a sufficient basis for his present decision. But he has taken account of it in assessing the significance of other aspects of his state of health.

(2) The clinicians instructed by the Secretary of State concluded that Senator Pinochet would not at present be mentally capable of meaningful participation in a trial. In reaching that conclusion, they were obliged to make assumptions about what kind of participation in a criminal trial would in law be regarded as "meaningful" in determining the fitness of an accused. Those assumptions are apparent from the conclusion of their report and are considered in sub-paragraphs (3) and (4) below. So far as the Secretary of State has attached weight to them, he is satisfied that they are appropriate.

(3) The clinicians expressed their opinion about Senator Pinochet's capacity for meaningful participation in a trial on the basis of (i) Senator Pinochet's memory deficit for both recent and remote events; (ii) his limited ability to comprehend complex sentences and questions

owing to memory impairment and a consequent inability to process verbal information appropriately; (iii) his impaired ability to express himself audibly, succinctly and relevantly; and (iv) easy fatiguability. The Secretary of State considers that all of these factors are potentially relevant to Senator Pinochet's mental capacity to participate in a trial. In this context, he attaches particular importance to Senator Pinochet's memory deficit for recent events, which would affect his ability to relate and understand items of information given to him at a trial, and to his limited ability to comprehend complex sentences and questions and to process verbal information. The Secretary of State has not attached weight to the impairment of Senator Pinochet's capacity to remember remote events, save in so far its recent deterioration is symptomatic of brain damage having a wider significance: see sub-paragraph (6) below.

(4) With these impediments Senator Pinochet would be unable to follow the process of a trial sufficiently to instruct Counsel. He would have difficulty in understanding the content and implications of questions put to him and would have inadequate insight into this difficulty. He would have difficulty in making himself understood in replying to questions.

(5) In assessing the significance of the above matters, the Secretary of State has considered the nature of the issues which would be likely to arise in a criminal trial on the serious charges for which Senator Pinochet has been committed. He has also assumed that at any trial reasonable steps would be taken to mitigate Senator Pinochet's disabilities, for example, by attending to his physical comfort and medical needs, by adjusting the timetable of hearings, and by endeavouring to simplify the proceedings so far as their nature permitted. He has reminded himself that the burden of proof at any trial would be on the prosecution. The Secretary of State does not consider that these matters are capable of mitigating to a significant degree the difficulties to which Senator Pinochet's disabilities would give rise.

(6) The disabilities identified in the medical report are due to widespread brain damage, the major episodes of which seem to have occurred during September and October 1999 when Senator Pinochet suffered a number of strokes. They are not due to the ordinary processes of ageing.

(7) The examination took place on a single day, but the clinicians had access to reports prepared by reputable British general practitioners and specialists attending Senator Pinochet who had examined him on a number of occasions in September and October 1999. These enabled them to cross-refer their observations on 5 January 2000 to earlier observations and to evaluate a characteristic pattern of illness as it had evolved over a period of several months.

(8) The clinicians considered that further deterioration in both his physical and his mental condition was likely to occur, but were unable to express an opinion on the effect (if any) which a trial would have on the rate of deterioration. Their view was that although some day-to-day fluctuation in functional abilities was characteristic of brain damage due to cerebrovascular disease, further sustained functional improvement of a significant degree was unlikely.

16. The Secretary of State has always attached great importance to being able to satisfy himself that the results of the medical examination were not influenced by feigning of any kind. His instructions to the clinicians drew attention to the point and he is satisfied that they have been conscious of it throughout. They have advised him that there was no evidence that Senator Pinochet was trying to fake disability. The impediments were coherent in nature and consistent in manifestation, and the neuropsychological testing showed none of the features of deliberate exaggeration. In particular, those neuropsychological tests which were indicative of original intelligence and educational level showed superior performance. The Secretary of State is advised that there is no practical possibility that the results of the neuropsychological tests were influenced by coaching. He is also advised that while it is possible to simulate with drugs the symptoms of a global impairment of cognitive functions, (i) this is a problem with which geriatricians are particularly familiar, and (ii) Senator Pinochet's cognitive impairment was focal rather than global, a pattern not seen in drug-induced impairment. It is important to point out that the outward manner of Senator Pinochet is not necessarily a reliable guide to his mental condition. It is characteristic of persons with a high level of original intelligence that they are able to mask superficially a significant impairment of cognitive functions.

17. The report of the clinicians who examined Senator Pinochet has been criticised by a number of medical practitioners whose opinions have been transmitted by the examining magistrates responsible for criminal investigations of Senator Pinochet in Spain, Belgium and France, and by certain other parties. In considering these criticisms, the Secretary of State has borne in mind that those who have made them have not examined Senator Pinochet, as the authors of the report of 6 January 2000 did, nor have they had the advantage which the clinicians enjoyed of studying records of Senator Pinochet's recent medical history. The Secretary of State is advised that most of the criticisms made of the report are irrelevant to its conclusions, and certainly to the conclusions that are critical to Senator Pinochet's fitness for trial (see paragraph 15). He is advised that those criticisms which are relevant are medically unjustified. The Secretary of State is satisfied that the advice he has received on these points has been based on a careful and objective analysis of the criticisms. He accepts that advice.

18. The medical report on Senator Pinochet of 6 January 2000 is an entirely independent report by highly qualified specialist practitioners on the relevant clinical facts. In commissioning it, the Secretary of State did not set out to prove any particular point and had no expectation of any particular outcome. He is satisfied that the clinicians who prepared it undertook their task in the same spirit.

19. Letters of request from the examining magistrates in Belgium and France have been transmitted to the United Kingdom, each of which seeks a further medical examination. In addition, Judge Garzon, the examining magistrate in Spain, has called in his representations for a further examination of Senator Pinochet. Senator Pinochet has consistently declined to comply with the invitations addressed to him by requesting states for a further medical examination. The Secretary of State, having taken advice on the point, does not consider that a

further examination would yield further material of significance. He does not therefore regard it as either necessary or appropriate to commission one in order to determine whether Senator Pinochet is fit to stand trial.

Unfitness to stand trial

20. The conclusions to which the Secretary of State has come mean that in a criminal trial in England, Senator Pinochet would be found unfit to stand trial, and there would not therefore be any trial of the charges against him on their merits. If this were a peculiarity of English criminal law, the Secretary of State would not attach as much weight to it as he does. However, in the view of the Secretary of State, the principle that an accused person should be mentally capable of following the proceedings, instructing his lawyers and giving coherent evidence is fundamental to the idea of a fair trial. He is advised that the attempted trial of an accused in the condition diagnosed in Senator Pinochet, on the charges which have been made against him in this case, could not be a fair trial in any country, and would violate Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights in those countries which are party to it.

21. After receiving the initial representations of Spain, the Secretary of State asked for further information from those representing Spain about the principles governing these matters in the Spanish system of criminal justice. This information has satisfied him that while the procedure differs in significant respects from that which would be followed in England, the underlying principle is substantially the same. The test of fitness to stand trial in Spain depends mainly on whether the accused is capable of understanding and following the charges against him, answering questions put to him, understanding the oral and documentary evidence for the defence and the prosecution, defending himself and instructing his lawyers. This is consistent with the representations as to Spanish law made on behalf of Senator Pinochet and on behalf of human rights organisations represented by Bindman & Partners. If Senator Pinochet were to be extradited to Spain, his fitness for trial would be assessed there by an objective process of clinical examination and testing. There is no reason to believe that that process would lead to conclusions any different in substance from those of the medical report commissioned by the Secretary of State in England. The Secretary of State is conscious that in Spain as in England, a "trial" may include the process of assessing the Defendant's fitness for trial. However, on the material before him, it is reasonable to assume that if Senator Pinochet were to be extradited to Spain, a trial there on the merits of the charges against him would be found impossible.

22. In considering whether to decide against extradition on account of Senator Pinochet's unfitness to stand trial, the Secretary of State has given careful thought to the alternative possibility of leaving that question to be determined in accordance with Spanish judicial procedures in Spain, in the event that there was no other objection to extraditing him there. He has been advised and has concluded that on the basis of English law he is bound to form a view of his own on Senator Pinochet's fitness to stand trial, and that he cannot refrain from reaching a concluded view on this point on the basis that the question can be determined in Spain. In the light of his conclusion that no improvement in Senator Pinochet's condition can be expected, he considers that no purpose would be served by the continuance of the current extradition proceedings in England. These would involve the continued detention of Senator Pinochet here for a period which, allowing for the habeas corpus proceedings and any appeal arising out of them, might be substantial. Any order for the extradition of Senator Pinochet which might then be made would involve the compulsory removal to another country of a man of 84 years of age who must at this stage be presumed innocent, for the purpose of a trial which could not result in any verdict on the charges against him, for reasons that are already apparent to the Secretary of State as the extradition authority in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State considers that that course would serve no purpose of any substantial value to the interests of justice and that it would be oppressive to Senator Pinochet.

23. The Secretary of State would not necessarily have taken the same view if there had been any realistic prospect that Senator Pinochet's condition would improve, either spontaneously or as a result of treatment. He is aware that in Spanish law the effect of a finding that an accused is unfit to stand trial is to suspend a prosecution for as long as that state of affairs subsists, but it is not tantamount to an acquittal.

Section 12 of the Extradition Act 1989

24. Section 12(2)(a) of the Act provides that the Secretary of State may not order the extradition of the accused in relation to any alleged offence if it appears to him that: (i) by reason of its trivial nature; or (ii) by reason of the passage of time since he is alleged to have committed it . . . ; or (iii) because the accusation against him is not made in good faith in the interests of justice, it would, having regard to all the circumstances, be unjust or oppressive to return him.

25. The Secretary of State considers that this provision has no application to the present question. Although it would in his view be oppressive to order Senator Pinochet's extradition given his unfitness to stand trial, this state of affairs has not arisen by reason of the passage of time since he is alleged to have committed the offences. But for the lapse of time since the alleged offence, a decision under section 12 might possibly have fallen to be made before Senator Pinochet became unfit, but the cause of his unfitness is the supervening brain damage which appears to have occurred in September and October 1999. That damage was not itself either caused or aggravated by the lapse of time since the alleged offences. Neither of the other two factors identified in the sub-section is relevant.

26. It follows that Senator Pinochet's unfitness for trial is not an absolute bar to his extradition. It is a matter to be addressed as part of the general discretion of the Secretary of State under section 12(1).

The European Convention on Extradition

27. The United Kingdom and Spain are parties to the Convention.

28. The Convention requires extradition in all cases to which it applies, subject only to specific and limited exceptions, and to any reservations made by particular contracting states on their accession. In cases falling outside these exceptions and reservations, there is no general discretion. There is no express exception applicable to this case, nor is there any relevant

reservation of the United Kingdom or Spain. The Secretary of State is advised that it is open to argument whether the Convention is subject to an implicit exception for cases where the primary purpose of any extradition, namely the trial of the charges alleged against the accused, could not be served. In the circumstances of this case, the Secretary of State considers it unnecessary to form a concluded view about that. He has assumed, in reaching his decision, that the Convention does not allow for the refusal of extradition on the ground that the accused is and will remain unfit to stand trial in the requesting state.

29. The Convention is not incorporated into English domestic law save to the limited extent provided for by the European Convention on Extradition Order 1990, SI 1990/1507. This provides simply for the Extradition Act 1989 to apply as between the United Kingdom and other parties to the Convention, and for it to do so on the basis contemplated in section 9(8)(a) of the Act that a prima facie case need not be shown on the committal hearing. Section 12 of the Act therefore applies, as a matter of English law, to extradition proceedings arising out of requests from states party to the Convention. The discretion conferred by it on the Secretary of State must be exercised in such cases.

30. Although the Convention is not part of English domestic law, the Secretary of State attaches great importance to the international obligations of the United Kingdom, and in the exercise of his discretions under the Extradition Act he regards those obligations as both relevant and entitled to considerable weight. In most cases to which the Convention applies they will be decisive. However, the Secretary of State recognises that given the breadth of his discretion under section 12 of the Act there may be some occasions on which the requirements of the Convention are outweighed by other compelling considerations peculiar to particular cases. The Secretary of State considers that they are outweighed by such considerations in this case, having regard in particular to the nature of Senator Pinochet's condition in a man of his age, to its probable permanence, and to its impact on the possibility of a trial of the charges against him.

31. The experience of the Home Office has been that in practice parties to the Convention operate its provisions in a more flexible fashion than its absolute language suggests, and in accordance with basic principles of justice which are common to all of them. It is consistent with this approach that Belgium should have been recorded in the judgment of the High Court on their recent application for judicial review as having

> clearly stated that they would support the Secretary of State's decision if only they could be satisfied that Senator Pinochet is indeed shown by the report to be permanently unfit to stand trial;

and that Spain should have informed the Secretary of State that they will respect any decision made by the Secretary of State in the exercise of his discretionary powers. In making his decision, the Secretary of State has not attached weight to the matters summarised in this paragraph, but he considers it right that they should be recorded.

Other countervailing considerations

32. The main consideration which has been urged upon the Secretary of State in favour of allowing the current extradition proceedings to take their course is the importance of ensuring *so far as possible* that the allegations made against Senator Pinochet should be tried. The Secretary of State agrees that this is important. The scope of the charges against Senator Pinochet was substantially reduced as a result of the decision of the House of Lords in R *v.* Bow Street Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate ex p. Pinochet (No. 3) [1999] 2 WLR 827, but the remaining charges are extremely serious. The Secretary of State attaches great importance to the principle that universal jurisdiction against persons charged with international crimes should be made effective, and he is aware that the practical consequence of refusing to extradite Senator Pinochet to Spain on account of his unfitness to stand trial is that he will probably not be tried anywhere. The Secretary of State is also mindful of the sense of injury which will be felt by those who suffered from breaches of human rights in Chile in the past, as well as their relatives. All of these are matters of legitimate concern, and he has had them very much in mind when considering the evidence about Senator Pinochet's state of health. They are among the reasons why he has required the evidence of Senator Pinochet's condition to satisfy a high standard of expertise, thoroughness, objectivity and cogency before he was prepared to act on it. Ultimately, however, the reservation "so far as possible" cannot be brushed aside. A trial of the charges against Senator Pinochet, however desirable, is no longer possible.

33. The Secretary of State has considered other factors, including a wide variety of matters raised in representations received at the Home Office. This letter has dealt in terms only with those matters which have had a significant bearing on the Secretary of State's decision. It is, however, right to mention the following further points:

(1) The Secretary of State understands that if Senator Pinochet were convicted in Spain of the offences charged against him, victims of those offences might be entitled to recover civil damages in proceedings ancillary to the criminal trial. The Secretary of State doubts whether this point could be relevant to a decision whether to extradite a person on a criminal charge, but he has reached no concluded view on its legal relevance, because he does not in any event feel able to attach significant weight to it. It is right to add that the point assumes the possibility of a verdict on the charges.

(2) The Secretary of State has not had regard to the possibility, if indeed it is a real one, that Senator Pinochet might be tried in Chile.

(3) The Secretary of State considers that in some circumstances it may be appropriate for him to have regard to political, economic or diplomatic interests of the United Kingdom in exercising his discretions under the Extradition Act. He has not had regard to such factors in making his present decision.

Referring the decision to the Court

34. The Secretary of State has been urged by a number of those who have made representations to him to leave to the Courts the question whether Senator Pinochet should be discharged on account of unfitness to stand trial. He has considered this possibility but does not propose to adopt it.

35. The High Court has power to discharge accused persons who are being unlawfully detained, and such further powers as are specifically conferred on it by the Extradition Act 1989. It has no inherent supervisory power over extradition. Under section 11(3) of the Act, the High Court on the hearing of a habeas corpus application has a duty similar to that of the Secretary of State under section 12(2)(a) to discharge an accused if by reason of the lapse of time since the offences are alleged to have been committed it would in all the circumstances be unjust or oppressive to order his extradition. If the Secretary of State had regarded these provisions as applicable he would have been bound to refuse to extradite Senator Pinochet. However, the facts making it oppressive to extradite Senator Pinochet do not arise from the lapse of time since the alleged offences. Therefore neither section 11(3) nor section 12(2)(a) applies. The Secretary of State is the only authority on whom a general discretion is conferred whether to order extradition. He has had regard in exercising it to the principle expressed by the courts on a number of occasions that the proper exercise of that discretion by the Secretary of State is the principal safeguard for the accused against oppression.

36. The Secretary of State would not, even if the Court had concurrent jurisdiction in the circumstances of this case, have thought it right to refrain from performing a duty or exercising a discretion conferred on him by statute, which he was in a position to exercise on material which he had commissioned for that purpose, simply because at some future stage another authority might take the decision instead.

Domestic prosecution

37. Article 7 of the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment requires the Secretary of State, if he does not order the extradition of a person accused of torture, to submit the case to the United Kingdom prosecuting authorities for the purposes of a domestic prosecution. The Secretary of State has supplied papers in advance to the Solicitor General and the Director of Public Prosecutions for that purpose and has this morning referred the case to them under Article 7. Their functions in the matter are entirely independent of his.

Letters rogatory

38. The only additional matter is the application of Judge Garzon by letters rogatory of 15 January 2000 for Senator Pinochet to be required to appear in court to respond to a request for a statement. The Home Secretary has decided not to give effect to this request on the grounds that Senator Pinochet is not a compellable witness as a matter of English law.

Letter to the Belgian Ambassador:

39. The Secretary of State has today made a final decision not to issue an Authority to Proceed under section 7 of the Extradition Act 1989 in respect of the two requests of Belgium for Senator Pinochet's extradition, transmitted on 15 December 1998 and 11 November 1999. In making this decision, the Secretary of State has treated the "Elaborative Memorandum" transmitted on 3 February 2000 as supplementing those requests and has had regard to the full range of offences alleged against Senator Pinochet in all three documents.

40. Under 7(4) of the Extradition Act 1989, the Secretary of State is required to refuse an Authority to Proceed if an order for the extradition of Senator Pinochet could not lawfully be made or would not in fact be made in accordance with the provisions of the Act. Under those provisions, extradition is available only in respect of extradition crimes. The Secretary of State has directed himself on this point in accordance with the decision of the House of Lords in R *v.* Bow Street Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate ex p. Pinochet (No.3) [1999] 2 WLR 827. An offence committed outside the United Kingdom is not an extradition crime unless it was punishable in the United Kingdom at the date when it is alleged to have been committed. Torture outside the United Kingdom and conspiracy to torture outside the United Kingdom first became punishable in the United Kingdom on 29 September 1988 when section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 came into force.

41. None of the matters set out in the two extradition requests of Belgium and the Elaborative Memorandum disclose offences of torture or conspiracy to torture committed after 29 September 1988. In the Elaborative Memorandum, attention is drawn to three cases in which persons disappeared in circumstances which have never been disclosed to their families. It is alleged that their disappearance constituted torture of themselves and their families, which in the absence of news of them continued, or must be treated as continuing, to the present day. It is an essential requirement of the offence of torture in English law that the accused should, by some act or omission, have intentionally inflicted severe physical or mental pain or suffering on another person or been party to the infliction of such pain or suffering. The Secretary of State does not regard the two extradition requests or the Elaborative Memorandum as alleging (i) any act or omission inflicting severe pain or suffering and occurring on or after 29 September 1988, or (ii) that any intention to inflict pain or suffering was continuing until 29 September 1988 or any later date, or (iii) an intention existing at any time to inflict pain or suffering on any one other than those who disappeared. Furthermore, the Secretary of State does not regard any such allegations as being implicit in the facts alleged.

42. There are no offences other than torture or conspiracy to torture disclosed in the two extradition requests or the Elaborative Memorandum which have at any time been punishable in the United Kingdom if committed outside the United Kingdom. The requirement that offences alleged in an extradition request should be punishable under the law of the requested state is of course reflected in the European Convention on Extradition.

43. If the Secretary State had regarded the two extradition requests and the Elaborative Memorandum as disclosing extradition crimes, he would nevertheless have refused to issue an Authority to Proceed in this case because he is satisfied that Senator Pinochet is unfit to stand trial and that there is no likelihood of significant improvement. He has today decided on that ground that he will not order the extradition of Senator Pinochet to Spain. It appears to him that even had the Belgian extradition requests and the Elaborative Memorandum disclosed extradition crimes Senator Pinochet's unfitness to stand trial would have precluded his extradition to Belgium for the same reasons as it precluded his

extradition to Spain. The enclosed copy of my letter this morning to the Spanish Ambassador sets those reasons out.

44. In these circumstances, the question whether Senator Pinochet could claim state immunity in respect of the offences alleged against him does not arise.

45. I refer to the three letters of request issued by the examining magistrate Mr. Vandermeersch and transmitted on 19 and 24 January and 22 February 2000. The first of these seeks a further medical examination of Senator Pinochet. It has been executed in accordance with English law by inviting Senator Pinochet to submit voluntarily to the examination sought. He has declined to comply. In the light of the judgment of the High Court on 15 February 2000, the second letter of request has been executed so far as it seeks disclosure of the medical report. The Secretary of State does not propose to give effect to the second letter of request to any greater extent, having regard to the terms of that judgment and to his decision to refuse an Authority to Proceed in respect of Belgium's extradition requests. If Senator Pinochet were at some future stage to enter Belgium or to be extradited there from a third country, the Secretary of State will consider what further assistance might be appropriate. The third letter of request invites the Secretary of State or other competent authority to carry out an assessment of the frontal functions and of the autobiographical recall capacities of Senator Pinochet with the latter's consent. This letter has been executed so far as it can be by inviting Senator Pinochet's consent. He has declined. There is accordingly nothing more by way of execution to be done.

46. As indicated, I am enclosing a copy of the letter which I have sent this morning to the Spanish Ambassador.

Letter to Swiss Ambassador:

47. The Secretary of State has today made a final decision not to issue an Authority to Proceed under section 7 of the Extradition Act 1989 in respect of the request of Switzerland for Senator Pinochet's extradition, received on 11 November 1998 and renewed on 7 October 1999.

48. Under section 7(4) of the Extradition Act 1989, the Secretary of State is required to refuse an Authority to Proceed if an order for the extradition of Senator Pinochet could not lawfully be made or would not in fact be made in accordance with the provisions of the Act. Under those provisions, extradition is available only in respect of extradition crimes. The Secretary of State has directed himself on this point in accordance with the decision of the House of Lords in R *v.* Bow Street Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate ex p. Pinochet (No.3) [1999] 2 WLR 827. An offence committed outside the United Kingdom is not an extradition crime unless it was punishable in the United Kingdom at the date when it is alleged to have been committed. Torture outside the United Kingdom and conspiracy to torture outside the United Kingdom first became punishable in the United Kingdom on 29 September 1988 when section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 came into force.

49. The requirement that offences alleged in an extradition request should be punishable under the law of the requested state is of course reflected in the European Convention on Extradition. None of the offences alleged in the extradition requests of Switzerland are alleged to have been committed after that date.

50. If the Secretary of State had regarded the extradition request of Switzerland as disclosing extradition crimes, he would nevertheless have refused to issue an Authority to Proceed in this case because he is satisfied that Senator Pinochet is unfit to stand trial and that there is no likelihood of significant improvement. He has today decided on that ground that he will not order the extradition of Senator Pinochet to Spain. It appears to him that even had the request of Switzerland disclosed extradition crimes Senator Pinochet's unfitness to stand trial would have precluded his extradition to Switzerland for the same reasons as it precluded his extradition to Spain. The enclosed copy of my letter this morning to the Spanish Ambassador sets those reasons out.

51. In these circumstances, the question whether Senator Pinochet could claim state immunity in respect of the offences alleged against him does not arise.

52. As indicated, I am enclosing a copy of the letter which I have sent this morning to the Spanish Ambassador.

Letter to French Ambassador:

53. The Secretary of State has today made a final decision not to issue an Authority to Proceed under section 7 of the Extradition Act 1989 in respect of the requests of France for Senator Pinochet's extradition, transmitted on 13 November 1998 and 4 February 1999.

54. Under section 7(4) of the Extradition Act 1989, the Secretary of State is required to refuse an Authority to Proceed if an order for the extradition of Senator Pinochet could not lawfully be made or would not in fact be made in accordance with the provisions of the Act. Under those provisions, extradition is available only in respect of extradition crimes. The Secretary of State has directed himself on this point in accordance with the decision of the House of Lords in R *v.* Bow Street Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate ex p. Pinochet (No.3) [1999] 2 WLR 827. An offence committed outside the United Kingdom is not an extradition crime unless it was punishable in the United Kingdom at the date when it is alleged to have been committed. Torture outside the United Kingdom and conspiracy to torture outside the United Kingdom first became punishable in the United Kingdom on 29 September 1988 when section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 came into force.

55. The requirement that offences alleged in an extradition request should be punishable under the law of the requested state is of course reflected in the European Convention on Extradition. None of the offences alleged in the extradition requests of France are alleged to have been committed after that date.

56. If the Secretary of State had regarded the extradition requests of France as disclosing extradition crimes, he would nevertheless have refused to issue an Authority to Proceed in this case because he is satisfied that Senator Pinochet is unfit to stand trial and that there is no likelihood of significant improvement. He has today decided on that ground that he will not order the extradition of Senator Pinochet to Spain. It appears to him that, even had the requests of France disclosed extradition

crimes, Senator Pinochet's unfitness to stand trial would have precluded his extradition to France for the same reasons as it precluded his extradition to Spain. The enclosed copy of my letter this morning to the Spanish Ambassador sets those reasons out.

57. In these circumstances, the question whether Senator Pinochet could claim state immunity in respect of the offences alleged against him does not arise.

58. A letter of request of 22 February from Judge Le Loire sought a further medical examination of Senator Pinochet. That request was forwarded to Senator Pinochet's legal representatives on 29 February. They confirm that he does not propose to comply.

59. As indicated, I am enclosing a copy of the letter which I have sent this morning to the Spanish Ambassador.

Tote

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the sale of the Tote and the future of the Levy Board. [111812]

Mr. Straw: The futures of the Horserace Totalisator Board (The Tote) and the Horserace Betting Levy Board have, for different reasons, been under review. I am now able to set out the Government's conclusions.

I announced in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Mr. Cunliffe), on 12 May 1999, *Official Report,* columns 159–160W, that the Government had decided to sell the Tote and that further work would be put in hand to determine the most appropriate method of sale. That work, which included the evaluation by independent financial advisers of a range of sale options, has now been completed. The options included flotation of the Tote on the stock market, its sale by open competitive auction and a sale to horseracing. Consideration of the best option was helped by the agreement of all relevant horseracing interests to support a single proposal to buy the Tote on behalf of racing, in order to maintain the position under which all the Tote's profits are used for the benefit of racing.

Following careful consideration of all the available sale options, I have concluded that a sale to racing represents the best match, in principle, with the Government's objectives for the sale as a whole, as set out in my May 1999 statement. While the price to be paid by racing for the Tote will need to be the subject of commercial negotiation, it will be important to ensure that it is a fair one which strikes the right balance between the respective legitimate interests in the Tote of both racing and the taxpayer.

Racing's proposal to Government aims to ensure that those who are responsible for managing and developing the Tote's business do so within a fully commercial operating environment. I believe that this represents the best options for the Tote and its staff, not forgetting, of course, all those who bet with it.

We therefore propose to bring forward legislation, at the appropriate time and when Parliamentary time allows, which would enable the sale to proceed on this basis. However, a final decision will need to take account of circumstances at the time, including the outcome of commercial negotiations and relevant legal considerations.

I have also today published the report of the quinquennial review of the Horserace Betting Levy Board; copies have been placed in the Library.

The Levy Board was set up in 1961 to collect a levy on horserace bets from bookmakers and to disburse it for the benefit of racing.

The Report concludes that the Levy Board is an efficient body which carries out its statutory functions well, but that most of those functions no longer need to be carried out in the public sector. In particular, the arrangements under which racing receives income from bookmaking should become a matter for settlement between the parties on a commercial basis.

The Report recommends that the Government, in co-operation with the Levy Board and the industries involved, should take forward detailed consideration of all of the associated issues including the Board's important role in the provision of integrity services and its regulatory functions.

The Government agree with these conclusions, and propose to bring forward, once again at the appropriate time and when Parliamentary time allows, legislative proposals for the abolition of the Levy Board. We shall now be discussing with the Board, the British Horseracing Board and other representatives of the racing and bookmaking industries, the steps needed to put alternative arrangements in place. As part of this process I shall be asking the British Horseracing Board, as racing's governing body, to prepare a realistic plan which shows how racing will be run as a national sport without a statutory levy.

I should make it clear that the decision to abolish the levy system is no reflection on the performance of either the Board or its staff. Both have made a significant contribution to the administration of racing over many years, which we gratefully acknowledge.

The sale of the Tote and the abolition of the levy system will together mark an important change in the relationship between the Government and horseracing. The Home Secretary is responsible for policy on the regulation of gambling, which requires consideration of its social impact and measures to ensure protection against crime and exploitation. For reasons of history, this responsibility has involved the Government in the administration and financing of British horseracing to an extent and in ways which are no longer needed.

My recent announcement that the Government are to establish an independent review of gambling offers racing, and others, an opportunity to put forward their ideas for the future control and regulation of betting on horseracing. Meanwhile, the sale of the Tote and the abolition of the Levy should enable racing to take more control of its own affairs and finances, as befits a mature sport. In preparing the legislation needed to give effect to these changes, the Government are committed to working closely with racing, bookmaking and other relevant interests to ensure that the results which are delivered match up to our aspirations. Horseracing is an important and successful national sport which gives employment and pleasure to many people. We want it to prosper.

Metropolitan Police (Private Medical Treatment)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the Metropolitan Police Service report into the pilot project which involved the use of private medical facilities to treat Metropolitan police officers. [112751]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner tells me that the Metropolitan police are undertaking a "Spend-to-Save" pilot scheme for the early diagnosis of musculo-skeletal conditions that involves the use of private medical facilities. The scheme commenced in May 1999 and will run to the end of April 2000, after which a report will be published. I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Library.

River Thames (Bodies Recovered)

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many bodies recovered from the Thames by the Metropolitan police in the last five years have been incapable of identification. [111987]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan police has informed me that between 1 January 1995 and 24 February 2000 his officers recovered 197 bodies from the River Thames. Of these, seven currently remain incapable of identification.

Gammahydroxybutyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of

(1) the recent announcement by the President of the United States of America of the decision to place gammahydroxybutyrate in Schedule 1 of the Controlled Substance Act; and if he will make a statement; [111873]

(2) the impact of recent moves in the US to place gammahydroxybutyrate under the Controlled Substances Act; and if he will make a statement. [111722]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am aware that in the United States of America the Controlled Substances Act has recently been amended to include gammahydroxybutyrate. This information will also be made available to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs who are responsible for keeping drug misuse in the United Kingdom under review.

It is important to bear in mind that drug misuse patterns vary from country to country. Gammahydroxybutyrate misuse has given rise to concern in the United States of America for a number of years. Historically, it has been widely available there and could be purchased over the counter in health food stores until 1992.

Prison Budgets (London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the financial budget allocated to each London prison in each of the last five years. [111938]

Mr. Boateng: Budgets are adjusted periodically during the year. The final budgets for the years 1995–96 to 1998–99 and the latest budget for 1999–2000 are given in the table.

£000

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Belmarsh	22,251	23,607	25,400	26,445	27,090
Brixton	18,570	17,722	17,491	17,677	17,488
Feltham	15,776	15,711	16,472	17,067	19,615
Holloway	15,768	16,796	17,824	18,386	18,622
Latchmere House	2,404	2,396	2,497	2,440	2,667
Pentonville	16,323	16,229	17,346	19,352	19,988
Wandsworth	21,668	19,015	20,323	21,821	22,640
Wormwood Scrubs	20,273	20,803	20,912	20,937	20,558

Civil Servants (Relocation)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Government make use of relocation companies when relocating civil servants. [112063]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office and its agencies use one relocation company, Hambro Countrywide Relocation, to assist members of staff who have been authorised to move home at public expense following a transfer within, or into, the Department.

Correspondence

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire concerning the asylum application concerning Mr. Arif and Mrs. Susan Tuysuz originally lodged in 1994. [111717]

Mrs. Roche: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 28 February. I am sorry for the delay.

Police Recruitment

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Elmet of 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 172W, if he will publish a breakdown of the figure of 12,478 police recruits on a *(a)* force by force and *(b)* year by year basis. [111872]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Members for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 828W.

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that magistrates should take into account possible loss of reputation in deciding whether to allow an election for jury trial under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill. [112361]

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact on the confidence of *(a)* the general public and *(b)* members of the ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system of his proposals under the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; and if he will make a statement. [112519]

Mr. Straw: The Bill is part of the Government's programme to modernise the criminal justice system, to make it more responsive to the needs of victims of crime and the public at large. It is designed to prevent defendants from manipulating the system by demanding Crown Court trial in trivial cases just to delay proceedings. It does not prevent cases from being tried by jury where Crown Court trial is appropriate, and there is no reason why there should be any diminution in public confidence. Rather, it is likely to enhance public confidence.

The Government have given careful consideration to the concerns that the changes could adversely affect minority ethnic defendants. They are satisfied that this is not the case. Home Office data published on 9 December 1999 show a higher conviction rate for white defendants (67 per cent) than for black defendants (57 per cent) in the magistrates courts. A similar pattern emerges from a separate study (to be published on 3 March), which shows that both in magistrates courts and in the Crown Court white defendants are more likely (by about six percentage points) to be convicted than black defendants.

Under the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill, magistrates courts would consider the circumstances of the offence but not the circumstances of the defendant. They would therefore be precluded from taking account of the effect of conviction on an accused's reputation (or livelihood), which under the original Mode of Trial Bill they would have been required to consider. The change was made in response to the widely-expressed concern that such considerations might discriminate in favour of certain categories of defendant and against others. The criteria in the new Bill will ensure that the courts make an objective decision on where a case should be tried.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the number of *(a)* lay magistrates, *(b)* stipendiary magistrates, *(c)* recorders and assistant recorders and *(d)* circuit judges if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is enacted. [112518]

Mr. Straw: My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor has no plans to increase the number of lay magistrates, stipendiary magistrates, recorders and assistant recorders and circuit judges as a consequence of enacting the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the average *(a)* cost of, *(b)* length of and *(c)* waiting time for (1) a trial in the magistrates court following the dismissal of an appeal to the Crown Court from the decision of magistrates on mode of trial, under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; [112539]

(2) a hearing of (i) an oral and (ii) a written appeal to the Crown Court from the decision of magistrates on mode of trial, under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill. [112537]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to my reply given on 27 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 250W. There will be no change under the Number 2 Bill.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the *(a)* number and *(b)* cost of additional appeals to the Crown Court against the (i) verdicts and (ii) sentences of magistrates, if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is enacted. [112531]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to my reply given on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 544W. There would be no significant change under the (No. 2) Bill.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to issue national guidelines to magistrates in England and Wales on the nature of the circumstances for each type of either-way offence which would normally lead to that offence being tried *(a)* summarily and *(b)* on indictment if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is enacted. [112534]

Mr. Straw: National Mode of Trial Guidelines were issued in 1995 by the then Lord Chief Justice, setting out the circumstances in which magistrates should consider committing an either-way offence for trial in the Crown Court. Although the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is not intended significantly to change the basis on which magistrates make their decisions on mode of trial, some amendments to the guidelines would be necessary to bring them into line with the Bill.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the effect of the requirement in *(a)* the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill and *(b)* the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill for magistrates courts to state the reasons for their decision as to mode of trial on the percentage of appeals to the Crown Court against the magistrates' decision. [112530]

Mr. Straw: The requirement (which is in the (No. 2) Bill only) for magistrates to give reasons is not expected to affect the number of defendants exercising the right of appeal to the Crown Court on mode of trial.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of defendants who will exercise the right of appeal to the Crown Court on mode of trial, under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; and what estimate he has made of the percentage of appeals that will be successful. [112538]

Mr. Straw: It is assumed that 3,500 defendants (25 per cent. of those who would have elected and whom the magistrates have decided to try) will appeal; that 17.5 per cent. of these cases will proceed to an oral hearing; and that 12.5 per cent. of appeals considered on the papers, and 27.5 per cent. of oral appeals, will be successful.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the increase in the number of cases in *(a)* the Divisional Courts *(b)* the Court of Appeal and *(c)* the House of Lords as a result of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill being enacted; what will be the additional costs to public funds; and if he will make a statement. [112535]

Mr. Straw: Our estimate is that any change in the number of cases going to these courts will be de minimis.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what factors underlay his estimate of *(a)* the cost savings that would be made and *(b)* the number of defendants who would be tried in the magistrates' courts rather than the Crown court under (i) the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill and (ii) the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill; [112528]

(2) if he will provide a breakdown of the estimated savings to the criminal justice system from the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill by each principal category of expenditure; and if he will make a statement. [112533]

Mr. Straw: For the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill it was assumed that 12,000 fewer defendants would be tried in the Crown Court annually, resulting in resource savings to the criminal justice system of £105 million a year. For the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill it is assumed that 14,000 fewer defendants would be tried in the Crown Court annually, resulting in resource savings to the criminal justice system of £128 million a year.

The £128 million estimated annual resource savings are made up as follows:

for the courts—£12.5 million on committals and £41.5 million on Crown Court trials which would no longer take place. This would be offset by the cost of magistrates courts trials (£8.5 million, including the cost of any subsequent committals for sentence), and the cost (estimated at £0.5 million) of interlocutory appeals to the Crown Court.

for the Prison Service—savings of £83.5 million annually would result from a reduction in remand times and the shorter sentences imposed by magistrates courts.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that appeals to the Crown Court against magistrates' decisions as to mode of trial under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill should be heard (1) by circuit judges only; and if he will make a statement; [112536]

(2) in open court; and if he will make a statement. [112529]

Mr. Straw: The intention is that the appeal should be heard by the Resident Judge or by a deputy nominated by the senior presiding Judge. The Government believe that most appeals will be determined on the basis of the papers. It would however be open to the parties to seek to make oral representations, which the judge could agree to hear if he considered it necessary in the interests of justice; the arrangements for such an oral hearing would be a matter for the judge's discretion.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the length of the average waiting time for a trial in a magistrates court if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is enacted. [112517]

Mr. Straw: The magistrates courts deal with over 400,000 either-way cases annually and will have no difficulty in absorbing the additional cases which it is expected that they will retain as a result of the Bill.

Asylum Seekers (Chelmsford)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers the Chelmsford Borough Council area will be expected to house from April; and if he will make a statement. [112493]

Mrs. Roche: The number and location of asylum seekers accommodated under the national asylum support scheme throughout the country will depend on where accommodation, whether in the private or public sector, is made available to the Home Office for that purpose, on where there are existing ethnic minority communities and on where there is the potential for support services to be developed.

The Home Office intends to secure accommodation from local authorities through Regional Consortia. Chelmsford is in the Eastern Region Consortium.

Freedom of Information

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will include in the code of practice on freedom of information a provision that, where a request is made for information about a third party, the holder of the information should consult the third party before deciding what information is to be released and in what form. [112676]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I can confirm that this will be covered by the code of practice, a working draft of which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I hope to place in the Parliamentary Libraries shortly.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the minutes of all meetings of the Commission for Racial Equality at which the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. were discussed. [112682]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. Disclosure of minutes of meetings of the Commission for Racial Equality is a matter for the Commission.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the involvement of the Home Office Race Equality Unit in the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the relationship between the Unit and Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112716]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The head of the unit attended on my behalf at two meetings of the International Steering Committee of the Congress. The Unit provided names of possible speakers and suggested topics for workshops.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the persons who wrote messages of support in the Global Cultural Diversity Congress registration brochure published by the Commission for Racial Equality, indicating in each case when they were first informed that the Global Cultural Diversity Congress had been cancelled, and by whom. [112726]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: These are matters for the company and the Commission for Racial Equality.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what expenses the Commission for Racial Equality has paid to *(a)* Commissioners or *(b)* members of the Commission's staff in respect of their functions as Directors of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.; and if he will make a statement. [112725]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This information is not available to me.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the actions of Mr. Hugh Harris as acting Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality at the Commission's meeting on 7 February in respect of business related to Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112715]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. I will need to consider the report of Gurbux Singh before doing so.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* officials in his Department learned that a request for additional funding from Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. would be discussed at the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February; and if he will make a statement. [112712]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The dates are 4 February, 3 February and 1 February respectively.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what (i) funding and (ii) promises of funding under whose authorisation and on what terms *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Commission for Racial Equality have given to Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd; when his Department promised funding; and if he will make a statement. [112737]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I approved, in September 1999, Home Office funding of £10,000 for a "think-tank" and up to £40,000 for a research report on the costs of racial discrimination to be used at the Congress. The other matters will be addressed in the review which my right hon. Friend has asked Gurbux Singh to conduct.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) who is ultimately liable for the debts of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd; and if he will make a statement; [112740]

(2) what are the total *(a)* assets and *(b)* liabilities of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd; and if he will make a statement; [112681]

(3) if he will refer the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd to the Department of Trade and Industry for investigation; [112722]

(4) what was the total level of sponsorship and donations given to Global Cultural Diversity Congress by *(a)* commercial, *(b)* charitable and *(c)* community organisations; what was the level provided by each organisation; on what terms that money was provided; what arrangements have been made for the money to be repaid; and if he will make a statement; [112708]

(5) which foreign Governments gave money towards the costs of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress; what was the amount provided by each Government; on what terms that money was given; what arrangements have been made for it to be repaid; and if he will make a statement. [112709]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: That is a matter for the liquidator.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if at meetings of the Commission for Racial Equality, Commissioners who were at the same time directors of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. voted on business related to Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112714]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The decision-making process will be examined by Gurbux Singh in the review he is to undertake.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when members of the International Strategic Steering Committee of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress were informed that the Congress had been cancelled, and by whom; and if he will make a statement. [112679]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The decision to cancel the Congress and to notify interested parties was primarily a matter for Global Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what disciplinary action he plans to take against officials of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Commission for Racial Equality in respect of the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd; and if he will make a statement. [112721]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This must await the outcome of the review.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* civil servants and *(c)* foreign dignitaries who had confirmed that they would attend the Global Cultural Diversity Congress as speakers, members of panels or hosts of sessions, indicating in each case (i) when they confirmed they would attend, and (ii) when they were first made aware that the Global Cultural Diversity Congress had been cancelled, and by whom. [112724]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. Organisational issues relating to the event and its cancellation were the responsibility of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. We are unaware of all of those who were expected to take part in this way at the moment.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if *(a)* he *(b)* Ministers in his Department or *(c)* officials in his Department authorised the donation of money from his Department to fund the Global Cultural Diversity Congress; and if he will make a statement. [112742]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I approved, in September 1999, Home Office sponsorship of £10,000 for a "think-tank" and up to £40,000 for a research report on the costs of racial discrimination which was intended to be used at the Congress. The results of this report are valid in any event and will be publicised.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the involvement of the hon. Member for Warwickshire North, with the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112741]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I was invited to join the International Steering Committee that held its launch on 8 February 1999 at the South African Embassy but did not personally attend any subsequent meetings. I spoke at the launch of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress at the Foreign Office on 8 February. I hosted an event at the Home Office on 10 May 1999 for representatives of business and the voluntary sector to raise awareness of the Congress.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions representatives of *(a)* Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. and *(b)* the Commission for Racial Equality had with Ministers in his Department or his officials about the request for additional funding for the Global Cultural Diversity Congress which was discussed at the Commission's meeting on 7 February prior to the meeting taking place. [112677]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Discussions between officials and representatives of Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the Commission for Racial Equality about funding took place during the three weeks prior to the Commissioners meeting on 7 February. Ministers were not involved in these discussions.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations his Department has received from *(a)* commercial, *(b)* charitable and *(c)* community organisations and from *(d)* foreign Governments regarding the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112723]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what dates since 1 January *(a)* he, *(b)* ministers in his Department and *(c)* officials in his Department met representatives from the (i) International Strategic Steering Committee of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, (ii) Commission for Racial Equality and (iii) Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd; if (1) the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and (2) Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd were discussed; and if he will place in the Library the minutes of such meetings. [112718]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I met representatives of the Commission for Racial Equality to discuss the Congress and the company on 21 and 22 February. Officials had meetings with representatives of the International Strategic Steering Committee or the Commission or Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 limited on 13 January, 27 January, 1 February, 3 February, 7 February and 15 February.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the involvement of Sir Herman Ouseley as Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality with the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112717]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The role of the Commission will be examined as part of the review I have asked Gurbux Singh to undertake.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the appointments on public bodies held by *(a)* members of the Commission for Racial Equality and *(b)* directors of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112711]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is not readily available. My officials will have to make inquiries and I will write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales regarding the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd; and if he will make a statement. [112678]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary advised the First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly of the decision that it would not be justifiable to use substantial public funds to support the event on 21 February.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the involvement of the International Strategic Steering Committee of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress with Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112680]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The International Strategic Steering Committee of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress was established to advise on issues for discussion, possible speakers and representation at the event and to ensure a global perspective for the Congress. The organisation of the conference was for the Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.

Commission for Racial Equality

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the Government's policy is on directors of a company in liquidation holding office on the Commission for Racial Equality. [112710]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Government policy on public appointments is set out under Nolan guidelines by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. There is no specific reference to directors of a company in liquidation.

Matters relating to the appointment of Commissioners are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when Mr. Hugh Harris was appointed Acting Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, and by whom. [112713]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary appointed Hugh Harris to take on the role of Acting Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality on Monday 7 February, following Sir Herman Ouseley's retirement.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many limited companies currently

trading have been set up by *(a)* the Commission for Racial Equality and *(b)* other non-departmental public bodies; and if he will make a statement. [112727]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: One. Five other Home Office Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies have limited companies currently trading.

Strip-search Procedures

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date a review of strip search procedures was undertaken; if the report was completed; when he will publish and respond to its recommendations; if he will make a statement concerning the management of this review indicating how many staff were allocated to its completion and at what level supervision was undertaken; what consultation took place with non-Governmental organisations; and how many communications he has received on the issue. [111948]

Mr. Boateng: I am pleased to announce that I received the Prison Service's report on searches of the person last week. Copies have been placed in the Library and are available on the Prison Service website at www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk.

The report makes 16 recommendations, all of which have been accepted by the Prison Service.

The review was co-ordinated by one senior executive officer in the Prison Service's security group who consulted and involved many staff of a variety of grades both in the Prison Service headquarters and in prison establishments. As this was an internal review, non-governmental organisations were not consulted, but publications on the subject by several such organisations were taken into account.

Five Parliamentary Questions have been received from my hon. Friend, and one from hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones). In addition, a letter was received from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak.

The emerging findings were then subjected to rigorous competitive analysis by other staff across the Service, including senior managers. This process has taken a long time, and other priority tasks prevented the earlier completion of the report. But I am satisfied that the Prison Service took the completion of this report very seriously.

Departmental Press Office

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the cost to public funds of his plans to expand his Department's Press Office; and if he will make a statement. [112527]

Mr. Straw: Individual salaries differ but our estimate is that the cost of extra staff for the Home Office Press Office will be up to £400,000 in a full year.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost is to public funds of the relocation of his Department's Press Office to Queen Anne's Gate; and if he will make a statement. [112523]

Mr. Straw: An independent consultant's report, produced by Clear Communications Ltd. in 1999, recommended a major restructuring of the Home Office Press Office. The Home Office Press Office is now being restructured and a number of additional posts have been created. It is not possible to fit it into its existing accommodation in Queen Anne's Gate, which in any case is considerably substandard. It is therefore proposed to move it and some other parts of Communication Directorate to another floor in the same building some time in May. Detailed costings are dependent on a number of factors and are not yet available.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to modernise his Department's Press Office IT system; what is the cost to public funds; and if he will make a statement. [112525]

Mr. Straw: In the short term, the Home Office Press Office is taking part in the pilot running of a Briefing and Reference Database (BARD). This combines published information such as news releases, speeches, Parliamentary business and basic facts and figures about Home Office business so that press officers can answer quickly and accurately media inquiries. In the long term the Communication Directorate, along with the rest of the Home Office, will benefit from new working practices and Information Technology (IT) systems under a proposed Private Finance Initiative project called IT 2000. No detailed costs are available.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many press officers are employed by his Department's Press Office; how many are to be recruited to the news team as part of the current restructuring process; and if he will make a statement. [112544]

Mr. Straw: At present there are 14 press officers (including three trainees and one Chief Immigration Officer on secondment) employed in the main Home Office Press Office, with three unfilled vacancies. The restructuring of the Press Office could involve the appointment of up to 10 further press officers.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the *(a)* minimum and *(b)* maximum starting salary for recruits to his Department's new Press Office news team; and if he will make a statement. [112524]

Mr. Straw: The new Press Office news team will largely be recruited at Information Officer grade, for which the pay band is £15,902 to £27,709 p.a.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the functions of his Department's new Press Office news team. [112522]

Mr. Straw: The planned restructuring of the Home Office Press Office will enable it to separate the functions of dealing with breaking news from those of more medium to long-term communications planning. The plan involves the setting up of a team of press officers who would operate from roughly 6 am to about 10 pm on weekdays in order to deal with the growing 24-hour demands of the media. This team would deal with today's stories in the media, handle media bids for interviews with Ministers and urgent media statements when these are needed.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many press officers are to be recruited to his Department's new Press Office news team; and if he will make a statement. [112526]

Mr. Straw: An independent consultant's report, produced by Clear Communications Ltd. in 1999, recommended a major restructuring of the Home Office Press Office and an increase in staff resources of up to 10 press officers. This restructuring will enable the unit to deal better with the growing number of media calls it is receiving and be reactive and proactive to the growing number of continuous 24-hour news operations. An advertisement recently appeared in the trade press and the plan is to recruit up to 10 additional staff.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many press officers were employed in his Department on *(a)* 1 May 1997, *(b)* 1 January 1998, *(c)* 1 January 1999 and *(d)* 1 January 2000; at what grades they were employed; and what was the cost to public funds of their employment. [112397]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* Records of staff numbers are of necessity a snapshot of a particular month and do not take into account staff arrivals and departures which are happening constantly. The press office has for instance seen a turnover of staff of nearly 200 per cent. since January 1997.

The relevant staff numbers and staff costs (which include Superannuation and National Insurance) are:

May 1997—total of 15 Press Officers at approximate cost of £370,000. The grades were: three Senior Information Officers, ten Information Officers, two part-time, one Assistant Information Officer and a Higher Executive Officer on secondment;

January 1998—total of 14 Press Officers at approximate cost of £330,000. The grades were: three Senior Information Officers and 11 Information Officers, two part-time;

January 1999—a total of 14 Press Officers at approximate cost of £330,000. The grades were: two Senior Information Officers, eight Information Officers, two part time, three Assistant Information Officers and a Higher Executive Officer on secondment; and

January 2000—a total of 13 Press Officers at approximate cost of £345,000. The grades were: three Senior Information Officers, six Information Officers, three Assistant Information Officers and a Higher Executive Officer.

In addition, at various times throughout this period Chief Immigration Officers were on six-month attachment to the press office. It should also be noted that the grades referred to are substantive grades and that at various times press officers may have been on temporary promotion to a higher grade.

Internal Communications Advisers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many internal communications advisers are to be recruited by his Department; what is their *(a)* minimum and *(b)* maximum starting salary; and if he will make a statement. [112520]

Mr. Straw: Ten Internal Communication Advisers are to be recruited by the Home Office.

They will be Grade 7 appointments with a minimum starting salary of £29,777 and a maximum starting salary of £46,112.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the functions of his Department's Internal Communications Advisers. [112521]

Mr. Straw: The functions of the Internal Communication Advisers are to:

(i) support the modernisation programme and business change within individual Directorates and Agencies in the Home Office;

(ii) tailor the Home Office internal communication strategy for a specified Directorate or Agency incorporating best industry practice;

(iii) support the implementation of the Home Office Internal Communication strategy, working as part of a team of Internal Communication Advisers within the Home Office;

(iv) develop the key communication skills of senior managers and managers within Home Office Directorates and Agencies, making full use of in-house and external agency expertise;

(v) ensure local communication activities are co-ordinated with other communication activities across the whole Home Office by working via the Head of Internal Communication; and

(vi) develop and manage mechanisms to gather feedback, such as surveys and focus groups.

General Pinochet

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on the medical condition of General Pinochet since 16 February; and if he will place copies of them in the Library. [112695]

Mr. Straw: I have received various representations which I intend to place in the Library when I have secured the agreement of the requesting states which have provided them.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of his Department's staff were *(a)* registered disabled, *(b)* women, *(c)* from ethnic minorities and *(d)* from (i) independent, (ii) grammar and (iii) other schools in (1) 1970, (2) 1979, (3) 1989 and (4) 1999. [106762]

Mr. Wills: Details of the percentage of the Department's staff who were registered disabled, women and from ethnic minorities in 1999 are given below and comprise staff in DfEE Head Office sites, the Employment Service and DfEE staff working in the Government Office network. The figures for permanent and temporary (casual) staff are shown separately.

Permanent staff

There were a total of 36,934 permanent staff employed in DfEE at 1 April 1999 of whom:

1,933 had declared a disability, which is equal to 5.4 per cent. of the total number

27,296 were women, which is equal to 73.9 per cent. of the total number

2,317 were known to be from an ethnic minority background, which is equal to 6.3 per cent. of the total number.

Temporary (casual) staff

There were a total of 3,539 temporary (casual) staff employed in DfEE at 1 April 1999 of whom:

52 had declared a disability, which is equal to 1.5 per cent. of the total number

2,279 were women, which is equal to 64 per cent of the total number

102 were known to be from an ethnic minority background, which is equal to 2.9 per cent. of the total number.

The provisions in the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995, replace the former quota scheme, the designated employment scheme and the requirement to register as a disabled person. Instead, individuals may now voluntarily declare a disability under the definitions contained in the Act; this is the basis for the information given.

DfEE (in line with the Commission for Racial Equality guidelines) asks staff to voluntarily declare their ethnicity in order to monitor progress against its Equal Opportunities Action Plan. The figures reflect the position for those who have provided this information. We are unable to supply details of the percentage of the Department's staff who were registered disabled, women and from ethnic minorities in 1970, 1979 or 1989, nor statistical information on the type of school attended by staff. This is for the following two reasons:

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) came into existence in 1995, following Machinery of Government changes. The records retained for predecessor departments are limited and incomplete and are insufficient to provide the information requested for the three years in question. Neither does DfEE (nor did its predecessor departments) hold information centrally on the type of secondary school attended by its staff. Individual records hold the name, but not the classification, of the school.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in each of the last five years, what proportion of women employees in (i) his Department and (ii) executive agencies under the control of his Department *(a)* returned to work after childbirth, *(b)* returned to work after childbirth before the end of maternity leave, indicating the (1) time-range and (2) mean time, *(c)* returned to work after childbirth on reduced working hours, indicating the average hours worked and *(d)* returned to work after childbirth full-time and subsequently reduced their hours. [108967]

Mr. Wills: We are unable to answer all elements of the question because the information needed could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, details of the proportion of women employees in DfEE (which includes DfEE staff in Government Offices) and ES, who returned to work after childbirth in each of the last five years (part *(a)* of the question), is shown in the following table. The figures for 1995 include, from January to July, women in the former Department for Education and Employment Department Group who transferred to DfEE following Machinery of Government change in July 1995.

The figures are expressed as a percentage of the total number who completed maternity leave in each of the years shown.

	Total number taking maternity leave	*Percentage returning to work*
1995	1,644	99.9
1996	1,641	98.1
1997	1,338	99.3
1998	1,099	100.0
1999	970	99.8

New Deal

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent to date on the New Deal for the long-term unemployed aged 18 to 24 years. [107437]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 28 January 2000]:* Since its start in 1998, to the end of December 1999, £550.8 million has been spent on the New Deal for young people. Expenditure on the New Deal is planned over the lifetime of this Parliament; any unspent resource in one year is therefore available in future years. Independent research published last year indicates that the impact on the economy of the New Deal for young people is likely to be of a sufficient scale to largely offset the cost of the programme.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment the Government have made of the level of retention in employment of those on the New Deal employment option; and if he will make a statement. [109282]

Ms Jowell: Of the 24,670 young people who joined the employer option before October 1999, 80 per cent. remained on the option for at least 13 weeks.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of each New Deal scheme on unemployment in Cumbria. [109286]

Ms Jowell: In the period ending December 1999, 2,245 young people in Cumbria had found employment through the New Deal for Young People. Over the last two years, the numbers of 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed for six months or more has fallen by 74 per cent.

Similarly, in the period ending December 1999, 506 people in Cumbria had found employment through the New Deal for long term unemployed adults aged 25 or over. In the period July 1998 to December 1999, the numbers of adults aged 25 or over unemployed for at least two years fell by 41 per cent.

These results demonstrate the positive impact the New Deal has on long term unemployed people of all ages.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate the Government have made of the cost to businesses of participating in the New Deal in *(a)* the UK as a whole and *(b)* Cumbria. [109285]

Ms Jowell: There is a comprehensive programme of evaluation of New Deal underway, which includes qualitative and quantitative research with employers at a national level. A report on the survey is due to be published around the end of July 2000.

Leeds LEA

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* infant children in classes of 31 or more, *(b)* after school clubs, *(c)* summer literacy schools, *(d)* summer numeracy schools, *(e)* school projects benefiting from New Deal for Schools capital funding and *(f)* qualified teaching assistants there were in the area of Leeds Local Education Authority for the years 1996–97 to 1999–2000. [109048]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information is shown in the tables.

Numbers of children in maintained primary schools in infant classes of 31 or more taught by one teacher in Leeds local education authority area: 1997–2000

	Number of children in infant classes of 31 or more in	
	January	*September*
2000	[1]—	[2]—
1999	5,094	2,720
1998	7,847	5,132
1997	7,817	[2]—

[1] Provisional national estimates are due to be published in April 2000
[2] Not available

Numbers of out of school clubs in the Leeds local education authority area: 1997–2000

Position as at 31 March	*Out of school clubs* [1]
2000	[2]—
1999	111
1998	105
1997	[3]—

[1] Includes clubs which operate before and/or after school
[2] Not available
[3] Information was collected by the Department for Education prior to 1998

Number of summer literacy and numeracy schools in the Leeds local education authority area: Financial years 1996–97 to 1999–2000

	Summer literacy schools	*Summer numeracy schools*
2000–01	[1]—	[1]—
1999–2000	11	3
1998–99	8	1
1997–98	1	[2]—
1996–97	[2]—	[2]—

[1] Not available
[2] Scheme did not exist

Numbers of new deal for schools projects in Leeds local education authority area: Financial years 1996–97 to 1999–2000

	New Deal for Schools projects [1]
1999–2000	65
1998–99	41
1997–98	37
1996–97	[2]—

[1] Comprises projects which benefited from New Deal for Schools Capital Funding
[2] Scheme did not exist

Numbers of full time equivalent educational support staff in schools[1] in Leeds local education authority area: 1997–2000

Position as at January	*Full time equivalent of other educational support staff* [1]
2000	[2]—
1999	2,212
1998	2,179
1997	2,073

[1] Includes nursery assistants, special needs support staff liberians and technicians
[2] Includes Maintained Nursery, Primary, Secondary and all Special Schools and Pupil Referral Units

Class Sizes (Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the number of pupils in Somerset in classes with over 30 pupils in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000, broken down by (i) Key Stage 1, (ii) Key Stage 2, (iii) Key Stage 3 and (iv) Key Stage 4; and if he will make a statement. [110763]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information is shown in the tables.

The January class size count for the academic year 1999–2000 is currently being undertaken and provisional national estimates are expected to be published in April.

Numbers of pupils in classes of size 31 or more taught by one teacher, by key stage of education, in maintained primary schools in the local education authority area of Somerset—1997 and 1999
Position as at January

	Key stages				
	1	*2*	*3*	*Mixed*	*Total*
1999	4,266	10,274	0	792	15,372
1997	4,887	8,876	0	333	14,096

Numbers of pupils in infant classes of size 31 or more taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the local education authority area of Somerset—1998 and 1999
Position as at September

	Number
1999	1,545
1998	4,598
1997	[1]—

[1] Not available

Numbers of pupils in classes of size 31 or more taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in the local education authority area of Somerset—1997 and 1999
Position as at January

	Secondary ages [1]			
	Middle-deemed secondary	*Mainly under 14*	*Mainly 14 and 15*	*Total secondary*
1999	1,578	2,455	930	4,963
1997	975	1,672	1,193	3,840

[1] Ages as at the start of the academic year (August 31)

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to

phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [110726]

Mr. Wills: My Department's policy is based around the Model Improvement Programme for Greening Operations which DETR published in 1998, and includes a commitment to substitute the use of all slow renewables such as peat with organic wastes such as coir, manure, leaf mould and bark chippings. The Department's procurement policy reflects this commitment.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111597]

Mr. Wills: Information is not collected centrally in the form requested. My Department's contracted stationery suppliers offer recycled paper. Individual Divisions within the Department make decisions on the purchase of paper under the Departmental wide contract based on value for money, quality and fitness for purpose. My Department's HQ sites have paper recycling schemes in place.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 25W, on asset sales, if he will list the individual land and buildings sold by the Employment Service and the value realised from the sale of each item. [111267]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated February 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question pursuant to his Answer of 24 January, *Official Report*, column 25W, on asset sales about the individual land and buildings sold by the Employment Service and the value realised from the sale of each item. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

In answer to your question, I have listed below the details you have requested.

£

Land and building	*Sale proceeds*
West London Area Training Centre (Chiswick)	450,111
Elephant and Castle Jobcentre	3,250,643
Crosby Jobcentre	170,000
Sub total	3,870,754
Romsey[1]	136,973
Total	4,007,727

[1] This building was sold late in 1999, but was not included in the reply to Parliamentary Question No. 104497 as the details had not been confirmed at the time

I hope this is helpful.

Carlisle Jobcentre

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to relocate the jobcentre in Carlisle; and if he will make a statement. [111419]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Eric Martlew, dated February 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning plans to relocate Carlisle Jobcentre. This falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Our Jobcentre in Carlisle is currently located at Edenbridge House, Lowther Street, Carlisle in premises leased from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The current lease is due to expire on 31 March 2001 and we understand that the Ministry of Agriculture would like to be able to utilise the space currently occupied by the Jobcentre.

Accordingly, we are currently looking at possible alternative premises. In doing so we will, of course, aim to find a location which offers at least the same standards of accommodation for both our customers and staff as we have currently.

I hope this is helpful.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 470W, on the New Deal, if he will list the number of young people on each of the New Deal options in Shrewsbury and Atcham broken down into *(a)* employment, *(b)* full-time education/training, *(c)* voluntary sector and *(d)* environment task force; and if he will make a statement. [111063]

Ms Jowell: The numbers of young people on each of the New Deal Options in Shrewsbury and Atcham at the end of December were as follows:

	Number
Employment Option	4
FTET	17
ETF	12
VS	12

I expect many of these to join the 155 young people who have already found work as a result of New Deal in Shrewsbury and Atcham.

New Deal (JSA)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will review the requirement under the New Deal programme whereby a JSA claimant who stops claiming JSA to work on a temporary contract with a employer has, on completing the contract to wait a further six months before becoming eligible for training. [112089]

Ms Jowell: There is no case for a review. Anyone who has been in employment for several months or more immediately prior to making a claim for Jobseeker's

Allowance (JSA) has an excellent chance of finding a job quickly and will be helped to do so by the Employment Service.

The New Deal for Young People is designed to help those who are at risk of long-term unemployment. It is essential that we target resources effectively. New Deal advisers have discretion to allow early access to the programme for young people claiming JSA who are likely to find it particularly difficult to find work.

Equal Pay Act 1970

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he intends to amend section 2(5) of the Equal Pay Act 1970 to entitle an employee in Scotland to arrears of remuneration or damages for breach of the principle of equal pay for a period of six years. [111929]

Ms Jowell: We are considering the implications of recent case law for the provisions in the Equal Pay Act on entitlement to arrears of pay for employees across the UK. I will make a further statement in due course.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many awards have been made of the education maintenance allowance in the 15 pilot areas in England so far; and what is the cost of these awards *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of the budgeted amount. [111714]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is shown in the table (figures refer to the period up to and including 18 February):

	Current EMA recipients	*Total cost to date (£)*
Bolton	1,130	420,760
Cornwall	2,770	1,442,447
Doncaster	1,241	634,959
Gateshead	953	502,261
Greenwich	205	108,178
Lambeth	179	89,350
Leeds	962	508,108
Lewisham	175	70,591
Middlesbrough	913	443,841
Nottingham	1,184	821,835
Oldham	1,205	641,975
Southampton	804	358,836
Southwark	108	37,175
Stoke	1,179	656,569
Walsall	1,114	594,851
Total	14,122	7,331,736

There is no set budget as the scheme is demand led. Some EMA applications remain uncleared where further information is required from applicants.

We are encouraged by anecdotal information which suggests that EMAs are having a positive impact already. A number of institutions have reported improved attendance and a stronger work ethic among EMA recipients. EMAs have the potential to make a real difference to the life chances of young people and we are pleased that the pilot areas have made an encouraging start and continue to consolidate the progress already made.

University Fees and Grants

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the proposed annual university *(a)* fees and *(b)* repayable grants for tuition at universities in each part of the United Kingdom for students who are (i) UK citizens, (ii) other EU citizens, (iii) Commonwealth citizens, (iv) Irish and (v) other, (A) educated and (B) resident in the previous four years in (1) England, (2) Scotland, (3) Ireland, (4) other European Countries, (5) Commonwealth countries and (6) other places. [111996]

Mr. Wicks: The maximum tuition fee contribution for "home" (including other EU students) studying in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (and for students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, who are studying in Scotland), if they are assessed as eligible for fee support, will be £1,050 in the next academic year (2000–01). Universities may charge fees to other students at higher rates. To qualify for "home" fee status, a student must normally meet certain conditions, including having been ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom (or the European Economic Area for EU nationals) for three years on the relevant date closest to the beginning of their course. However, no part of that three year-period can have been wholly or mainly for the purpose of receiving full-time education.

Public support towards tuition fees is not repayable. Because of the system of income-assessment around a third of home and EU students make no contribution to tuition fees.

This answer covers Northern Ireland (given the suspension of devolved government there) but tuition fees for Scottish-domiciled and EU students studying in Scotland are a matter for the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament.

Key Stage 4

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the Key Stage 4 results for 16-year-olds in English, maths and science for each year since 1992 *(a)* for Shropshire and *(b)* nationally; and if he will make a statement. [111915]

Mr. Wicks: The GCSE is the main means of assessing the performance of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 and these results for *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* nationally are shown in the table. The figures show the number of 16-year-olds achieving the specified grades, as percentages of those 16-year-olds entered for the relevant GCSE subjects.

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
(a) Shropshire								
Percentage of 16-year-old candidates achieving grades A*-C in:								
English	51	56	57	54	57	54	59	61
Mathematics	42	48	50	45	46	48	53	54
Science	42	43	50	48	51	51	55	56
Percentage of 16-year-old candidates achieving grades A*-G in:								
English	99	99	98	98	98	98	100	99
Mathematics	95	97	97	96	96	96	97	98
Science	98	98	97	97	97	97	98	99
(b) England								
Percentage of 16-year-old candidates achieving grades A*-C in:								
English	54	56	57	56	56	55	56	58
Mathematics	44	46	46	45	46	47	47	49
Science	43	44	46	47	48	48	50	50
Percentage of 16-year-old candidates achieving grades A*-G in:								
English	98	99	97	97	97	97	99	99
Mathematics	94	94	95	95	96	96	95	96
Science	96	96	95	95	96	96	97	98

New Deal (Scotland)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the number of businesses in *(a)* Inverclyde, *(b)* Renfrewshire and *(c)* Scotland which have participated in the New Deal; and if he will make a statement. [111502]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Employers across Scotland are strongly committed to New Deal, with almost 11,000 signing New Deal Agreements to date, and many others recruiting New Dealers into unsubsidised jobs (for which Agreements are not required) or supporting the Programme in other ways. In Inverclyde and Renfrewshire 417 employers have signed Agreements (Agreement figures are not broken down below the level of New Deal Delivery Units).

Class Sizes

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the relationship between *(a)* class sizes in the years when (i) Key Stage assessment (ii) GCSEs, (iii) A-levels, and (iv) equivalent vocational training are taken and *(b)* pupil performance as measured at each of those stages; and if he will make a statement. [112434]

Ms Estelle Morris: The evidence, including that from Ofsted, indicates that class size is most important at Key Stage 1. That is why we have pledged to reduce the size of infant classes. The pledge will ensure that all children benefit from infant classes of 30 or below, and will help to give young pupils the important start they need.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the size of classes was in *(a)* Hereford and *(b)* nationwide, in each of the last four academic years, leading up to (i) each Key Stage assessment, (ii) GCSEs, (iii) A-levels and (iv) vocational courses equivalent to A-levels; and if he will make a statement. [112437]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on class sizes is not available in the form requested. The available information on class sizes from January 1996 to 1999 is shown in the table. A class size count for January 2000 is currently being undertaken and national estimates are expected to be published in a Statistical First Release in April.

The most recent count of infant classes was carried out in September 1999. Figures derived from this count show that the average size of infant classes taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the Hereford Parliamentary constituency was 23.7 pupils per class. The Government have pledged to limit to 30 the size of infant classes for five, six and seven-year-olds by September 2001 at the latest. We are well on course to deliver that pledge.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher in Maintained Primary Schools by Key Stage in Hereford Parliamentary constituency and in England: 1996–1999

	Hereford Parliamentary constituency			England		
	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Overall primary[1]	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Overall primary[1]
1999	24.4	27.4	25.8	26.5	28.4	27.4
1998	25.2	27.4	26.4	27.1	28.3	27.7
1997	24.7	27.0	26.2	26.9	28.1	27.5
1996	24.7	26.2	25.4	26.8	27.9	27.3

[1] Includes middle schools

Note:

Position at January each year

Average size of classes taught by one teacher in Maintained Secondary Schools by age group [1] in Hereford Parliamentary constituency and in England: 1996–1999

	Hereford Parliamentary constituency				England			
	Aged under 14	*Aged 14 and 15*	*Aged 16 or older*	*Overall secondary [2]*	*Aged under 14*	*Aged 14 and 15*	*Aged 16 or older*	*Overall secondary [2]*
1999	24.7	22.3	13.8	23.4	25.1	21.7	10.5	21.9
1998	24.5	20.3	8.3	22.0	24.9	21.6	10.7	21.7
1997	24.4	20.0	8.3	21.8	24.7	21.6	10.8	21.7
1996	25.2	20.9	10.1	22.7	23.5	21.5	10.6	21.7

[1] Ages at the start of the academic year (August 31)
[2] Includes middle schools
Note:
Position at January each year

Ex-ASTRA Civil Servants

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many ex-ASTRA civil servants have been re-employed in the Civil Service under the reinstatement initiative; of those reinstated what were their grades *(a)* before privatisation and *(b)* on reinstatement; and how many have subsequently left the Civil Service and on what terms. [112152]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The information sought is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, reinstatement is the return to work of former established civil servants in the same permanent grade as when they left the Civil Service. All former established staff have the right to apply for reinstatement.

School Terms

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the pattern of school terms and school holidays; and if he will make a statement. [112691]

Ms Estelle Morris: Decisions about the number, length and dates of school terms and holidays are taken locally, not by central Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no plans to change these arrangements.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Chevening Scholarship Programme

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the Chevening scholarship programme for *(a)* young Chinese officials and *(b)* others. [112012]

Mr. Hain: The FCO's Chevening Scholarships programme in China is the largest in the world, with more than 100 Scholars in 1999–2000. The Scholars (future "leaders, decision makers and opinion formers") come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including government, business and NGOs. Our survey of departing students shows that 97 per cent. of Chinese Scholars in 1999 rated their academic experience in the UK as "excellent" or "good", and 97 per cent. rated the experience of their stay in the UK as "excellent" or "good". Chevening Scholars coming to the UK from China acquire new knowledge and skills, and learn more about our way of life and values. In future, as their careers progress, we hope they will tend to look to the UK for ideas, technology, trade and investment. China has been designated as one of the target countries for the Prime Minister's initiative to attract more international students to the UK. As a result, we plan to expand the Chevening programme in China in the coming academic year, by at least 15 scholars.

Abkhazia

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the joint OSCE/UN fact finding mission will visit the Gali region of Georgia; and if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's efforts to resolve the issue of Abkhazia. [112128]

Mr. Vaz: No date has yet been fixed for the OSCE fact-finding mission to Gali. Her Majesty's Government are working actively within the Friends of the Secretary-General group to help find a solution to the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia. The Secretary of State discussed the situation in Abkhazia with President Shevardnadze and others during his visit to Georgia on 23–24 February.

Mrs. Layla Zana

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what views he has expressed to the Turkish Government regarding its refusal to allow members of the European Parliament to visit Mrs. Layla Zana in prison; and if he will make a statement. [111986]

Mr. Vaz: We regret that the Chairman of the EU/Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, Daniel Cohn Bendit, was refused access to Layla Zana in late February, and have raised this in discussions with the Turkish authorities. We remain hopeful that a meeting may be possible at a later date.

As referred to in my parliamentary answer of 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 262W, the British Embassy in Ankara closely monitors the case of Mrs. Zana.

Kosovo

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the support given by the Kosovo Liberation Army to Albanian protesters in Mitrovica on 21 February. [112111]

Mr. Vaz: The Kosovo Liberation Army was demilitarised in September 1999, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244. We are aware of press reports of Kosovo Albanian extremists being involved in disturbances in Mitrovica.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of the progress that the European Union has made in its economic and infrastructure efforts in Kosovo; [112094]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the progress that has been achieved in the civil implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 in Kosovo; [112091]

(3) what assessment he has made of the progress made in establishing and overseeing the development of the first stage of provisional democratic self-governing institutions in Kosovo. [112092]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 133W.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the security situation in *(a)* Prizren, *(b)* Pec and *(c)* Gnjilane; and if he will make a statement. [112112]

Mr. Vaz: Although we keep the security situation across the province under review, we have not made specific assessments of the situation in Prizren, Pec or Gnjilane, which are respectively in the German, Italian and US-led KFOR sectors. We understand, however, that the situation in Gnjilane is currently tense, with isolated incidents of violence.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement concerning recent Serbian protests in Kosovska Mitrovica at KFOR troop activity. [112102]

Mr. Vaz: We condemn any attacks on KFOR, whose mission is to provide security for all people in Kosovo.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate his Department has made of the policing requirement for *(a)* Pristina, *(b)* Kosovska Mitrovica and *(c)* Kosovo. [112109]

Mr. Hain: The UN Secretary-General has estimated the international policing requirement for Kosovo as 4,718 officers. We accept this. We have agreed to double our own contribution as part of the international effort to meet this requirement.

Within Kosovo, UNMIK are best placed to decide on the day-to-day operational requirements for the various regions, including Pristina and Mitrovica. These requirements are kept under continuous review, and adjustments made as necessary. For example additional police officers, as well as KFOR troops, were sent recently to Mitrovica.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British troops were involved in activity in Kosovska Mitrovica between 15 and 22 February. [112106]

Mr. Vaz: Two hundred and thirty troops from the Royal Green Jackets were involved in security operations in Kosovska Mitrovica between 15 and 22 February.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the support given by the Government of President Milosevic to Serbian protesters in Kosovska Mitrovica. [112110]

Mr. Vaz: We have no evidence of any direct support given by the Government of President Milosovic to stirring up trouble in Mitrovica.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department was informed of the mass protests by ethnic Kosovo Albanians which began on 21 February in Kosovska Mitrovica. [112105]

Mr. Vaz: My Department was informed of the news when it broke on 21 February.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress made in the re-establishment of an independent, impartial and multi-ethnic judiciary in Kosovo. [112096]

Mr. Vaz: I am satisfied with the progress being made on the re-establishment of an independent, impartial, multi-ethnic and effective judiciary in Kosovo and that it is being given a very high priority. The UN Mission in Kosovo has changed the basis of applicable law to that which applied in 1989, before Milosevic removed Kosovo's autonomy, as the Kosovo Albanians and others were reluctant to accept the discriminatory Yugoslav and Serbian laws. This helps recruit local multi-ethnic judges and prosecutors and 130 were appointed in January alone. Council of Europe legal experts are reviewing Kosovo's laws to establish whether they are in conformity with internationally recognised standards. The OSCE's Judicial Training Unit is providing intensive training to local judicial personnel.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of progress made by UNMIK in setting up the administration of social services, utilities and the consolidation of the rule of law in Kosovo; [112058]

(2) what assessment he has made of progress made by UNMIK in the establishment and consolidation of its authority and the creation of interim UNMIK-managed structures in Kosovo. [112061]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* UNMIK inherited a massive challenge in June 1999: nothing less than the rebuilding of society in Kosovo. The UK has made a substantial contribution, including to emergency repair of utilities. We gave US$1 million to pay the salaries of utilities workers for the UN Mission last summer.

The Kosovo Albanians and Serbs have now both agreed to join the UN Mission in the new Joint Interim Administrative Structure (JIAS). This will involve joint departments, each headed jointly by a member of UNMIK and by a Kosovar. One of these, which is already being

established, deals with Health and Social Welfare. UNMIK have recently recruited more than 300 judges and prosecutors to put in place an effective legal system.

UNMIK

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the contributions made by *(a)* Her Majesty's Government and *(b)* the European Union to the manning and resources of UNMIK. [112905]

Mr. Vaz: The UK and its EU partners continue to make a major contribution to the international effort in Kosovo. The main elements of the UK's bilateral contribution include:

60 officers for the international police presence, a contribution we are now going to double;

40 police officers training the future Kosovo Police Service;

30 civilian secondees working on human rights/rule of law, democratisation, media development, elections and administration;

DFID has 50 staff working on the ground in Kosovo.

UK pays 6.25 per cent. of UNMIK assessed contributions. Our contribution for June 1999-June 2000 is £15.7 million. We pledged $13 million in the second half of 1999 on activities in support of UNMIK:

$4.8 million for upgrading Pristina airport.

$1 million for salary costs for utility workers.

$1 million on prisons and the use of an Emergency Engineering Unit to help repair prison facilities.

$3 million for activities related to the transformation of the Kosovo Liberation Army and $1 million for socially valuable projects to be carried out by the Kosovo Protection Corps.

$2.9 million on other support including the UN Mine Action and Co-ordination Centre, the provision of a health management team for Pristina Hospital and providing experts to the UNMIK Civil Administration pillar.

In November 1999, we pledged a further $10 million in budgetary support to UNMIK.

A UK Scenes of Crime team (up to 20 personnel) carried out forensic investigations in Kosovo last year. Work will be resumed in the spring.

EU has agreed to provide 360 meuro to Kosovo in 2000 most of it for reconstruction and in budgetary support to UNMIK, with around 50 meuro in humanitarian aid. The EU is providing emergency budget support to UNMIK through accelerated procedures.

The EU Task Force (which has been strengthened to become the EU Reconstruction Agency) is responsible for the delivery of EU assistance. Since starting work in July 1999, it has disbursed over 52 million euros.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress that UNMIK has made in *(a)* the establishment and consolidation of its authority, *(b)* the creation of interim UNMIK-managed structures, *(c)* setting up the administration of social services and utilities and *(d)* the consolidation of the rule of law in Kosovo. [112093]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer given to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 400W.

Hungary

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from Hungary concerning ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina. [112107]

Mr. Vaz: We have not received any recent official representations from Hungary concerning ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina. We are aware of Hungarian concerns about the situation in Serbia and we share the view that the promotion of democratic change in FRY/Serbia will be the best way of helping minorities within that country.

Danube

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance the Government are giving to those countries affected by the cyanide contamination of the Danube. [111972]

Mr. Vaz: We have followed with concern reports of the pollution in the Danube caused by a serious spill of cyanide-contaminated water from a gold mine in Western Romania. There is no UK involvement in this disaster nor have we provided any assistance directly to those countries affected. We support the EU initiative in calling for an investigation into the causes of this pollution. We also support the EU principle that the polluter should pay.

The European Commission has confirmed that it will provide some practical assistance. The EU Commissioner for the environment, Margot Wallstroem, visited the region in February to assess the damage and what help might be offered. The EU is to set up a working committee of international experts and is ready to send experts to the region to help if necessary. No decision has yet been taken on financial assistance.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has received from *(a)* commercial, *(b)* charitable and *(c)* community organisations and from *(d)* foreign Governments regarding the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112720]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has received no representations regarding the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Intervention Board

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the review of regional service centres for the Intervention Board Executive Agency began; how much it has cost; when he expects it to report; and if he will list all the present sites of the Intervention Board Executive Agency with the whole-time equivalent staff numbers employed at each site. [111351]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Minister commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to review the administration of payments under the CAP subsidy schemes. The review, which began last September, covered the payments made through MAFF's nine Regional Service Centres (RSCs) and through the Intervention Board Executive Agency (IBEA). PwC submitted their report at the end of January and my right hon. Friend is now considering their recommendation that the payment functions of MAFF and IBEA should be merged. Any significant reorganisation of MAFF's RSCs and IBEA will require new funding, and the case for this will be considered in the context of the Spending Review 2000.

PwC's fees for the study which was completed in January amounted to approximately £300,000 (excluding VAT and expenses).

The Intervention Board currently operates form two main sites, in Reading and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Some control staff are also based at outstations in England based at Bristol, Harrogate, Wolverhampton and Cambridge. The whole-time equivalent staff numbers employed at each site are as follows:

	Number
Reading	1,002
Newcastle	[1]293
Bristol	22
Harrogate	12
Wolverhampton	17
Cambridge	9
Total	[1]1,355

[1] Includes 15 control staff

BSE

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the underspend in the Treasury's budget for BSE-related expenditures. [111707]

Ms Quin: There is currently no underspend in this Department's budget for BSE-related expenditure.

NORTHERN IRELAND

H-blocks

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what savings arose as each of the H-blocks in the Maze Prison was emptied of prisoners. [102160]

Mr. Ingram: In 1998–99, there was a reduction of £0.33 million in the budget operating costs for which HMP Maze was directly responsible. Currently operating costs are £1.10 million less than the 1998–99 budget.

In addition, there was a 26 per cent. reduction in staffing at the prison between June 1998 and September 1999.

Mrs. Rosemary Nelson

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions the issue of the personal security of Mrs. Rosemary Nelson was raised in meetings between the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition and officials of the Northern Ireland Office and the Prime Minister's Office. [103817]

Mr. Ingram: The Government's long-standing policy is that they discuss security with the individual concerned and not with third parties. The Committee on the Administration of Justice, who wrote on behalf of Rosemary Nelson on 10 August 1999 were informed of this and were given details of how Rosemary Nelson might apply to the Northern Ireland Office's Key Person's Protection Scheme. She did not do so. Additionally, where the police have intelligence of a specific threat, which they did not in this case, they will notify the individual concerned and offer advice on security.

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the recorded number of incidents of violence caused by paramilitary groups during 1999; and if he will make a statement. [111428]

Mr. Ingram: The following tables show the security related incidents in Northern Ireland for the period 1 January to 31 December 1999.

	Number of incidents
Shooting	125
Bombing	[1]100

[1] Excludes incidents involving incendiaries, petrol bombs or hoax bombs

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks

	By Loyalist	*By Republican*
Deaths	3	4
Shootings	47	26
Assaults	90	44

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111605]

Mr. Ingram: The information is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Decommissioning

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a further statement about decommissioning of illegally held arms in Northern Ireland. [111405]

Mr. Ingram: There is no doubt that we have experienced a number of setbacks in recent weeks. However, the maintenance of the IRA cease-fire, as General de Chastelain has acknowledged, represents an important step and has contributed greatly to the peace process. It is important that we build upon that.

General de Chastelain's last report gave some grounds for optimism, but it is imperative that we have clarity on the issue of decommissioning before we can restore

devolved government in Northern Ireland. We are all agreed that the Good Friday Agreement has to be implemented in full. The obligations on all sides have not changed.

Our priority is to work together with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland parties to restore the institutions quickly, and to see that decommissioning begins as soon as possible. What we all need to do now, after recent disappointments, is to move on together without any recrimination and without any precondition. What is important is that substantive progress is made now. The next step is to decommission weapons, and that must happen soon.

Ballymena Government Training Centre

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the future of Ballymena Government Training Centre, Co. Antrim indicating the steps being taken to redeploy instructors, administrative staff and industrial staff employed at the Centre and the likely number of redundancies in each group of employees. [112406]

Mr. Ingram: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Training and Employment Agency under its Chief Executive. Mr. Ian Walters. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Ian Walters to Mr. Roy Beggs, dated 1 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me, as Chief Executive of the Training and Employment Agency, to reply to your question about the future of Ballymena Training Centre, the steps being taken to re-deploy staff, and the likely number of redundancies.

Following a review of training centres and Further Education colleges, the then Minister, Mr. McFall, confirmed in September 1999 that planning would proceed on the merger of the training centres and FE colleges. Plans are underway for Ballymena Training Centre to become fully integrated into the North East Institute of Further and Higher Education and the aim is for the merger to take effect in September 2000.

To help facilitate the merger process, the Department, acting through the Agency, has introduced a voluntary redundancy scheme for training centre staff in the instructional and industrial grades. In Ballymena, 11 staff out of a total of 30 staff have applied for and been granted voluntary redundancy. There will be a further opportunity for staff in these grades to apply for the voluntary redundancy scheme in the next few months.

Arrangements are being discussed for instructional and industrial staff who prefer to transfer to employment with North East Institute, to do so with appropriate protection of their employment rights.

I expect that all administrative staff in the training centre will be re-deployed to other parts of the Department or, perhaps, the wider Northern Ireland Civil Service. There is no need for a voluntary redundancy scheme for this group of staff.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Departmental Expenditure Limit

Jean Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what changes there are to his Department's departmental expenditure limit. [113148]

Mr. Mandelson: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Revised Spring Supplementary Estimate the Departmental Expenditure Limit for the Northern Ireland Office will be increased by £4,221,000 from £1,025,277,000 to £1,029,498,000. This is to fund expenditure arising from the Northern Ireland Act 2000. Pending that approval, expenditure of £4,221,000 will be met by a repayable advance from the Contingencies Fund.

This increase will be offset by a reduction in expenditure of the Northern Ireland Departments and will therefore not add to the total of planned Public Expenditure.

CABINET OFFICE

Drugs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent appointments she has made to support her work on the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [112384]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My right hon. Friend has made no recent appointments in this area.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) on what projects the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator will work with the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward); [112383]

(2) what Civil Service support will be made available to the hon. Member for Witney in his work in relation to drugs and children. [112385]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator has been asked to consider what more could be done to co-ordinate work on drugs in schools. This involves discussions with the Department for Education and Employment and organisations such as the Metropolitan Police and Childline. In the light of his experience with Childline, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) has met the UK anti-drugs co-ordinator on this issue. There is no question of civil service support being made available to the hon. Member for Witney.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mozambique

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the emergency help sent so far to Mozambique during the recent flooding; and if she will make a statement. [112694]

Clare Short: My Department deployed two humanitarian specialists to the region during the initial stages of the flooding on 11 February. They conducted rapid assessments and liaised with the Mozambican authorities and humanitarian organisations to help identify priority needs. We despatched a consignment of over 400 tents on 12 February from the UK to Maputo for the Red Cross to distribute for emergency shelter to those made homeless. We also supported the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team who are assisting the Mozambican authorities with the targeting and coordination of the relief efforts. Given the deteriorating situation over the last week we redeployed a humanitarian specialist to Mozambique to work alongside permanent DFID staff in Maputo.

We have mobilised 11 helicopters, including four from the RAF, to assist with the rescue and relief effort. We have also provided US$1 million to the World Food

Programme to support the continued operations of helicopters from the South African Defence Force. To assist with the effective tasking of all helicopters, we have seconded a logistics expert into the World Food Programme. But helicopters are not the total answer. We are also deploying 70 boats and specialist trained crews, together with a number of large capacity self-inflating life rafts. DFID has already contributed over £5.8 million for rescue and immediate relief including the provision of shelter, water, sanitation and health support. This funding has been channelled through the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF, World Food Programme, Red Cross, ActionAid, Oxfam, Save the Children Fund and World Vision. These activities are being coordinated with the Mozambican authorities. We stand ready to provide further assistance.

HEALTH

NHS Dentistry

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the level of demand for NHS dentistry in the next five years; [109828]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of dentists required to meet current demand for NHS treatment; [109855]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of patients waiting to see an NHS dentist; [109866]

(4) what is the average waiting time to see an NHS dentist in Shropshire. [109835]

Mr. Hutton: The number of dentists in the General Dental Service in England at December 1999 (the latest date for which figures are available) was 17,746, an all time high and an increase of 480 from the previous year. Access problems are largely attributable to increases in the proportion of the time which dentists spend treating private patients and in the numbers of dentists working part-time. We therefore believe that we need to increase the level of dentists' commitment to the National Health Service. The Government will discuss with the profession a scheme to encourage and reward commitment to the NHS, paying out about £17 million a year.

Plans for the future direction and development of NHS Dentistry have been made taking into account past, present and future trends in registrations and demand for NHS dentistry. Information on the number of patients waiting to see a NHS dentist, or the length of waiting time for dental services in Shropshire, is not available centrally. For information on protocol for waiting times at the Shropshire Dental Access Centre, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) on 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 511W.

Dentists

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage competition amongst dentists. [112321]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The NHS expects all its dentists to provide a high quality and reliable service. Patients should be told whether they can expect to pay the standard charge for this service and, if so, how much a course of treatment will be. On top of this, we welcome the initiative of individual dentists who attract patients by offering exceptional service in some way.

Old Church Hospital

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds there will be at the proposed new hospital at Old Church; and what is the current number of beds in the present hospital at Old Church. [111953]

Mr. Denham: There are currently 463 beds at Old Church hospital. The Trust has submitted proposals which are currently under consideration by the London Regional Office of the NHS Executive to provide 711 beds at Old Church Park.

Adoption

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to reform the system for the adoption of children; and if he will make a statement. [111780]

Mr. Hutton: Through the Government's Quality Protects Programme we aim to develop a modern adoption system which puts the interests of the child first and provides a sensitive and efficient service. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is reviewing with ministerial colleagues how we can build on Quality Protects, moving further and faster to secure our aim of maximising the use of adoption for all children for whom it is appropriate and minimising delay. My right hon. Friend will make further announcements on the work programme in due course.

Long-term Care

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if nursing care funded by the Government for those in long-term care will be restricted to that given by trained nurses; [112004]

(2) if he intends to adopt the definition of nursing care set out in the report of the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care. [112003]

Mr. Hutton: No options for change have been ruled in or out at this stage. The Department of Health held a seminar on 1 March to discuss approaches to defining nursing care. Participants included representatives of professional and managerial organisations, private sector providers and voluntary organisations representing users of services. The issues raised at the seminar will help to inform our consideration of national standards for staffing levels in nursing homes and our final decision on the future funding of long-term care, following the conclusion of the spending review.

Crowns and Bridges

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the number of claims for *(a)* precious metal based and *(b)* non-precious metal-based crowns and bridges in each of the last three years. [111724]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* The tables show the number of claims scheduled for payment for crowns and bridges in precious and non-precious metal carried out in England from 1996–97 to 1998–99.

General Dental Service: Number of treatments for crowns: 1996–97 to 1998–99
England

Thousand

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Precious metal			
Crowns full or 0.75—precious metal	21.7	192.0	248.2
Bonded FJC—gold or precious	1,264.2	892.8	870.1
Total	1,285.9	1,084.8	1,118.3
Non-precious metal			
FJC—non-precious metal alloy	3.6	26.8	26.9
Bonded FJC—non precious	14.5	12.6	15.1
Total	18.1	39.4	42.0
Total for all metals	1,304.0	1,124.2	1,160.3

General Dental Service: Number of treatments for bridges [1]: 1996–97 to 1998–99
England

Thousand

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Precious metal			
Retainers			
Retainer—gold-inlay compound	1.1	0.8	0.4
Inlay—compound confluent cavity or 0.75 crown	0.5	0.4	0.5
FJC	1.1	1.2	0.8
Retainer—other-FJC precious	1.1	0.9	1.4
Bonded FJC—gold or precious	174.1	142.0	156.0
Pontics			
Pontics—gold	1.4	1.2	1.1
Others precious	0.4	0.1	0.4
Bonded gold/precious	118.8	98.2	109.4
Total for precious metal[1]	298.5	244.8	270.0
Non-precious metal			
Retainers			
FJC non-precious	0.4	0.1	0.2
Bonded FJC non-precious	1.7	2.2	2.8
Acid etch retainer—metal	33.7	30.6	33.5
Pontics			
Other alloys non-precious	0.2	0.1	0.2
Bonded non-precious	1.2	1.7	2.0
Acid etch pontic—bonded	19.4	18.8	20.5
Total for non-precious metal[1]	56.6	53.5	59.2
Total for all metals[1]	355.1	298.3	329.2

[1] Figures for bridges are available only for the individual parts

NHS Staff

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* numbers of and *(b)* cost to the NHS of employing agency nurses (i) nationally and (ii) by region for each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [112396]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* Information on the number of agency staff is not available centrally.

The table shows the total expenditure on non-National Health Service nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff in England, for the financial years 1994–95 to 1998–99. These figures include all agency staff and any staff not directly employed by individual NHS trusts and health authorities.

Expenditure on non-NHS nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff
England

£

Financial year	*Total expenditure*
1994–95	132,836,673
1995–96	166,631,983
1996–97	191,496,635
1997–98	216,338,567
1998–99	272,225,162

Sources:

1. Annual financial returns of district and regional health authorities and the special health authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals 1994–95 and 1995–96
2. Annual financial returns of health authorities 1996–97 to 1998–99
3. Annual financial returns of NHS trusts

Correspondence

Mr. Arbuthnot: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 29 October 1999 from the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire regarding Dr. Egerton, a constituent. [112540]

Ms Stuart: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, replied to the right hon. Member on 29 February.

Breast Implants

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations made by the Independent Review Group set up to examine the health risks of silicone gel breast implants relating to *(a)* information about benefits and risks of surgery for patients undergoing cosmetic breast augmentation surgery, *(b)* advertisements promoting breast implant surgery, *(c)* a consent form which incorporates the issues to be discussed between surgeons and women considering breast implantation, *(d)* measures to ensure that standards of care in private clinics, *(e)* registration of details of each breast implant and explant, *(f)* reporting breast implant-related adverse incidents, *(g)* information to patients on the likely financial implications of breast implant surgery and *(h)* a steering group to organise research. [112549]

Mr. Denham: A group chaired by the noble Baroness Emerton of Tunbridge Wells is producing an information booklet for women who are contemplating having breast implants. The booklet will provide expanded information on the issues identified by the Independent Review Group, including consent and financial implications. This will be available shortly.

There have been discussions between the Advertising Standards Authority and Departmental officials about advertising, and we are currently considering how best to take this matter forward.

The use of such forms is good practice, and in 1992 the Department issued model consent forms which can be adapted by National Health Service trusts for any procedure. This will be supported by the information leaflet which will give advice to women on the questions they will need to ask surgeons before giving consent.

We are committed to introducing new and modern regulatory arrangements for independent healthcare provision through the Care Standards Bill, which is currently before Parliament. Copies of the Government's response to the Health Committee report of the regulation of private healthcare are available in the Library.

The group's recommendations on registration were about ensuring good clinical practice. Measures are also in hand, through initiatives such as the Care Standards Agency and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, to increase compliance with good clinical practice in both the public and the private sector.

The Medical Devices Agency guidance was published last year on the reporting of adverse incidents. This was circulated to liaison officers in the public and the private sectors, to all members of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons and the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, and to manufacturers. Copies are available in the Library.

A steering group has been established within the Department to identify suitable approaches that could lead to research of high scientific quality into breast implants and cosmetic surgery. The group's membership includes a consultant plastic surgeon, an Emeritus Professor of immunology, a representative from industry and the Chairman of the NHS Health Technology Assessment programme.

Non-medical Supplies

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which private firms were invited to tender for the supply of non-medical supplies and equipment to NHS trusts in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date. [112570]

Mr. Denham: This information is not available because National Health Service trusts are not required to report to the Department which firms they have invited to tender.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much NHS trusts spent on non-medical supplies and equipment in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date. [112541]

Mr. Denham: Information is not available for 1999–2000.

Expenditure on non-medical supplies and equipment 1997–98 and 1998–99 is shown in the table.

£000

	1997–98	1998–99
Revenue expenditure:		
Supplies and services—general	627,624	704,052
Premises	1,480,979	1,468,051
Establishment	638,573	674,119
Transport	173,104	173,955
Audit fees	18,468	18,828
Other auditors' remuneration	13,031	12,675
Other	722,149	847,930
Capital assets:		
Equipment—additions	352,296	343,690

Descriptions of the entries in the revenue expenditure lines are as follows:

Supplies and services—general

This is the trust's total revenue expenditure on such things as:

cleaning equipment, materials and external contracts;
provisions;
contract catering;
staff uniforms and clothing;
patients' clothing;
laundry equipment, materials and external contracts;
hardware and crockery; and
bedding and linen (both disposable and non-disposable).

Premises

This is the trust's total revenue expenditure on:

coal;
oil;
electricity;
gas;
other fuel;
water and sewerage;
general supplies and services;
furniture;
furnishings and fittings;
office equipment;
computer hardware and software;
data processing services;
rates;
rent;
property insurance;
engineering and building maintenance; and
other miscellaneous.

Establishment

This is the trust's total revenue expenditure on administrative expenses including:

printing and stationery;
postage;
telephones;
advertising;
travel;
subsistence;
removal expenses; and
staff cars.

Transport

This is the trust's total revenue expenditure on:

vehicle insurance;
fuel and oil;
maintenance equipment, materials and external contracts;
hire of transport;
hospital car services: and
miscellaneous transport expenses.

Audit fees

This is the total of fees paid or payable to the external auditor for the reporting year in respect of fees for auditing the annual accounts and returns.

Other auditors' remuneration

This is the total of fees paid or payable to the external auditor for the reporting year in respect of fees for any work other than auditing the accounts and returns, e.g. fees for value for money reviews.

Other

This is the total revenue expenditure of the trust not covered above. These include:

patients' travelling expenses;

redundancy costs;

expenditure related to contracts with security firms;

insurance payments other than car or property insurance; and

losses and special payments, net of related insurance proceeds.

There may be medical expenditure within this category but there is insufficient information to identify and exclude this.

Descriptions of the entries in the capital asset line are as follows:

Equipment—additions

This represents the net book value of equipment assets acquired using both exchequer funds and from donations in the year. It also includes transfers from assets under construction where these have been completed in the year. Insufficient information is available to split the category into medical and non-medical equipment. This net book value does not equal the actual cash expenditure. Cash expenditure just on equipment is not available.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets were set for savings to be made in the purchase of non-medical supplies and equipment by NHS trusts in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000 to date. [112571]

Mr. Denham: National Health Service trusts were not set targets for savings in the purchase of non-medical supplies and equipment in 1997–98, 1998–99 or 1999–2000.

The NHS Supplies Authority has been set purchasing targets covering all areas it influences—medical and non-medical goods and services. Those targets and achievements are set out in the table:

£ million

	Target	*Achievement*
1997–98	[1]75.6	104.2
1998–99	[1]82.5	113.3
1999–2000	[1]111.0	[2]122.0

[1] More than
[2] To 31 January 2000
Source:
NHS Supplies Authority

Ambulances

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the breakdown on the M4 motorway of a St. John Ambulance under contract to the London Ambulance Service carrying a patient awaiting a heart and lung transplant on 19 February; [112626]

(2) what requirements there are for ambulances carrying patients long distances to carry spare tyres. [112627]

Ms Stuart: The breakdown of the ambulance carrying a patient from London to Wales was regrettable, but I understand that another vehicle was speedily provided and the patient suffered no adverse effects from this incident. It is policy among all ambulance services not to carry a spare wheel. A replacement vehicle was sent to ensure proper transport for the patient.

Elderly People

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what data he has collated for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99 on the indicators in the Government's poverty audit Opportunity for All relating to (i) intensive home care for people over 65 years of age in England and (ii) community based care for people over 65 years of age. [112156]

Mr. Hutton: The data for these indicators, which are also part of the Personal Social Services Performance Assessment Framework, were published on 24 November 1999 in a summary form in *Social Services Performance 1998–99* and in detail in the form of computer tables on the Department of Health's internet site (reference: www.doh.gov.uk/paf/). The data show that in England (i) 8.4 households per 1,000 head of population aged 65 or over received intensive home care (more than 10 contact hours and 6 or more visits during the survey week) in England in 1998–99. Comparable data are not available for 1997–98 due to changes in the data collection. (ii) 71 people aged 65 or over per 1,000 head of population aged 65 or over received community based services in 1998–99. The comparable number for 1997–98 was 81.

Cleft Lip and Palate Services

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations he has had with patients and their families about the future provision of cleft lip and palate centres. [112730]

Mr. Denham: The Chief Executive of the Cleft Lip and Palate Association (CLAPA) was a member of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group that reviewed cleft lip and palate services. He is currently a member of the Cleft Implementation Group. Representatives of cleft support groups have been involved in proposals in all regions and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer attended the CLAPA's Annual General Meeting in October last year.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what expert qualifications and experience members of his Clinical Standards Advisory Group have on cleft lip and palate. [112733]

Mr. Denham: The information is contained in Appendix A of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group on Cleft Lip and/or Palate (available in the Library) which lists the members of the CSAG committee established to look into this. The cleft committee was chaired by Professor John Murray, Dean of the Dental School at the University of Newcastle.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the members of his Department's Clinical Standards Advisory Group on cleft lip and palate. [112732]

Mr. Denham: The members of the sub group of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group which looked at cleft lip and palate services are listed in appendix A of the CSAG Report on cleft lip and palate services, copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which hospitals his Department is assessing as future cleft lip and palate centres; and when he will announce his decision on the future locations of such centres. [112731]

Mr. Denham: Decisions about the designation of specialist cleft lip and palate centres are matters for Regional Specialist Commissioning Groups, in accordance with the commissioning framework issued in the Health Services Circular HSC 1998/238, copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the members of the regional specialised services commission groups and the relevant sub-groups charged with taking forward the Government's plans for the future provision of cleft lip and palate services. [112729]

Mr. Denham: The information requested can be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, it should be noted that Regional Specialised Commissioning Groups (RSCGs) have been established in all the English health regions, and Regional Directors of the NHS are accountable for their performance. The chairs of the RSCGs are as follows:

Region	*Chair*
Northern and Yorkshire	Barry Fisher, Chief Executive of North Yorkshire Health Authority
North-West	Professor Maggie Pearson, North-West Regional Office
Trent	Dick Stockford, Director of Policy Development, Trent Regional Office
West Midlands	Henry Foster, Chief Executive, Dudley Health Authority
London	John James, Chief Executive, Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority
Eastern	Chris Heginbotham, Chief Executive, East and North Herts Health Authority
South-East	Mike Gill, Regional Director of Public Health, Eastern Region
South-West	Tony Laurence, Regional Director, South West Region

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 3 March 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what concessionary fare schemes for public transport are available to blind people. [111974]

Mr. Hill: The most recent comprehensive information available to the Department comes from a survey of the position in 1995–96. Of the 331 local authorities which responded to that survey, 299 provided a concessionary travel scheme for blind people. The areas covered by these schemes included Greater London and all the six metropolitan areas. At least 32 of the schemes provided free travel; the remainder offered a range of different concessions.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the payment of Disability Living Allowance to blind people and the disabled on entitlement to local authority concessionary fare schemes. [111975]

Mr. Hill: A survey of the position in 1995–96 indicated some differences between local authorities as to eligibility for concessionary travel for people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. Last year the Department of Social Security and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issued a guidance note to local authorities suggesting that concessionary travel should not be refused to people on the grounds that they were in receipt of the mobility element of the Disability Living Allowance.

Animals (Mange)

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which public bodies have specific powers covering the control of animals with mange. [112014]

Mr. Mullin: This is not a matter for my Department.

Thameslink

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 706W, when he expects to be able to publish the shadow Strategic Rail Authority's proposals for additional capacity on the Bedford to London section of the Thameslink route which will not be dependent on the Thameslink 2000 project. [112425]

Mr. Hill: Thameslink's initial proposals for additional capacity were set out in "Thameslink—A New Partnership for the Millennium" which they published in March 1999. Discussion of these and other proposals to enhance capacity on the Bedford to London section is continuing with the Franchising Director, who will make an announcement in due course, I have asked the Franchising Director to keep my hon. Friend directly informed of progress.

Objective 1, Merseyside

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress in negotiations between his Department and the European Commission on the Objective 1 Special Programme Document for Merseyside. [112942]

Ms Armstrong: We are making good progress in our negotiations with the European Commission on the Objective 1 Single Programme Document for Merseyside. The European Commission is keen to ensure that confirmation of the acceptability of the Single Programme Document is provided by 31 March.

Funding Schemes

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the funding schemes administered by his Department, indicating the total funds of each scheme and the administration costs of each scheme as a percentage of the total funds. [112494]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Details of the schemes administered by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and information about the level of funding is given each year in the Departmental Annual Report. The 1999 Annual Report was presented to Parliament on 25 March 1999 (Cm 4204). The Department does not record its administration costs at the level of individual schemes.

Rail Franchise (North England)

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last met the Chairman of the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority to discuss the redrawing of the Rail Franchise for the North of England; and if he will make a statement. [112784]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has not met the Chairman of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to discuss redrawing the rail franchise for the North of England, but the Franchising Director will consider this together with other relevant matters when replacing the franchise in that area.

Air Rage

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many incidents classified as air rage have been reported in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [113027]

Mr. Mullin: Data are not available for that period. Reports of disruptive incidents on UK airlines have been collected since April 1999. An analysis of the data for the

seven months to October 1999 recorded 796 incidents, 39 of which were considered serious. The analysis is available in the House of Commons Library.

Homelessness

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the amounts allocated to homelessness over the past 10 years and the amounts allocated to rough sleeping over the past 10 years. [112810]

Mr. Mullin: Since 1990 my Department has allocated the following amounts to tackle single homelessness and rough sleeping.

1990–93

£12.1 million (single homelessness)

£96 million (rough sleeping)

1993–96

£19 million (single homelessness)

£86 million (rough sleeping)

1996–99

£23.8 million (single homelessness)

£73 million (rough sleeping)

1999–2002

£196 million (Rough Sleepers Unit).

The Rough Sleepers Unit was established in my Department in April 1999. This Unit has an integrated budget combining the separate single homelessness and rough sleeping programme budgets as well as budgets previously administered by other Departments.

Government implemented a special homelessness initiative in the early 1990s to tackle homelessness pressures in London and the South-East which was allocated partly to local authorities and partly to housing associations (through the Housing Corporation). The local authority allocations were £112 million in 1990–91 and £126.7 million in 1991–92.

Local housing authorities have statutory obligations to assist homeless persons under part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (and formerly under part III of the Housing Act 1985). This includes unintentionally homeless households with dependant children, and those who are vulnerable, totalling almost one million households between 1991–99. Funding for local authorities' activities under these provisions is provided as part of the annual local government finance settlement and is unhypothecated.

Water Industry

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements he has made for protecting vulnerable customers under the Water Industry Act 1999. [113477]

Mr. Meacher: The Water Industry (Charges) (Vulnerable Groups) Regulations 1999 were made under the Water Industry Act 1999 and laid on 22 December 1999. The regulations offer protection to customers who might face hardship affording their bills because they use large amounts of water for essential purposes and pay on a measured basis. Customers will qualify for assistance if they are in receipt of income related benefits or tax credits (Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Working Families Tax Credit, Disabled Person's Tax Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) and either *(a)* they have three dependent children under the age of 16; or *(b)* they have a medical condition requiring significant extra water use (these are defined as kidney failure requiring home dialysis, abdominal stomas, desquamation, weeping skin disease and incontinence).

Customers in these circumstances will be entitled to pay the average charge for the company that supplies them, rather than their actual measured charge. This represents a significant new step to tackle water poverty.

The wording of the 1999 Regulations could have been interpreted as excluding low income customers whose children have qualifying medical conditions. That was not the intention. Therefore the Government have today laid the Water Industry (Charges) (Vulnerable Groups) (Amendment) Regulations 2000 which ensure that low income customers can receive assistance if their children are suffering from a qualifying medical condition. This confirms the Government's commitment to helping families who might face hardship as a result of high essential water use.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Schuman Project

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the UK beneficiaries of the Schuman Project who are *(a)* lawyers and *(b)* judges since its inception. [112336]

Mr. Lock: The only available information is contained in the analysis and first assessment on the pilot phases 1997–98 of the Robert Schuman Project published by the European Commission on 1 December 1998. The UK organisations selected to receive funding under the scheme are as listed. A report covering 1999 will be published in the Official Journal in due course.

1997

SLS Legal Publications—University of Belfast

The General Council of the Bar of England and Wales

The Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn

The Institute of Professional Legal Studies—Queen's University Belfast

1998

AIRE Centre (Advice on Individual Rights)

Liberty (The National Council for Civil Liberties)

Middlesex University

SLS Legal Publications—University of Belfast

Southampton Institute

The Law Society of Scotland (two projects)

The University of Manchester

The University of Birmingham.

Eviction and Seizure of Goods

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many court orders for evictions and seizure of goods there were last year in which those to be evicted or to have goods seized no longer lived at the named address; what estimate he has made of the *(a)* total cost and *(b)* cost per order; and if he will make a statement. [112435]

Jane Kennedy: Statistics and costs information are not kept in the form requested, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Family Court Officers

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the comprehensive induction programme for family court officers includes modules on how to apportion specific periods of parental access in cases of divorce or separation. [112309]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

The national induction programme highlights factors which family court welfare officers need to address in their work with families and their assessments for courts. These factors include the nature, frequency and safety of involvement with each parent following separation.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Miners Compensation

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in how many cases payment of claims in respect of chronic bronchitis and emphysema suffered by former miners have been made to their widows. [111414]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 20 February the Department has made bereavement award payments to 1,851 widows amounting to over £16 million. In addition some 2,500 widows of miners who were in receipt of Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit for Chronic Bronchitis and Emphysema have received interim payments of £2,000 each.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many medical tests were carried out under the Miners Compensation Scheme in Scotland in *(a)* 1999, *(b)* January 2000 and *(c)* February 2000 to date, on ex-miners seeking compensation for emphysema and other respiratory diseases. [111415]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* To date over 3,200 ex-miners have undergone lung function tests at one of the four centres established in Scotland by Healthcall, the company contracted to carry out the lung function programme.

Nuclear Fuels

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library copies of letters sent to or received from British Nuclear Fuels plc on *(a)* safety at Sellafield and *(b)* Plutonium MOX fuel, by Ministers and officials in (i) his Department and (ii) other departments, since 10 September 1999. [112354]

Mrs. Liddell: Correspondence on these and other issues is a matter between the Government and the company.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the first commercial quantity of vitrified high level radioactive waste will be repatriated to foreign countries following the reprocessing of imported spent nuclear fuel as Sellafield. [112352]

Mr. Caborn: Dates for the return of wastes arising from BNFL's reprocessing operations will be agreed between the company and the owners of the reprocessed fuel.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library copies of all letters sent by Ministers and officials of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* other Departments to his Japanese Trade counterpart on the matter of plutonium MOX fuels, British Nuclear Fuels plc or Sellafield since 10 September 1999. [112355]

Mrs. Liddell: Correspondence on these and other issues is a matter between the two Governments. Senior officials from my Department visited Tokyo on 7–10 February to discuss MOX fuel with the Japanese Ministries and power utilities concerned. A joint press statement issued by the two Governments was placed in the Libraries of both Houses on 28 February.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the *(a)* dates and *(b)* purpose of visits made by Ministers in his Department to Sellafield since May 1997; and if he will place in the Library copies of speeches and radio and television interviews made by Ministers in association with such visits. [112353]

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Battle), the then Minister for Energy, visited Sellafield on 15 February 1999 at the invitation of BNFL for a site visit. There was no media involvement associated with this visit.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list, for each *(a)* director and *(b)* non-executive director of British Nuclear Fuels plc. their responsibilities in the company and the length of time each has served in that capacity as a board member. [112545]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* The responsibilities, and length of service, of the members of the Board of BNFL are as follows:

Executive Directors

David Bonser, Director, Engineering, Waste Management and Decommissioning Business Group, 30 September 1999 to date.

Ross Chiese, Group Finance Director, 26 August 1994 to date.

Christopher Loughlin, Director, Thorp and Magnox Business Group, 30 September 1999 to date.

Non-executive Directors

Sir John Boyd, Chairman of the Remuneration Committee, 30 October 1997 to date.

Hugh Collum, Chairman, 21 July 1999 to date (Chairman from 1 October 1997 to date.

Professor Alistair MacFarlane, 15 July 1994 to date.

Katherine Mortimer, 1 April 1993 to date.

John Rimington, 29 January 1998 to date.

John Roques, Chairman of the Audit Committee, 1 November 1990 to date.

Grahame Smith, 1 September 1999 to date.

Note:

John Taylor resigned as Director and Chief Executive of BNFL on 1 March 2000.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what analysis he has undertaken of the comparative risks, costs and benefits of alternatives to the Ilisu Dam, including *(a)* energy conservation, *(b)* other renewable sources, *(c)* fossil fuels, and *(d)* nuclear power. [112125]

Mr. Caborn: It is for the project sponsor to carry out any analysis of the comparative risks, costs and benefits of alternatives to a particular project.

Turkey needs to expand its generating capacity considerably. We know that they are looking at coal, gas and oil fired stations elsewhere in Turkey and also at nuclear power. It is natural that they should see hydro power—a clean, renewable energy source which does not involve imports—as having a place in meeting this need.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112664]

Mr. Byers: The annual Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies", provides information on a range of public organisations. The 1997 edition lists those bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans his Department has to conduct an investigation into the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112735]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* It is the policy of my Department not to comment on the affairs of particular companies. If the hon. Member has any information which he feels needs to be brought to my Department's attention he should do so as soon as possible.

MOX Fuel

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when his Department was informed by BNFL of problems in respect of MOX fuel supplied to German utilities. [112033]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* BNFL first told my Department of a problem concerning MOX fuel supplied to the German utility, PreussenElektra, on 22 October 1999.

ECGD Projects

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which British (i) banks and (ii) companies are involved in the following ECGD supported projects: *(a)* ACESITA stainless steel strip mill in Timoteo, *(b)* the nuclear power project in Qinshan, China, *(c)* the coal handling export terminal in Tianjin, China, *(d)* the coal fired power station in Manjung, Malaysia, *(e)* the Janamanjung Plant in Malaysia, *(f)* the development loan to the Korean Development Bank and *(g)* the seventh Airbus A330–200 to the United Arab Emirates. [112473]

Mr. Caborn: The following is the information:

ECGD supported project	*Name of bank*	*Name of company*[1]
ACESITA stainless steel strip mill in Timoteo, Brazil		
(a) Annealing and Pickling Line	Kleinwort Benson Ltd.	VAI (formerly Davy McKee (Poole) Ltd. trading as Davy International)
(b) Hot Mill	Lloyds TSB (formerly Lloyds Bank plc)	VAI (formerly Davy McKee (Sheffield) Ltd. trading as (Davy International)
The nuclear power project in Qinshan, China		
(a) Qinshan Phase II	Standard Chartered Bank	Weir Pumps Ltd.
(b) Qinshan Phase III	Midland Bank plc	Bechtel Ltd.[2]
The Coal handling export terminal in Tianjin, China	Midland Bank plc and Bank of China, London	ALSTOM Automation International Ltd.
The coal fired power station in Manjung Malaysia[3]	Midland Bank plc	ALSTOM Power Plants Ltd.
Line of Credit for Korean Development Bank[4]	HSBC Investment Bank plc	Various[5]
The seventh Airbus A330–200 to United Arab Emirates[6]	HSBC Bank plc	BAE Systems (formerly BAE) and Rolls-Royce

[1] Companies listed are the known lead contractors but there will be many sub-contractors involved on which records are not routinely held by ECGD—for example in the Airbus case typically, some 400 in the BAE Systems supply chain and some 250 in the Rolls-Royce supply chain.

[2] Bechtel Ltd. is acting as procurement agents to procure equipment from a number of British firms (including Weir Pumps and ALSTOM) who have won valuable sub-contract work.

[3] The coal fired power station in Manjung, Malaysia '*(d)*' and the Janamanjung Plan in Malaysia '*(e)*' are one and the same project.

[4] A Supplier Credit Finance Facility (SCFLOC) to support the purchase of UK Capital and Semi-Capital UK Goods and UK Services. It is an export credit loan and not a 'development loan'.

[5] No contracts have yet been placed.

[6] Delivered on 28 January 2000—the seventh of seventeen aircraft ordered under a Purchase Agreement dated 18 October 1996.

Utilities Bill

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to make regulations under the Utilities Bill regarding Consumer Council access to information. [113414]

Mrs. Liddell: The Utilities Bill contains strong information-gathering powers for the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council, to ensure it has access to the information it will need in order to play an influential and informed role on behalf of consumers within the regulatory system.

However, there are a small number of areas, such as information relevant to court proceedings, where confidentiality is legitimate. I have today published a consultation paper setting out the Government's initial thoughts on making regulations defining these areas, subject to Parliament's approval of the relevant provisions of the Utilities Bill.

I have placed copies of the consultation paper in the Libraries of both Houses.

IR35

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the right to full employment protection of individuals who become direct employees under IR35. [112987]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The treatment of individuals under tax and national insurance legislation does not determine their status for employment law purposes.

Objective 2 Map

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes were made in the draft map of authorities designated for Objective 2 status, including internal ward changes, prior to publication of the final map; and how such changes were made. [111920]

Mr. Caborn *[pursuant to the reply, 2 March 2000, c.342W]:* I now provide the changes in the proposals.

The changes made to coverage in England are as follows:

Torbay

Torwood ward is added

Southend

Victoria and St. Lukes wards are included in exchange for Chalkwell and Leigh wards

Great Yarmouth

Magdalen West ward was included in exchange for Gorleston ward

East Staffordshire

Victoria and Eton wards are included in exchange for Needwood ward and Tutbury and Hanbury ward.

The changes made in Scotland are:

Angus

Slidlaw and Carnoustie West are included in exchange for Colliston and Hayshead wards

Clackmannanshire

Harviestoun ward is no longer included

Dundee

Dudhope, Central, Menziehill and Gourdie wards are included in exchange for Wellgate, Baxter Park, Douglas, Whitfield and Trottick

Falkirk

Dawson and Victoria wards are included in exchange for Denny ward

Glasgow

Castlemilk and Dennistoun are included in exchange for Toryglen and Crosshill

Midlothian

Part of Pathhead ward is now included

Moray

Keith and part of Strathisla ward are now included in exchange for Rathford

Renfrewshire

Johnstone Cochranemill ward is included in exchange for Barshaw

South Lanarkshire

Ferniegar and part of Fernhill ward are included in exchange for Low Waters.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish New Deal statistics at an individual constituency level regularly. [113410]

Ms Jowell: To support our crusade against youth unemployment, I am pleased to announce that I am today making available information on the progress of the New Deal in each constituency across Great Britain. To put this information into context, some general indicators of local labour markets are also included.

Copies of the individual constituencies' statistics have been placed in the Library. In order to keep Members informed of progress, I will place updates of this information in the Library each quarter.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensioners

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the income of the poorest pensioners in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 2000–01. [111811]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows:

The median income among the poorest fifth of pensioner couples in 1997–98 was £126 per week. The median among the poorest fifth of single pensioners was £68 per week.

Notes:

1. Information is for 1997–98, the latest year available. Forecasts are not available for 2000–01.

2. Single pensioners are defined as single (non-cohabiting) people over state pension age (65 for men, 60 for women); pensioner couples are defined as couples (married or cohabiting) where the man is over state pension age.

3. Estimates of incomes refer to net income before housing costs, expressed in July 1997 prices.

4. Estimates are rounded to the nearest £ per week, although they are not necessarily accurate to that degree.

5. For the purposes of this analysis, the 'poorest' are defined as the bottom fifth of the pensioner couples income distribution and the bottom fifth of the single pensioners income distribution, calculated on the net income before housing costs measure. Figures are not available for the distribution of pensioner couples and single pensioners combined.

6. The median income for a given group of people, or couples, is the income of the person or couple exactly in the income distribution. Thus for a given group, half the people or couples have an income higher than the median and have an income lower than the median.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1997–98.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what *(a)* current measures are in place and *(b)* future proposals he has to ensure the senior citizens claim their full benefit entitlement. [111094]

Mr. Rooker: We are committed to taking action to find more effective ways of encouraging eligible pensioners to claim their benefit entitlement. We will be announcing our plans, to encourage pensioners to take-up their entitlement to their minimum income guarantee, shortly.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112659]

Mr. Rooker: The annual Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies", provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

In this Department no new public bodies have been established since May 1997.

Pensioners (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were in receipt of a State Retirement Pension in each of the parliamentary constituencies in the Greater London area on 1 February. [112617]

Mr. Rooker: Information on the number of men and women in receipt of a State Retirement Pension is not available at parliamentary constituency level. Although information is available on the number of people of pensionable age, this is from the 1991 Census published by the Office for National Statistics.

Miners Compensation

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the payment of compensation for mining-related illness to ex-coal miners will result in a reduction of social security benefits currently paid to them. [112502]

Mr. Bayley: Payments of compensation are treated as capital in the income-related benefits[1]. Where a person who has suffered a personal injury (including an industrial illness) receives a compensation payment, the capital value may be disregarded if it is held in a Trust Fund. Normal rules on income from Trust Funds would apply.

[1] The income-related benefits are Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Correspondence

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will answer the letter from the hon. Member for Wellingborough of 29 June 1999 and provide the breakdown requested of the £22 million stated by the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), to have been paid in respect of war pensions for psychiatric illness in 1939, *Official Report*, 24 February 1999, column 518. [113170]

Mr. Bayley: A reply to most of the matters raised in the letter was sent on 9 September 1999, and a further letter, about war pensions paid in respect of psychiatric illness in 1939, was sent to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough on 26 February 2000.

HEALTH

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the accident and emergency units indicating *(a)* the projected patient attendance expected when built, *(b)* the actual patient attendance achieved each year since 1992 and *(c)* the number of cubicle beds in each unit. [112951]

Ms Stuart: Copies of accident and emergency attendances by NHS trusts are available in the Library. The initial projected number of accident and emergency attendances and the number of beds within accident and emergency units are not collected centrally.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he was informed of the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd., and by whom; and if he will make a statement. [112793]

Ms Stuart: The Department was informed of the cancellation of the Global Diversity Congress by the Chief Executive of the Commission for Racial Equality, Susie Parsons, in a letter dated 22 February 2000.

DEFENCE

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civilians in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* 1999. [104021]

Dr. Moonie: A breakdown by age group of the number of civilians employed by the Ministry of Defence on 1 April 1999 is given in the table. Corresponding information for 1979 is not readily available and could be produced only at disproportionate cost. A breakdown by age group for the whole Civil Service is provided within the annual publication "Civil Service Statistics", available from the Library of the House.

Civilian personnel employed by Ministry of Defence at 1 April 1999

Thousand (Full time equivalent)

Age group	*Males*	*Females*	*Total*
16–19	1.0	0.4	1.4
20–24	2.8	2.0	4.8
25–59	5.9	4.0	9.9
30–34	8.6	5.1	13.8
35–39	9.6	4.9	14.5
40–44	9.7	4.2	13.9
45–49	9.9	4.2	14.1
50+	24.7	8.7	33.4
Unknown	2.4	0.0	2.5
Total	74.7	33.6	108.3

Notes:
1. Data may not sum to totals due to rounding
2. Data includes 5.3 thousand FTE MoD staff who are on secondments, maternity leave, unpaid leave, career breaks.

Source:
Defence Analytical Services Agency

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112660]

Dr. Moonie: The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Greek Commemorative Medals

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress his Department is making in negotiations with the Greek Government on the verification of service to allow the award of Greek commemorative medals to British servicemen and women. [112965]

Dr. Moonie: I presume that the medals referred to are the official campaign medals instituted by the Greek Government for service in Greece and Crete during the Second World War. In recent years the Greek Government have offered them to eligible British ex-Servicemen who have been invited to apply in writing to the Greek Embassy in London. The Queen has granted permission for the medals to be accepted as souvenirs or keepsakes, but not to be worn.

The eligibility criteria, assessment of entitlement and distribution of these medals are entirely matters for the Greek Government. My Department do not directly assist the Greek authorities with the verification of eligibility. However, on request, we will provide any British veteran with an official Record of Service, which he can offer to the Greek authorities and may provide sufficient proof of participation in the campaigns in Greece and Crete, to enable the Greek Government to issue a medal.

TREASURY

Government Investments

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's investments. [113413]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Today we have confirmed our plans to sell 150 tonnes of gold in 2000–01, a sum equivalent to the amount sold in 1999–2000 on a pro rata basis. These sales form part of the programme announced on 7 May 1999, *Official Report*, column 479W, to restructure the United Kingdom's reserves holdings. As in 1999–2000, the sales will be made through Bank of England auctions. There will be six auctions during 2000–01, which will be held every other month starting in May. As in 1999–2000, the auctions will be of approximately 25 tonnes each, and they will continue to be conducted on a single price basis.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Regional Orchestras

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on plans to reduce the size of regional orchestras. [112812]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council's plans for the regional orchestras were announced last October. Discussions with individual orchestras on securing their long-term future are currently underway, and these will include looking at ways in which they could benefit from greater flexibility to vary the number of players so that they can diversify their repertoire and bring a greater range of music, including large scale symphonic work, to audiences across England.

Funding Schemes

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the funding schemes administered by his Department, indicating the total funds of each scheme and the administration costs of each scheme as a percentage of the total funds. [112491]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Although my Department provides funding for various schemes they are all administered by other bodies.

Football

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations his Department has made to the European Commission regarding the rules allowing professional footballers from any EEA country to play football in any other EEA country. [112514]

Kate Hoey: My Department has made no recent representations to the European Commission on this subject.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112665]

Mr. Chris Smith: The annual Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies, provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1999 edition lists those public bodies in existence at 1 April 1999. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Since 1 April 1999 my Department has established the following advisory non-departmental public bodies:

Eight Regional Cultural Consortiums covering the following regions:

North West
North East
Yorkshire and Humberside
West Midlands
South West
East Midlands
South East
Eastern.

British Museum

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many British Museum staff have been dismissed over the past 12 months; at what cost; and with what period of notice, in each case. [112380]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The answers are:

Number of staff and their category	*Reason for terminations*	*Period of notice*	*Total cost (£)*
11 aged 60+ who are being compulsorily retired	Museum reorganisation	6 to 9 months	48,529
Nine aged between 50 and 60 who are taking early retirement but on a compulsory basis	Museum reorganisation	6 months	[1]190,470
22 persons under 50 who are taking compulsory early severance	Museum reorganisation	6 months	1,035,510
Three others	Performance or health grounds	2—no notice	0
		1—13 weeks	0

[1] Additionally these staff will be paid an annual compensation cost until they reach age 60. The total cost in the current year is £67,950. Over the next few years this annual sum will reduce as people reach age 60. The overall present value of this payment, at current money values, is estimated to be £455,360. There will also be other one-off costs estimated at £184,390 relating to pension preservation and the bringing forward of lump sums.

Notes:

1. All the compensating amounts shown in the table derive from Civil Service Pension Scheme standard terms and conditions.
2. The table does not include staff whose fixed-term contracts have not been renewed. These terminations do not carry a cost to the Museum.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total cost of senior management salaries at the British Museum *(a)* is for the present year and *(b)* was for 1997. [112346]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The answers are:

Year	*Amount (£)*
1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997	181,602
1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998	219,086
1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000	323,560

Notes:

1. We have used as the definition of "senior management" those earning above £59,000 per annum, the threshold we use in pay negotiations following Treasury guidance.
2. Variances between years are due to adjustments to individual salaries and also to changes, since 1 April 1999, to senior management structures in the Museum.
3. These amounts include the salary costs of a senior manager whose appointment is for the life of the Great Court project only.
4. The senior management team has been strengthened for the task of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the British Museum.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112138]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 233W.

Jorge Semprun Speech

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library an English translation of the speech by Jorge Semprun to the Weimar meeting on EU cultural and audio visual issues. [112386]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to the replies I gave him on 15 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 88W, and 6 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 458W. In those answers I outlined the informal discussions of the meeting in Weimar to which Jorge

Semprun contributed. The text of his contribution was placed in the Library. Translations of the proceedings of informal Culture/Audiovisual Council meetings are not made: this would be prohibitively expensive.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many designers awarded contracts by the New Millennium Experience Company have received payments from the NMEC that were *(a)* greater than, *(b)* the same as and *(c)* less than the sum specified under the terms of their contract. [110916]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* Payments are being made in all cases according to contractual terms. Some invoices are the subject of normal issue resolution procedures.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Diplomatic Immunity

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which consultative committees of the European Communities confer diplomatic immunity on their members; what is the total number of diplomatic passports issued by them; and how many incidents involving such individuals have been covered by diplomatic immunity *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* across the EU and *(c)* further afield since the establishment of the bodies in each of the last five years. [112332]

Mr. Vaz: Members of consultative committees of the European Union, such as the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee have no diplomatic immunity. Therefore, no diplomatic passports have been issued to them and no diplomatic incidents have occurred involving such individuals in the UK, EU or further afield.

Albania

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Albania. [112108]

Mr. Vaz: The security situation in Albania continues to cause concern. After the civil unrest in 1997 there are still large caches of weapons throughout the country. Although the Government have had some success in recent months in tackling organised crime, armed gangs still operate in the north of the country and in the south on major routes from Greece.

We are helping the Albanian Government to build up the capacity of its police forces and currently have 20 British police officers serving there with the Western European Union's Multi-National Advisory Police Element. We are also providing support, bilaterally and through NATO, for the rebuilding and restructuring of the Albanian armed forces, as well as advice on the disposal of surplus munitions. Up-to-date information on the security situation as it affects travellers in Albania is provided in the FCO's travel advice.

"UK in Europe"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the planned *(a)* contents of, *(b)* contributors to, *(c)* target audience for, *(d)* means of distribution of and *(e)* print run of the booklet, "UK in Europe"; and if schools will receive copies of the booklet. [112371]

Mr. Vaz: The FCO publication, "UK in Europe, a New Millennium", is intended as an introductory text to the subject of Britain's membership of the EU. Written by the FCO, it is targeted at the general public in the UK and overseas. Print runs and the means of distribution have yet to be finalised.

Your Britain, Your Europe Roadshow

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the accommodation costs of the Your Britain, Your Europe Roadshow; and to how many people, from which organisations, these costs were attributable. [112338]

Mr. Vaz: The accommodation costs were £6,775.75. Over the week the costs were attributable to 19 people from two organisations: the FCO and Caribiner, the public relations company which helped organise the roadshow.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason his Minister for Europe travelled to Paris, as part of the Your Britain, Your Europe Roadshow, to conduct an interview with a UK radio station; and what was the cost of this visit. [112340]

Mr. Vaz: I visited Paris to deliver a speech at an event to mark the 50th anniversary of the Council of Europe. I took the opportunity also to conduct a radio interview and to meet journalists at the Gare du Nord station to publicise the roadshow. The cost of the visit to Paris was £4,192.69. This covered the travel and accommodation costs of myself and accompanying FCO officials.

Burundi

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the further support announced during his visit to Africa for the Burundi peace process. [112381]

Mr. Hain: The UK has supported the Burundi peace process politically, with resources and with personnel. The UK has contributed over £250,000 so far and will continue to support the process as long as the current momentum is maintained.

I attended the Burundi peace summit at Nelson Mandela's request in Arusha on 21 February, and I announced a further contribution of £30,000 to the current round of negotiations and £50,000 for related reconciliation efforts in Burundi.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National

Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112136]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* The Foreign and Commonwealth Office have not incurred any expenditure in connection with the National Changeover Plan, nor do we plan to spend anything over the next 12 months.

Regional and Minority Languages

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress towards the signature of the Council of Europe Charter on Regional and Minority Languages. [113411]

Mr. Robin Cook: I am pleased to announce that yesterday the UK Permanent Representative to the Council of Europe signed the Charter on behalf of the United Kingdom. We hope to ratify later this year, subject to the completion of requisite Parliamentary procedures.

EU Business

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for March and *(b)* the major European Union events for the next six months. [113412]

Mr. Vaz: The following is the information:

Monthly forecast of EU Business: March 2000

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

March

28 February-1 March—Lisbon—EuroMed Investment Conference

Opening Statement

Panel Discussion

Investing in an Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area

Working Groups

Doing Business in the Free Trade Area

Promoting Investment in a Free Trade Area

Investment Financing in the Mediterranean Region

Presentation and Discussion of the Conclusions and recommendations of the Working Groups

Conclusions and Recommendations

Closing Statements

Press Conference

1–2 March—Brussels—European Parliament Plenary

Consultation Procedure

(possible) Proposal for a Council regulation establishing a Community framework for the collection and management of the fisheries data needed to conduct the common fisheries policy

(possible) Proposal for a Council decision on financial contribution from the Community towards the expenditure incurred by the member states in collecting data, and for financing studies and pilot projects for carrying out the common fisheries policy

(possible) Proposal for a Council directive amending Directive 93/53/EEC introducing minimum Community measures for the control of certain fish diseases

Proposal for a Council regulation amending for the fourth time Regulation (EC) No 1626/94 laying down certain technical measures for the conservation of fishery resources in the Mediterranean and for the fourth time Regulation (EC) No 850/98 for the conservation of fishery resources through technical measures for the protection of juveniles of marine organisms

(possible) Initiative of the Republic of Austria with a view to adopting a Council decision to combat child pornography on the Internet

Lisbon—EU/Russia Ministerial Meeting

EU-Russia relations

Developments in Russia, including the Northern Caucasus

Developments in the EU

Western Balkans Mediterranean region and the Middle East Peace Process

Preparation for the EU-Russia Summit

3–4 March—Lisbon—Justice and Home Affairs Council (Informal)

No formal agenda

10 March—Tokyo—EU/Japan Ministerial Meeting

No agenda yet available

13 March—Brussels—Social Affairs Council

Preparation of the special European Council in Lisbon

Presidency paper on a Europe of innovation and knowledge

Commission Communication on Community policies to promote employment (Article 127)

Commission Communication on social inclusion

Commission Communication on job strategies in the information society

First Commission report on the social situation in Europe

Commission proposals on Article 13

Oral report from the Presidency on progress in negotiations

13 March—Brussels—ECOFIN Council

Adoption of the provisional agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

Implementation of the Stability and Growth Pact

Preparation of the Lisbon European Council on Employment, Economic Reforms and Social Cohesion

Towards a Europe based on Innovation and Knowledge, Lisbon, 23–24 March 2000

Taxation

(a) (possible) VAT: Postal Services

Presentation of Commission proposal

(b) Taxation of aircraft fuel

Presentation of Commission communication

Discharge of 1998 budget

Presentation of Commission action plan to improve management and financial procedures

AOB

13–17 March—Strasbourg—European Parliament Plenary

No agenda yet available

16 March—Brussels—Internal Market Council

No agenda yet available

17 March—Lisbon—Informal Education Ministers Meeting

No formal agenda

17–18 March—Porto—Trade Ministers' Meeting (Informal)

No formal agenda

20–21 March—Brussels—General Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

20–21 March—Brussels—Agriculture Council

No agenda yet available

23–24 March—Lisbon—Special European Council

No formal agenda

27 March—Brussels—Justice and Home Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

28 March—Brussels—Transport Council

No agenda yet available

29–30 March—Brussels—European Parliament Plenary

No agenda yet available

30 March—Brussels—Environment Council

No agenda yet available

European Calendar—March—August 2000

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

Dates	*Venue*	*Events*
March		
28 February-1 March	Lisbon	EuroMed Investment Conference
1–2	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
2	Lisbon	EU/Russia Ministerial Meeting
3–4	Lisbon	Justice and Home Affairs Council (Informal)
10	Tokyo	EU/Japan Ministerial Meeting
13	Brussels	Social Affairs Council
13	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
13–17	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	Internal Market Council
17	Lisbon	Informal Education Ministers Meeting
17–18	Porto	Trade Ministers' Meeting (Informal)
20–21	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Agriculture Council
23–24	Lisbon	Special European Council
27	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
28	Brussels	Transport Council
29–30	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
30	Brussels	Environment Council
April		
3	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
3–4	Cairo	EU-Africa Summit
4	Luxembourg	Social Affairs Council
7–8	Lisbon	ECOFIN Council (Informal)
10–11	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
10–14	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
13	Luxembourg	Consumer Affairs Council
15–16	Oporto	Environment Council (Informal)
17–18	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
May		
2	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
3–4	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
5–7	San Miguel, Azores	Information Meeting of Foreign Ministers
8	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
8	Lisbon	EU/New Zealand Ministerial Meeting
11	Brussels	Health Council
15–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
15–16	Oporto	WEU Council
15–19	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
16	Brussels	Culture Council
18	Brussels	Industry Council
18	Brussels	Development Council
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
25	Brussels	Internal Market Council
25–26	Lisbon	EuroMed Foreign Ministers Meeting (Informal)
28–30	Evora	Agriculture Council (Informal)
29–30	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
30	Brussels	Energy Council
June		
5	Luxembourg	ECOFIN Council
6	Luxembourg	Social Affairs Council
8	Luxembourg	Education Council
13–14	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
13–16	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
15	Luxembourg	Research Council
16	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
19–20	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
19–20	Sta. Maria da Feira	European Council
21–23	Cyprus	3rd Euro-Mediterranean Conference of the Ministers of Industry

Dates	Venue	Events
22–23	Luxembourg	Environment Council
26–27	Luxembourg	Transport Council
28	Lisbon	EU/India Summit
July		
3–7	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
6–7	Lille	Culture Council
7–8	(to be confirmed)	Social Affairs Council (Informal)
10–11	Brussels	General Affairs Council
15–16	(to be confirmed)	Environment Council (Informal)
17	Brussels	ECONFIN Council
17–18	Brussels	Agriculture Council
24	Brussels	Budget Council
25	Bangkok	ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial Meeting
28–29	Bangkok	ASEAN Post Ministerial Meeting
28–29	Arles	Justice and Home Affairs Council (Informal)
August [1]	—	—

[1] There are no Councils scheduled for this month

Austria

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what change in the UK's bilateral relations with Austria has resulted from the resignation of the Leader of the Freedom Party of Austria; and if he will make a statement. [113015]

Mr. Vaz: Joerg Haider's resignation as Leader of the Freedom Party has not affected the measures introduced by the 14 members of the EU against Austria on 4 February. The issue has not been Haider's leadership of the Freedom Party, but the participation of the Freedom Party in the government of Austria. We will continue to judge the Austrian Government on how it lives up to its commitments in its Declaration.

Iran

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the death sentences imposed on three Iranian Bahá'ís in the city of Mashad on 3 February; and what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the Iranian Ambassador about them. [113014]

Mr. Hain: We remain concerned at reports of the death sentences passed on Mr. Najafabadi, Mr. Moghaddam and Mr. Khulusi in Mashad on 3 February. The picture has been somewhat confused by the recent statement by Mr. Sabeqi, spokesman for the Iranian Judiciary, that no such sentences had been passed. The Portuguese Presidency, on behalf of EU partners, presented a demarche to the Iranian authorities expressing our concern and seeking clarification as to the current status of these three gentlemen on 17 February. We took similar bilateral action with the Iranian Ambassador on 21 February.

We regularly raise with the Iranian authorities our serious concern about treatment of the Bahá'ís. Persecution of individuals on religious grounds is totally unacceptable.

Mr. Temple-Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning the claims by the Iranian exile group, the National Council of Resistance, about the turnout for the recent Iranian Majles elections and falsification of results. [113069]

Mr. Hain: I was aware of this attempt by the National Council for the Resistance of Iran (NCRI) to dismiss as a fraud the conduct and outcome of the recent Iranian elections. Their claims are not credible. The political choice made in the elections by the Iranian people is a matter for them, but our view, and that of all impartial observers, is that the election result in Iran has been a substantial vote of confidence in President Khatami's political and economic reforms, and a clear signal of the Iranian people's interest in modernisation.

For us, that is also a vindication of the policy of engagement with Iran pursued by this Government. That policy has attracted some criticism in the past, sometimes from the people who have accepted at face value the propaganda of the NCRI, which is an organisation dominated by the terrorist Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MKO). The MKO are based in Baghdad and are regarded by Saddam Hussein as some of his most trusted allies. They are despised by most Iranians within Iran for their support for Saddam during the Iran/Iraq war in the 1980s. They have been responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in Iran which we have condemned.

In our dealings with the Iranian Government we and our EU partners have regularly expressed our concern over a number of issues, particularly human rights, and we will continue to do so until those legitimate concerns are dealt with to our satisfaction. But in assessing those concerns, and the progress of events in Iran generally, we will pay little attention to the views of the MKO or NCRI, whose own background and methods do not permit them to speak with authority on democracy or human rights.

The outcome of the elections strengthens our optimism for the future of Iran, and for Britain's developing relationship with Iran.

Nigeria

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Nigeria concerning the Christian-Muslim conflicts in the north of the country. [112988]

Mr. Hain: I discussed the situation in Northern Nigeria with Nigerian Foreign Minister Lamido on 14 February.

I was deeply concerned by the situation in Kaduna and condemn the recent violence there and elsewhere. I have appealed to all those concerned for calm and for them to settle their differences without recourse to violence.

Visa Applications

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many visa applications have been submitted to the Deputy High Commission in *(a)* Delhi, *(b)* Mumbai and *(c)* Calcutta during February 2000; and what were the figures for February 1999. [112790]

Mr. Vaz: The deadline for the submission of entry clearance statistics from overseas posts for the month of February is 15 March. I will write to my hon. Friend when the figures requested are available. I am glad that my hon. Friend was able to visit our entry clearance operations in New Delhi and Bombay recently.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent developments there have been in the revision of the St. Helena constitution. [113019]

Mr. Battle: Following the publication of the White Paper "Partnership for Progress and Prosperity" we have asked the St. Helena Legislative Council what changes they would like to see in the Constitution. We have told them that we are prepared to consider specific, detailed and well argued recommendations for the amendment of the 1988 Constitutional Order.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish the report from Mr. J. J. Rowe on the operation in 1999 of the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989. [113408]

Mr. Straw: I have today arranged for copies of Mr. Rowe's report to be placed in the Library. Mr. Rowe recommends that the legislation should be renewed. A draft Order is being laid before the House today which continues all those provisions of the Act which are currently in force.

Quantum Project

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce the outcome of the Prison Service's Quantum project. [113409]

Mr. Boateng: I announced in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), on 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 139–40W, that Martin Narey, the Director-General of the Prison Service had selected Electronic Data Systems (EDS) as the preferred supplier for the Quantum project and that negotiations would be held with a view to award of contract. I am pleased to say that the preferred supplier negotiations with EDS have concluded successfully. Martin Narey has decided to award a contract to EDS for the provision of Information Technology services for the Prison Service.

Strip-searches

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many times in each *(a)* women's and *(b)* men's prison a prisoner has been strip-searched after a visit by an hon. Member since 1 January. [111968]

Mr. Boateng: Prisons are not required to maintain statistics of the number of strip searches carried out, nor records of visits by hon. Members to prisoners. I am, however, aware that a female prisoner at Highpoint prison was strip searched following a visit by her Member of Parliament on 3 February.

As I advised the hon. Member during the debate he raised on Tuesday 29 February, this strip search was purely a random search. All prisons are required to carry out random searches of prisoners on completion of visits; Highpoint prison has a set level of 10 per cent. for such random searches. Category A prisoners will always be strip searched following any visit in open conditions.

Prison Suicides

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what surveys he undertook in 1999 in prisons in England and Wales to check the efficacy of the suicide awareness programmes. [111978]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has developed a set of auditable key performance baselines for policies and practices in prison establishments, including the suicide awareness strategy. The standards audit unit of the Prison Service visit establishments to conduct these audits.

In 1999, a total of 71 establishments were audited on the suicide awareness baseline. Of these, 13 achieved a rating of good; 27 acceptable; 24 deficient; and seven unacceptable.

The Director-General is personally committed to ensuring that the suicide awareness strategy works, as are the Director of Security, who has policy responsibility for suicide awareness, and the area managers responsible for establishments. All regularly visit establishments. Members of the suicide awareness support unit at Prison Service headquarters also visit establishments to provide support to those operating the strategy.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons also inspects prisons on a regular and unannounced basis during which he will look at the operation of the suicide awareness strategy. In addition to any recommendations that may arise from a visit to an individual prison, the Chief Inspector published a thematic review into the suicide awareness strategy in 1999. This contained a number of recommendations as to how the strategy could be improved; these recommendations are currently being acted upon.

Sex Offenders (Treatment)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which prisons in England and Wales run a sex offenders treatment programme; and what was the number of prisoners attending such a programme on 15 February. [112019]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service sex offenders treatment programme consists of four sub-programmes—core for all offenders, extended for those at high risk of re-offending, adapted for those with a low IQ, and a booster programme for all to reinforce the programme's lessons towards release from custody. A rolling programme is also being trialled for low risk offenders, and to provide a facility to enable those who have not done well on parts of the other programmes to revise elements rather than going through the whole programme again.

The programme is run in its various versions at:

Acklington—core/booster/extended
Albany—core/extended/rolling
Birmingham—core
Brixton—core/extended
Channings Wood—core
Dartmoor—core
Feltham—core
Frankland—core
Full Sutton—core/rolling
Grendon—core
High Down—core/rolling
Hull—rolling
Leyhill—booster
Littlehey—core
Maidstone—core
Manchester—rolling
Risley—core/booster
Rochester—booster
Swinfen Hall—core/extended
Usk—core/extended/adapted
Wandsworth—core
Wayland—core/booster/extended/rolling
Whatton—core/booster/adapted
Woodhil—core
Wymott—core/booster.

With regard to the number of inmates taking part on the sex offender treatment programme on 15 February, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 538–39W.

Prisons (Foreign Language Materials)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who has the responsibility for the provision of foreign language newspapers or books for non-English speaking prison inmates held in prisons in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [111985]

Mr. Boateng: Foreign language materials are provided in prison establishments through the local public library authority, in accordance with 'Guidelines for Prison Libraries (1997)' which details the standards under which prison libraries should operate. Each establishment has a local public authority librarian working to a joint service level agreement.

Governors of prisons in England and Wales will make arrangements to supply at least one newspaper for every ten prisoners, to be purchased out of prison funds They should provide as full a range of newspapers as possible, taking into account the preferences of those prisoners from ethnic minority groups. This is underpinned by the Prison Service race relations policy, which highlights the importance of prisons being aware of the needs of foreign prisoners and the materials that can be obtained to meet their needs. Subject to security considerations, prisoners are also allowed to receive newspapers, periodicals, magazines or books of their choice.

Secure Remands

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many secure remands to local authority accommodation were made since 1 June 1999 in relation to *(a)* children aged 12 to 14 years, broken down by age, gender and ethnicity, *(b)* females aged 15 to 16 years, broken down by age and ethnicity and *(c)* males aged 15 to 16 years declared vulnerable, broken down by age and ethnicity. [112000]

Mr. Boateng: The number of children and young people remanded or committed to local authority secure accommodation is recorded on the last day of each month by local authority secure units and sent to the Home Office. These returns break down the total number by age, gender and the statutory position under which the child or young person has been placed.

Information on ethnicity is not recorded. We have received returns from all units for June to December 1999 and the totals are set out in the table.

Direct secure remand and committals by courts are made under section 23(4) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969 and section 37 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980. The table also includes remands to secure accommodation under section 25 of the Children Act 1989, following application to a court by a local authority.

Date, gender and age	*Direct court-ordered secure remand (section 23(4) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969*	*Remand to local authority secure accommodation via section 25 of the Children Act 1989*	*Committal for sentence to the Crown court under section 37 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980*
30 June—males			
12	—	1	—
13	5	5	1
14	26	14	1
15	20	18	2
16	14	16	2
Total	65	54	6
30 June—females			
12	—	1	—
13	—	4	—
14	1	4	—
15	7	2	1
16	—	5	—
Total	8	16	1

Date, gender and age	Direct court-ordered secure remand (section 23(4) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969	Remand to local authority secure accommodation via section 25 of the Children Act 1989	Committal for sentence to the Crown court under section 37 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980
31 July—males			
12	—	3	—
13	3	6	—
14	25	12	1
15	26	12	1
16	17	6	1
Total	71	39	3
31 July—females			
12	—	1	—
13	—	3	—
14	1	8	—
15	3	5	1
16	4	3	—
Total	8	20	1
31 August—males			
12	—	5	—
13	11	4	1
14	20	17	4
15	24	7	5
16	30	7	2
Total	85	40	12
31 August—females			
12	—	1	—
13	1	—	—
14	4	3	—
15	—	4	1
16	4	1	—
Total	9	9	1
30 September—males			
12	1	3	—
13	11	4	1
14	22	8	2
15	28	5	1
16	31	8	3
Total	93	28	7
30 September—females			
12	—	1	—
13	2	1	—
14	3	5	—
15	3	7	1
16	10	10	—
Total	18	24	1
31 October—males			
12	4	4	—
13	16	6	2
14	30	9	1
15	33	6	1
16	35	8	4
Total	118	33	8
31 October—females			
12	—	2	—
13	1	3	—
14	—	6	—
15	4	4	1
16	8	4	—
Total	13	19	1
30 November—males			
12	8	8	—
13	10	7	—
14	28	11	1
15	36	11	2
16	40	6	5
Total	122	43	8
30 November—females			
12	—	2	—
13	1	3	—
14	2	6	—
15	3	5	1
16	11	5	—
Total	17	21	1
31 December—males			
12	3	3	—
13	4	4	—
14	11	6	—
15	36	7	2
16	36	6	11
Total	90	26	13
31 December—females			
12	—	3	—
13	—	3	—
14	1	11	—
15	3	5	1
16	9	4	1
Total	13	26	2

Deportation

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are awaiting deportation following rejection of their application for asylum. [111954]

Mrs. Roche: The information is not available. Data are not available on asylum applicants who have voluntarily left the country without the knowledge of the Home Office. Therefore, it is not possible to make a reliable estimate of the number of failed asylum seekers remaining in the country.

Jury Trial

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) of 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 139W, on jury trial, if the sum of £66 million annually takes account of the cost of alternative sentences; and if he will provide a breakdown of the cost of £0.5 million for interlocutory appeals including the legal and administrative costs per appeal. [112410]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The estimated resource savings take account of alternative sentences which the magistrates' courts might impose. It has been assumed, for the purpose of assessing the financial implications of

appeals, that 25 per cent. of defendants who would have elected Crown Court trial will appeal to the Crown Court against the magistrates' decision to try the case, and that 17.5 per cent. of appeals would proceed to an oral hearing. A paper-based appeal would cost £25 in court resources, £30 in Legal Aid and £35 in prosecution costs. An oral hearing would cost an additional £77 in court resources, £45 in Legal Aid and £60 in prosecution costs.

Metropolitan Police Housing

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who receives the proceeds of the sale of Metropolitan Police housing. [112409]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District informs me that the proceeds of the sale of Metropolitan Police housing go to the Metropolitan Police Fund.

New Prisons

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions his Department has had on possible sites for the construction of new prison establishments in England and Wales; and if he will list the areas in which such establishments may be built. [112618]

Mr. Boateng: The siting of new prisons is governed by strategic need. Prison population pressures are currently greatest in areas such as Greater London, the Midlands, the North-West and Yorkshire, and it is in these locations that the Prison Service has concentrated its efforts on finding new prison sites.

All new prison sites involve discussions with the respective local planning authorities in accordance with Crown development procedures.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the enforcement of European Union legislation in the UK regarding animal experimentation. [112692]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is the role of the European Commission to enforce Community legislation in the sense that full transposition into national law is required for a Council Directive.

Directive 86/609/EEC—on the approximation of laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the member states regarding the protection of animals used for experimental and other scientific purposes—is transposed and implemented in the United Kingdom through the rigorous controls of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

The domestic legislation was last amended in July 1998 (for enactment on 5 September 1998) when several requirements of the Directive, which had previously been enacted through administrative provisions, were placed on the face of the 1986 Act.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112669]

Mr. Straw: The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions lists public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango.

Home Detention Curfew

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners released to date under the Home Detention Curfew scheme have *(a)* breached the conditions of the curfew, *(b)* disappeared, *(c)* had their curfew revoked and *(d)* re-offended while on the scheme; what offences were committed by those who re-offended while on the scheme; what was the (i) average and (ii) maximum sentence received by a prisoner for an offence committed while on the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [112728]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* As of 29 February 2000, 862 prisoners subject to home detention curfew have had their licences revoked by the Secretary of State following a breach of the curfew conditions of their licence or a breach of their non-curfew licence conditions. Fifty are currently unlawfully at large. Breaches of non-curfew related conditions by curfewees whose original offences were committed prior to 1 January 1999 are dealt with by the courts. Information on these cases is not held centrally.

The number of cases where a breach of curfew conditions has been reported is not readily available and I will write to the hon. Member with this information.

As of 29 February, the Prison Service had received notification of 194 curfewees who had been charged with an offence committed while subject to the home detention curfew scheme.

A breakdown of the offences committed by these curfewees is shown in the table. This breakdown has been prepared from information supplied by police forces and drawn from the police national computer. Further analysis of re-offending by those subject to home detention curfew, including the procedures for notification of further charges to the Prison Service by the police, is currently under way as part of a long-term evaluation of the scheme.

Information is not held centrally on the sentences received by prisoners for offences committed while subject to home detention curfew.

Overall, the home detention curfew scheme has an impressive success rate of 95 per cent. of curfewees completing their period of curfew licence. However, we are not complacent about any re-offending on curfew and the scheme is strictly enforced. Where a prisoner does commit a further offence while subject to curfew, he or she is in breach of their licence conditions and may be recalled to prison, in addition to the possibility of an additional sentence for the new offence.

Offence type	*Number*
Burglary, theft and stealing from shops[1]	70
Assault	31
Driving and Traffic Offences	19
Drug Offences	16
Breach of the peace[2]	14
Handling Stolen Goods/Deception	12
Criminal Damage	10
Threatening Behaviour	8
Possession of an offensive weapon	4
Breach of court injunction or Restraining Order	3
Rape	2
Harassment	1
Going Equipped	1
False Imprisonment	1
Arson	1
Indecent Exposure	1
Total	194

[1] Including taking without consent/taking and driving away
[2] Including Drunk and Disorderly
Note:
Where a curfewee was charged with more than one offence, they appear in the table next to the most serious offence. The table excludes those where, following initial notification, the Prison Service was informed that the charges had been withdrawn.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners released on the home detention curfew scheme have been convicted *(a)* summarily and *(b)* on indictment of a further offence committed whilst on the scheme; and what (i) original and (ii) further offences were committed and what sentences were received in each case. [112794]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not held centrally on the convictions and sentences received by those who have committed offences while subject to home detention curfew.

Probation Service

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received on his plans to change the name of the Probation Service to the Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service; how many representations were *(a)* in favour and *(b)* against his plans; and if he will make a statement. [112738]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* A total of 216 representations have been received relating to the proposed change to the name of the probation service. The great majority of these have been generally supportive of the plans for modernising the service and accept the benefit of having a new name, but most expressed concern about the name "Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service". The new name will be one of a range of measures in the forthcoming Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, and I have said that I will listen carefully to the points raised when the Bill is considered by Parliament.

Crime Statistics (London)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his projection for the level of recorded crime from April 1999 to March 2000 for the Metropolitan Police area in relation to *(a)* burglary of dwellings and *(b)* robbery against which the five-year crime reduction target has been set. [113023]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the current projections for burglary of a dwelling and robbery offences in the financial year 1999–2000 are: *(a)* burglary of a dwelling, approximately 79,000; and *(b)* robbery approximately 36,000.

As part of its strategy to reduce crime in London, the Metropolitan Police have targets to reduce domestic burglaries by 10 per cent. and Street Crime by 15 per cent. over the next five financial years, based on the projected recorded crime figures for the end of the financial year 1999–2000.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish statistics for *(a)* crime rates broken down by categories of offences and *(b)* clear up rates in (i) the areas transferring out of the Metropolitan force and (ii) London boroughs for each of the last two years. [112761]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Most details of notifiable offences, and clear ups, are not collected centrally below police force area level. Details of the numbers of a limited range of offences recorded in Basic Command Units for the six month period ended September 1999, including London boroughs and those areas being transferred from the Metropolitan police to other forces, are included in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin on recorded crime, issue 1/00, published on 18 January and which is available in the Library.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will investigate the reasons why the accounts of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. for the last financial year have not been filed at Companies House; and if he will make a statement. [112796]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: These are matters for the liquidator.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Female Genital Mutilation

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the Government's policy is on measures to eradicate violence against women, with particular reference to the practice of female genital mutilation in developing countries. [111295]

Clare Short: Violence against women is one of the most shocking manifestations of women's inequality. We are working to ensure that women's empowerment and equality are actively pursued in the mainstream of all development activities.

Female genital mutilation is a serious health issue. It is also a violation of the rights of women to live free from violence. Our policy is to try to persuade countries where the practice occurs to take steps to reduce and eventually eliminate it. We encourage Governments to strengthen laws which prohibit female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices, such as dowry deaths. We also work with women's organisations to strengthen their capacity to address female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices. We have supported NGO projects to train health workers in a number of countries,

including Ghana, Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia, to prevent and manage health complications related to female genital mutilation.

We have also made a major contribution to the Trust Fund on Violence Against Women run by UNIFEM, which provides support to local women's organisations working on issues of violence against women throughout the world. We also work to combat the effects of violence against women through our bilateral programme in more than a dozen poor countries.

Operation Rachel

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the nature of the assistance provided by the European Union to the South African Police Service as part of Operation Rachel. [112348]

Clare Short: The European Union has agreed to provide up to 200,000 euros under the Common Foreign and Security Policy to the South African Police Service as the implementing agency of Operation Rachel for 1999–2000. This is part of the EU Joint Action initiative to combat small arms proliferation. The UK contribution to this will be about 16 per cent. or £20,000. In addition, the Government have provided £6,000 of Satellite Telephone Systems for Operation Rachel, through direct bilateral assistance.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the provision of supplies to St. Helena by the RMS St. Helena. [112922]

Clare Short: The RMS St. Helena resumed normal operations on 3 February following the breakdown experienced on 5 November 1999. The ship delivered 720 tonnes of freight to St. Helena on its first scheduled call to the island on 17 February. Alternative arrangements were made to ensure freight delivery continued while the RMS was out of service.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the provision of an airstrip on St. Helena. [112966]

Clare Short: I have agreed that my Department will finance a comparative study of air and sea access costs in order to identify the most cost-efficient permanent solution to the island's international passenger and cargo transportation needs. Terms of Reference for the study are currently being prepared and will be agreed with the St. Helena Government. Consultants are expected to start work in the middle of this year.

Serbia

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans the Government have for humanitarian aid for Serbia. [110693]

Clare Short: The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs produce regular reports on the humanitarian situation in Serbia. We continue to monitor these closely. While there has not been a humanitarian crisis this winter in Serbia, there is some hardship. We are providing assistance to vulnerable groups in Serbia through the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO). We have no current plans for bilateral humanitarian assistance to Serbia. We are, however, making untied contributions to the emergency Balkans appeals issued by the international agencies.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 6 March 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Child Pedestrians (Accidents)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many child pedestrians were *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured by motor vehicles in the City of Leeds in each year since 1990. [112045]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table.

Child pedestrian casualties in accidents involving motor vehicles, City of Leeds: 1990–1998

Year	Killed	Injured	All
1990	5	354	359
1991	4	298	302
1992	1	335	336
1993	1	293	294
1994	2	306	308
1995	0	282	282
1996	2	307	309
1997	5	283	288
1998	2	273	275

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if local planning authorities are required to give areas of outstanding natural beauty an equal level of protection to national parks. [112466]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* The then Countryside Commission presented its advice to Government on the future care of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in 1998. This included recommendations on planning policy guidance regarding AONBs. We announced our response on National Parks on 29 September 1999 and we will announce our proposals for a package of measures for AONBs when we have finalised our detailed consideration.

Water Company Pensions

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received in respect of the application of the Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment etc.) Regulations to staff affected by the termination by water companies of Sewerage Agency arrangements; and what response he will make. [113344]

Ms Armstrong: The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment etc.) Regulations 1999 are intended to provide private sector employers, bidding for Local Authority contracts under Best Value, with an option of access to the Local Government Pension Scheme so that transferring employees can retain their membership of that scheme while they are engaged delivering outsourced local authority services. I have so far received some 24 representations about the future pension status of employees in local authorities who work on the delivery of privatised water company services through agency agreements established under the terms of the relevant Water Acts. The scale of these agreements, and the alternative pension arrangements available to those employed under them, are being established with the co-operation of the United Kingdom Steering Committee on local government pensions. In the light of that exercise, I will consider carefully the appropriate next steps.

Ladbroke Grove Rail Accident

Mr. Terry Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the signalling system involved in the Ladbroke Grove rail accident was designed and engineered on the assumption that all trains using the system would be equipped with automatic train protection. [112550]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The Health and Safety Executive has informed me that it was not designed and engineered on this assumption.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 13W, on peat compost, if he will list the locations of the gardens of his Department including executive agencies and Government offices for the regions. [113347]

Mr. Hill: The Department does not keep central records of the locations of gardens on our estate. The information requested is however being obtained from each of our property centres and will be forwarded to my hon. Friend later this month.

Environment Agency Charges

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received about the proposed increases in charges by the Environment Agency; and if he will make a statement. [113289]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency received 42 responses to its recent consultation exercise on its charging proposals for 2000–01. The Agency's consultation papers stated that it would forward copies of these responses to the DETR. These have now been received and the Agency's proposals are being considered.

Combined Heat and Power

Mrs. Heal: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the rating of plant and machinery in combined heat and power schemes; and if he will make a statement. [113426]

Ms Armstrong: Last year we published draft regulations which determine which items of plant and machinery are assessed for business rates. The regulations reflect the recommendations of the second Wood Committee. In particular, generating plant and machinery belonging to the power industry will benefit from a "tools of the trade" exemption although such items which are in the nature of a building or structure will continue to be rateable.

We have now decided that plant and machinery used to generate electricity (such as turbines and engines) in all Good Quality Combined Heat and Power (CHP) schemes, including those used in wider industry, should benefit from this exemption.

De-rating such plant and machinery in CHP installations will ensure that those items are treated equally across all sectors. It also illustrates our continued support for the increased take up of CHP technology which can bring considerable environmental and economic benefits.

We will introduce the exemption from 1 April 2001 when the CHP Quality Assurance programme for assessing the quality of all types of CHP will be fully operational. The programme will determine the eligibility of CHP schemes for a range of benefits including exemption from the Climate Change Levy. The rating exemption for CHP plant and machinery will require a change in secondary legislation which we will publish in draft later in the year.

Transport Costs

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the recent RAC survey on the relative costs to families of using their car and using public transport; and if he will make a statement. [113118]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport was pleased to have provided the foreword to the RAC Report on Motoring 2000 which offered a useful insight into what motorists think are the relative costs of car and public transport. As the report showed there was considerable uncertainty among motorists about the full cost of their travel by car, and of the real costs of public transport. A more accurate picture of actual costs for households is given in table 1.15 "Household expenditure on transport: UK 1987–1997 in Transport statistics in Great Britain; 1999 Edition". We are currently undertaking research to probe what impact costs, both actual and perceived, have on people's travel decisions.

Road Schemes

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when work will begin on the *(a)* A2/A282 Dartford Improvement, *(b)* A2 Bean to Tolgate widening, *(c)* Tolgate to Cobham widening and *(d)* M60, junctions 5 to 8 widening. [113104]

Mr. Hill: The A2 Bean to Tolgate Widening, A2 Tolgate to Cobham Widening and A2/A282 Dartford Improvement schemes have yet to complete their statutory procedures. The start of works dates will therefore depend on the satisfactory completion of these procedures.

We currently plan to award the construction contract for the M60 Junction 5 to 8 Widening in 2003–04. The precise timing of the start of work will be a matter for the contractor.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors underlay the decision not to include *(a)* the widening of the M25 between junctions 12 and 15, *(b)* the A1(M) Wetherby to Walshford road scheme, *(c)* the A46 Newark to Lincoln improvement and *(d)* the A63 Selby bypass in the list of road schemes planned to start in 2001–02. [113100]

Mr. Hill: Owing to the time needed to complete the necessary contract procedures, construction of the M25 Junctions 12 and 15 Widening scheme could not take place any earlier than 2002–03.

The A1(M) Wetherby to Walshford road scheme is to be constructed as part of a Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contract. The amount of work needed to prepare the contract documents and undertake the subsequent procurement process means that the contract cannot be awarded before 2002–03.

The contracts for the A46 Newark to Lincoln Improvement scheme and the A63 Selby Bypass are programmed to be awarded in the financial year 2001–02.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what impact the road schemes announced in the recent local transport settlement will have on the Government's objective of reducing traffic growth; and if he will make a statement. [113098]

Mr. Hill: In order to tackle congestion and pollution, the Government want to see a reduction in road traffic growth, and an absolute reduction in road traffic where its damage is greatest. The schemes will, on their own, have a very small impact on total traffic growth. However, the local bypasses will help relieve communities of inappropriate traffic and all of the schemes form part of wider local strategies to improve choice and provide better alternatives to the car, thereby reducing traffic growth.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the start dates and completion dates of the 37 schemes on the Government's list of targeted trunk road and motorway improvements. [113117]

Mr. Hill: Of the 37 schemes in the Targeted Programme of Improvements, 26 have completed their statutory procedures. I have listed the financial years in which we currently plan to award construction contracts for these schemes.

Because Design and Build contracts will be used, the precise timing of the start of works will be a matter for the contractor. The construction periods will depend on individual contracts.

The start dates for the other 11 schemes will depend on the outcome of the remaining statutory procedures.

	Scheme
2000–01	
A1	Willowburn-Denwick
A6	Great Glen Bypass
A27	Polegate Bypass
A41	Aston Clinton Bypass
A43	Silverstone Bypass
A43	Whitfield Turn-Brackley Hatch Improvement
A1033	Hedon Road, Hull Improvement
A6	Clapham Bypass
A11	Roudham Heath to Attleborough
A43	M40-B4031 Improvement
A66	Stainburn and Great Clifton Bypass
A500	Basford/Hough/Shavington Bypass
A650	Bingley Relief Road
2001–02	
A5	Nesscliffe Bypass
A6	Rothwell-Desborough Bypass
A6	Rushden and Higham Ferrers Bypass
A10	Wadesmill-Colliers End Bypass
A21	Lamberhurst Bypass
A23	Coulsdon Relief Road
A46	Newark-Lincoln Improvement
A63	Selby Bypass
A120	Stansted-Braintree
2002–03	
M25	J 12–15 Widening
2003–04	
M60	J 5–8 Widening

We propose to take forward A1(M) Ferrybridge to Hook Moor and A1(M) Wetherby to Walshford under Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contracts, which we currently expect to award in 2002–03.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when work will begin on the *(a)* A249 Iwade-Queenborough Improvement, *(b)* A1(M) Wetherby to Walshford road scheme, *(c)* A1(M) Ferrybridge to Hook Moor road scheme, *(d)* M25, junction 12 to junction 15 widening, (e) A23 Coulsdon relief road scheme and (f) A21 Lamberhurst bypass. [113105]

Mr. Hill: The A249 Iwade-Queenborough went to Public Inquiry last September and the start of works date will depend on the outcome of the statutory procedures.

We propose to take forward A1(M) Wetherby to Walshford and the A1(M) Ferrybridge to Hook Moor schemes under Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contracts which we currently expect to award in 2002–03.

We currently plan to award construction contracts for both the A23 Coulsdon Inner Relief Road and A21 Lamberhurst Bypass in 2001–02. The precise timing of the start of works will depend on the Contractor.

The M25 J12–15 Widening scheme is due to start in 2002–03. The precise date will depend on the outcome of the necessary procurement processes.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors underlay the decision not to include *(a)* the M60, junctions 5 to 8 widening and *(b)* the A1 Ferrybridge to Hook Moor road scheme in the list of road schemes planned to start in 2001–02. [113099]

Mr. Hill: Construction of the M60 Junction 5–8 widening could not be finished in time to avoid affecting the transport arrangements for the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester. It was therefore agreed that the start of construction would be delayed until the Games had finished. Construction will start in 2003–04.

The A1 Ferrybridge to Hook Moor road scheme is to be constructed as part of a Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contract. The amount of work needed to prepare the contract documents and undertake the subsequent procurement process means that the contract cannot be awarded before 2002–03.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultations his Department carried out before the approval of the trunk road schemes planned to start in 2000–01. [113101]

Mr. Hill: Shortly after being elected the Government undertook a year-long strategic review of the roads programme in fulfilment of our manifesto promise. This review, unlike previous roads reviews, included extensive consultation at regional and national level. Around 14,000 responses were received to the consultation document. The results of the Review were announced on 31 July 1998.

Road Studies

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when the report of the study of road problems *(a)* in the Hull area, *(b)* in South East Manchester, *(c)* in the Tyneside area, *(d)* around Hastings, *(e)* around the London orbital motorway, *(f)* at Deeside Park Junction and *(g)* between Southampton and Folkestone is to be published; and if he will make a statement; [113102]

(2) when the reports of the study of road problems on the *(a)* A3 at Hindhead, *(b)* South and West Yorkshire motorway box and *(c)* A1 between Bramham and Boston will be published; and if he will make a statement. [113103]

Mr. Hill: We expect final reports for the studies currently under way to be published as follows:

Areas	
Access to Hastings Multi-Modal Study	Summer 2000
A1 Bramham to Barton Study	By Autumn 2000
A3 Hindhead Study	End 2000
London Orbital Multi-Modal Study	Autumn 2001
Deeside Park Junctions Study	Spring 2001
Tyneside Area Multi-Modal Study	Spring 2001
South East Manchester Multi-Modal Study	Spring 2001
South and West Yorkshire Motorway Box	Autumn 2001
Multi-Modal Study	Autumn 2001

Both the Hull Multi-Modal Study and Southampton to Folkestone Multi-Modal Study are in the second tranche of our study programme. Preparatory work on these studies will begin later this year. We anticipate that it will take some 12 to 15 months to complete the Hull study and between 18 and 24 months to complete the Southampton to Folkestone Study.

Trunk Roads

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the *(a)* trunk roads that are carried by a bridge, or which pass through a tunnel, of at least 600 m in length and *(b)* the dates on which such bridges and tunnels are set to be renewed. [113114]

Mr. Hill: In England there are 33 bridges and three tunnels with a length greater than 600 m, carrying 21 different trunk roads. This figure excludes trunk roads transferring to the Greater London Authority in July 2000 as these will be de-trunked.

All these structures have long residual lives and there are no plans for their renewal in the foreseeable future. There is an ongoing programme of works to ensure all structures remain safe and serviceable.

The Secretary of State has made it clear that, in the context of the Transport Bill, he does not have any plans to charge on existing structures that are not already tolled.

I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member with a list and place a copy in the Library.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Bernard Jenkin, dated 6 March 2000:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked me to write in response to your written PQ about trunk road structures of at least 600m in length.

I attach a list of those structures. Please contact Gerry Hayter in our Structures Section (telephone 0171 921 4789) if you require any further information on this subject.

The table below lists English trunk road bridges over 600m in length[1].

Road/Chainage	*Bridge name*	*Comments*
A10/35.60	Kings Meads Viaduct	—
A14/193.80	Orwell Bridge	—
A19/131.50	Tees Viaduct	—
A38/52.60A	Marsh Mills Viaduct E/B	—
A38/52.60B	Marsh Mills Viaduct W/B	—
A38(M)/387.2	Aston Expressway EB	—
A39/182.40	River Torridge	—
A631/0.30	Tinsley Viaduct, Lower	[2]—
M1/260.1	Tinsley Viaduct, Upper	[2]—
M2/47.00	Medway Bridge	—
M4/12.70–15.60	Elevated Section	—
M5/0.00	Rayhall Bents SB[3]	—
M5/1.00–1.60	Wigmore Bents[3]	—
M5/5.60–7.90	Oldbury Bents[3]	—
M5/142.40	Avonmouth Bridge	—
M5/194.10	Huntworth Viaduct	—
M5/258.60	Exe Viaduct	—
M6/178.4–182.8	Bromford Bents[3]	—
M6/183.0–183.9	Gravelly Hill Bents[3]	—
M6/187.2–188.0	Thornbridge Bents[3]	—
M6/192.6–193.4	Rayhall Bents[3]	—
M6/194.8–196.1	Bescott Bents[3]	—
M6/300.90A	Thelwall Viaduct (1963)	—
M6/300.90B	Thelwall New Viaduct (1995)	—
M32/2.60	Eastville Viaduct	—
M50/5.40	Queenshill Viaduct	—
M53/8.40	Bidston Moss Viaduct (West)	—
M56/43.50	Weaver Viaduct	—
M62/161.60	Ouse Bridge	—
M63/2.20	Barton High Level	Renamed M60

[1] Length is the cumulative span length taken from the Highways Agency's National Structures Database (NATS) rounded to the nearest metre.

[2] The A63 Tinsley Viaduct and M1 Tinsley viaduct is a 'double-decker' structure carrying two trunk roads.

[3] Elevated Road

Note:

Bridges due to be transferred to the Greater London Authority in July 2000 have been excluded.

The table below lists English trunk road bridges over 600m in length[1] not operated by the Highways Agency.

Road/Chainage	*Bridge name*	*Comments*
M4	Second Severn Crossing	Tolled
M48	Severn Bridge	Tolled
A282[2]	Queen Elizabeth II (Dartford)	Tolled

[1] Length is not taken from NATS

[2] The M25 is not continuous and the sections crossing the Thames at Dartford are correctly called the A282.

Note:

M48 is due to be renamed as part of the M4

The table below lists English trunk road tunnels over 600m in length.

Road/Chainage	*Tunnel name*	*Comments*
A282[1]	Dartford Tunnel	Twin bore tunnel
M25	Holmesdale Tunnel	—
A1(M)	Hatfield Tunnel	—

[1] The M25 is not continuous and the sections crossing the Thames at Dartford are correctly called the A282

London Elections

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the location of polling stations for early voting for the GLA and London mayoral elections. [113112]

Mr. Hill: We are providing for one early voting polling station for each London borough with less than 150,000 voters, and for two stations in every other borough. The exact locations of the polling stations is a matter for the boroughs themselves. They will be listed in an Order which I intend to lay before the House shortly.

Rail Safety

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the persons to whom media briefings were given by Government press spokesmen on the subject of rail safety on Monday 21 February, prior to the Deputy Prime Minister's statement on Tuesday 22 February. [113110]

Mr. Hill: None.

Rail Rolling Stock

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the value of new rail rolling stock that is waiting for safety approval; and if he will make a statement. [113113]

Mr. Hill: The value of rolling stock currently awaiting safety case approval is in the order of £150 million. I expect the industry to re-double their efforts to achieve safety approval and deliver these trains into service at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Alan Donnelly

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations in relation to specific planning applications in the last 24 months his Department has received from Mr. Alan Donnelly prior to his resignation as a Member of the European Parliament. [113122]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department has on record one representation from Alan Donnelly during this period. This was received in April 1999 and concerned a possible change of land use for the Vaux Brewery site in Sunderland.

Rough Sleepers Unit

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the cost of the Head of the Rough Sleepers Unit and her department in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [113124]

Ms Armstrong: The administration budget for the Rough Sleepers Unit in 1999–2000 is £1.013 million and in 2000–01 £1.297 million. This excludes accommodation and other support costs which are apportioned centrally.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what objectives and targets have been set for the head of the Rough Sleepers Unit. [113123]

Ms Armstrong: The key objective of the Head of the RSU is to deliver the Government's target to reduce rough sleeping to as near zero as possible and by at least two thirds by 2002.

Windows

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to require planning permission for a window to be inserted in an existing house wall which faces a window in a separate house and is less than 20 metres away; and if he will make a statement. [113183]

Mr. Raynsford: The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 grants a general planning permission for a range of minor works of development to dwellinghouses, including the insertion of windows. In granting permitted development rights, we have to strike a balance between giving freedoms to individual householders to improve their homes, and protecting the amenity of neighbouring properties. We are not aware of any significant problems in the exercise of permitted development rights relating to windows and therefore have no plans to change these at the present time. We will, however, continue to monitor any representations received on this issue.

Renewable Energy

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to promote a strategic approach to planning for renewable energy development; and if he will make a statement. [113479]

Mr. Raynsford: A positive, strategic approach to planning for renewable energy is essential to help to deliver the Government's targets and goals for renewable energy and climate change, which are central to achieving sustainable development, while continuing to protect the landscape. This was underlined in "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century: Conclusions in Response to the Public Consultation", published by my right hon. Friend, the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, on 1 February 2000.

In order to promote this strategic approach from the regional level downwards, the Government Offices for the Regions are initiating work to prepare regional assessments and targets for renewable energy provision based upon—and, where necessary, updating—existing resource studies. On 9 February 2000, DETR published "Guidance on Preparing Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks". The guidance indicated that the Government hope that the frameworks will draw upon this work and elaborate a regional approach to renewable energy, including regional targets which flow from the assessments of each region's capacity to generate electricity from a range of different sources. The Government would like to see frameworks in place in all regions by the end of 2000.

The frameworks will work alongside Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) and Regional Development Agencies' Economic Strategies in promoting sustainable development. Thus we envisage RPG taking forward in land-use terms a region's strategy for delivering renewable energy targets by defining broad locations for renewable energy development and setting criteria to help local authorities select suitable sites in their plans. We would encourage regional planning bodies to set targets in RPG, where sensible to do so, for the structure plan and unitary development plan areas within the region consistent with the regional targets provided by the regional sustainable development frameworks. Advice on this will be set out in the final version of the revised "Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) note 11: Regional Planning". This will be published shortly.

Together with the national planning policy guidance in "PPG 22: Renewable Energy", RPG—as taken forward through structure plans and Part I unitary development plans—will provide a strategic framework for policies and proposals for renewable energy development in local plans, including the identification in those plans of suitable sites. This, in turn, will feed through to decisions on individual planning applications.

More positive planning at regional and local levels will contribute to greater public familiarity with, and acceptance of, prospective renewable energy developments. It remains important, however, for operators to prepare the ground with local authorities, environmental organisations and local people before formal planning applications are submitted and to develop proposals in consultation with them.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

M25 Murder

Mr. Radice: To ask the Solicitor-General if, following the recent decision by the European Court of Human Rights in relation to the M25 murder case, he will take steps to expedite the appeal procedure for similar cases. [112628]

The Solicitor-General: This case was referred to the Court of Appeal by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. It will be for the Court of Appeal to decide whether in due course the convictions are to be quashed. I have no power to expedite such hearings, nor am I aware of any other similar cases awaiting a hearing in the domestic courts.

Serious Fraud Office

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Solicitor-General what criteria the Director of the Serious Fraud Office is required to follow in exercising his discretion not to institute criminal proceedings in return for the person concerned giving evidence for the prosecution; what administrative procedures must be carried out before the exercise of his discretion, in particular if he is required to carry out inquiries into the antecedents of such a person; how many times the Director has exercised his discretion since 1995; if the prohibition against convicted criminals being able financially to benefit by their crimes extends to such a person; and if he will make a statement. [112407]

The Solicitor-General: In deciding whether to prosecute, the Director of the Serious Fraud Office applies the evidential and public interest tests set out in the Code for Crown Prosecutors. Because fraud cases present particular problems of complexity it is sometimes necessary for investigators to have the assistance of one of the participants in a fraud in order to break it. Usually such a participant is on the periphery of the wrongdoing. In such cases the Director will consider all the information available at the time (including any information as to the financial or other benefits received as a result of the participation in the fraud) and may consult the Law Officers for advice. The Director will always consult the Law Officers before granting a formal written immunity from prosecution. [If the offence does not relate to serious or complex fraud the Director will seek the assistance of the Director of Public Prosecutions.] The number of times the Director has exercised his or her discretion since 1995 cannot be ascertained without incurring disproportionate cost.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultations he has had with ministerial colleagues in the Department of Social Security regarding the administrative costs of stakeholder pensions to small businesses with more than five employees. [111807]

Ms Hewitt: Officials from the DTI were involved in the consultation on stakeholder pensions and continue to be involved in the communications working group. In addition, a consultative panel which included employer representatives, was formed to discuss all issues relating to the scheme, including compliance costs. Concerns over burdens on business contributed to the decision to introduce an exemption for small businesses with less than five employees. However, we are aware that there will be administrative responsibilities for those businesses with five employees or more, and officials from the newly formed Small Business Service (SBS) are in discussion with their DSS counterparts to consider what can be done to minimise the requirements of the administrative process.

Ilisu Dam

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment the Government have made of Balfour Beatty's suitability as an applicant for ECGD support in relation to the Ilisu Dam Project. [112416]

Mr. Caborn: Balfour Beatty's application for support in respect of Ilisu is being considered by ECGD. ECGD is satisfied that they have the financial and technical competence to carry out their role in the Ilisu project, and have no reason to regard them as ineligible for ECGD support.

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what account will be taken of past and present disputes between Turkey and neighbouring states over water resources in making the decision about ECGD support for the Ilisu Dam. [112787]

Mr. Caborn: As my hon. Friend will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has raised the issue of downstream flow as one of the four areas of concern we have about the Ilisu project. We are continuing to monitor developments on all four issues.

Lesotho Highlands Project

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of Balfour Beatty's membership of the Lesotho Highlands Project Contractors' consortium. [112415]

Mr. Caborn: Allegations of corruption have been made against the Lesotho Highlands Project Contractors' consortium, of which Balfour Beatty was a member, and are the subject of court proceedings in South Africa. Balfour Beatty have said that there is no truth in the allegations.

It will be for the Courts to decide, and their verdict is expected later this year. Meanwhile, the members of the consortium must enjoy the presumption of innocence.

British Nuclear Fuels

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has received a copy of the report prepared by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. for Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance Ltd.; and if he will place a copy of the report in the Library. [112567]

Mrs. Liddell: I have not received a copy of the report. This is a matter between BNFL and Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry If he will make a statement in respect of the supply of MOX fuel by BNFL to Germany. [112032]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* I understand that BNFL has reviewed all the records for quality assurance checks carried out on MOX fuel supplied to its German customer, Preussen Electra. In the case of the record for one of the pellet lots concerned, BNFL found that in 1996 a set of data collected from a secondary manual sample check of pellet diameter

measurements, which had already been confirmed as acceptable, was inadvertently deleted from a computer. The lost data were replaced with data collected from the same check carried out on a previous pellet lot. BNFL considers that all other secondary pellet diameter checks for MOX produced for its German customer have been properly carried out and recorded. The MOX supplied by BNFL has been operating satisfactorily in the reactor in Germany since 1997. The HSE states in its report that it is satisfied that the fuel manufactured in the MOX Demonstration Facility will be safe in use. This view is based on the robustness of the fuel manufacturing process and the totality of the checks made on the key parameters. However, BNFL's customer has decided to shut the unit down and replace the fuel assemblies concerned.

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the total of payments made to date to NACODS South Wales area as reimbursement of costs incurred in the compensation claims for *(a)* chest disease and *(b)* vibration white finger. [112481]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government make no payments direct to NACODS South Wales area.

Under the arrangements agreed between the DTI and the Claimants' Solicitor's Groups for chest diseases and vibration white finger, the Government pay any costs or reasonable disbursements falling due direct to the solicitors. Any arrangement whereby Unions recover sums from the solicitors is strictly a matter for the parties concerned.

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his estimate of the compensation that will be paid out over the next three years to miners and miners' widows in respect of *(a)* chronic bronchitis and emphysema and *(b)* vibration white finger in (i) Scotland and (ii) the UK. [112961]

Mrs. Liddell: Over the next three years we currently estimate that compensation will be paid as follows:

(a) chronic bronchitis and emphysema

(i) £53 million in Scotland

(ii) £699 million in the UK (including Scotland)

(b) Vibration white finger

(i) £47 million in Scotland

(ii) £760 million in the UK (including Scotland).

These estimates are subject to considerable change. Firmer figures will become available only once significant numbers of claimants for both diseases have been through the full assessment procedures.

Balkans (Regeneration)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to publicise the opportunities for British firms to take part in the regeneration of *(a)* Kosovo and *(b)* other Balkan states. [112960]

Mr. Caborn: On the initiative of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, British Trade International set up the joint Government/private sector Kosovo Taskforce to co-ordinate and promote the UK's response to the reconstruction opportunities in the province. The Taskforce has done much to publicise the opportunities for British companies to play a part in the regeneration of Kosovo. Indeed, arising out of the Taskforce's activities, a consortium of British companies, with financial support from British Trade International, was awarded the concession to manage Kosovo's power sector over the seven months from last October; this is helping ensure that the people of Kosovo get through the harsh winter. Through help from the Taskforce, another British consortium was awarded the contract for the first phase of the upgrading of Pristina airport.

During my visit to Kosovo last October, it was clear that the good will arising out of both contracts should help UK companies compete for other business, not only in these two sectors but also in other areas of activity. This will be particularly important as Kosovo moves into the next phase of recovery, with strategic infrastructure projects, designed to help secure its longer term future, being put out to competitive tender by the international agencies. I am confident that I will see UK companies making even more progress when I again visit Kosovo in June. British Trade International has posted an official to the British Office in Pristina on a short-term basis to draw the attention of appropriate companies to opportunities in Kosovo and to assist those seeking to capitalise on them; resources have been secured for the next financial year to fund this post for the longer term.

To keep the business community abreast of commercial developments in Kosovo, British Trade International has set up a website: its address is www.brittrade.com/kosovo/. This includes information on the activities of the Taskforce and the international funding agencies—including information on projects they are funding. Kosovo has been an early and demanding test of British Trade International; it has been widely praised by the private sector for all its initiatives there.

Many companies regard Kosovo as the springboard for entry to the wider South East Europe region (the Balkans) which presents significantly more business opportunities; these are highlighted on the Kosovo website. Through promotional events such as seminars, support for trade fairs and missions, British Trade International continues to draw the attention of UK companies to commercial opportunities generally in all the markets of the region.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of working women in England and Wales who have benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage. [112916]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is estimated that some 1.5 million workers in England and Wales became entitled to higher pay as a direct result of the introduction of the national minimum wage in April 1999. The Low Pay Commission report estimates that around two-thirds of the beneficiaries are women.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the unrecovered loans issued by the Export Credits Guarantee Department *(a)* between 1979 and April 1997 and *(b)* since May

1997 which are attributable to defence related contracts, including details of (i) equipment, (ii) country and (iii) financial amount. [112959]

Mr. Caborn: The information readily available is as follows:

(a) the value of claims paid by ECGD in respect of defence-related contracts under guarantees issued between the mid 1980's and April 1997 and which remain outstanding for recovery as at 29 February 2000 is as follows:

£ million

Country	*Value of claims outstanding*
Algeria	98
Egypt	46
Indonesia	169
Jordan	253
Kenya	16

The equipment supplied under these contracts includes aircraft, artillery, naval vessels, vehicles, communications and ancillary equipment.

(b) there have been no claims paid by ECGD in respect of defence related contracts under guarantees issued since May 1997.

Post Offices (Easington)

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the number and location of crown and sub-post offices in the Easington constituency and the amount of Benefit Agency work carried out by each post office as a percentage of its business. [112805]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that in October 1999 there were 23 post offices, all sub-post offices, within the Easington parliamentary constituency. Of these, 19 derive 40 per cent. or more of their work load from the Benefits Agency. It is not Post Office policy to identify individual offices by the volumes and nature of business transacted.

EU Structural Funds

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he has made in meeting the requirements of the European Commission for the securing of public sector funding for the Objective 1 programme for Merseyside. [112940]

Mr. Caborn: It is for the Merseyside partnership to satisfy the European Commission's requirements for approval of the Single Programming Document for the Merseyside Objective 1 programme. However, my Department, other Government Departments and the Government Office for the North West are assisting the Merseyside partnership in negotiations with the Commission and in other ways, notably identifying match funding.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps she is taking to co-ordinate Government activities relating to the Objective 1 programme for Merseyside and those of other Objective 1 areas. [112941]

Mr. Caborn: Responsibility for the Merseyside Objective 1 rests primarily with the Merseyside partnership. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions leads for the Government on regional policy in England. My Department is in contact with the three English Objective 1 areas and is assisting in negotiations with the European Commission as well as co-ordinating the response of all the Government Departments concerned with central government match funding for the English Objective 1 programmes.

Flower Imports

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the value of flowers imported into the UK from non-EU sources in each year since 1990. [113028]

Mr. Caborn: The information is given in the table.

UK Imports of bulbs, tubers, etc; and cut flowers from non-EU countries

£000

Year	*Bulbs, tubers etc*	*Cut flowers and buds*	*Total*
1990	184	40,849	41,033
1991	205	49,372	49,576
1992	217	54,784	55,001
1993	217	57,864	58,081
1994	325	63,089	63,414
1995	213	68,105	68,317
1996	349	72,271	72,620
1997	489	71,057	71,545
1998	439	64,825	65,265
1999	342	66,699	67,040

Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise

21st Century Faxes Ltd.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will implement measures to deal with the activities of 21st Century Faxes Ltd. [113038]

Ms Hewitt: It is not the practice of my Department to discuss the affairs of individual companies. If the hon. Member has information he considers should be drawn to my attention, I would be happy to receive this.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 50W, on international price comparisons, which national Sunday newspapers were not represented at the briefing session on 11 February. [113021]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* Representatives of all the national Sunday newspapers were invited to attend. Our records show that representatives of the *Sunday Mirror* and the *Sunday People* did not attend.

Telephone Service Disruption

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what inquiries *(a)* he and *(b)* Oftel have started into the major faults in computers which disrupted 0845 telephone number access, NHS Direct Services and

other services in the week beginning 21 February; and what action is to be taken to ensure that the telecommunications infrastructure is not disrupted again. [113178]

Ms Hewitt: The regulation of telecommunications operators is the responsibility of Oftel. Oftel has asked BT for a full report of this network failure and for details of the measures BT will put in place to minimise the risk of this kind of failure happening again. Oftel takes network reliability very seriously and it will scrutinise carefully BT's report. When BT has completed its investigations Oftel will discuss the incident with BT and examine whether any further action will be required to ensure that the risks of further disruption are minimised.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Employees

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage of the total work force in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102041]

Dr. Reid: At 1 January 2000 no staff from the Scotland Office had self declared a disability in terms of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. (The procedure under which people could formerly be registered disabled ceased on 2 December 1999).

Recruitment advertisements and associated information will make it clear that my Department is an equal opportunity employer and will carry the Employment Services Disability symbol, highlighting its commitment to people with disabilities and a positive approach to staff who have a disability.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage of the total work force in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102729]

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110677]

Dr. Reid: Information on the ethnic origin of civil servants is collected using a voluntary, confidential questionnaire. To protect the privacy of individual staff, data relating to fewer than five people are not disclosed in equal opportunities monitoring. Information is therefore not available for my Department for the total percentage of the work force who are from an ethnic minority background.

Action is being taken across the civil service to address the under-representation of ethnic minorities. As part of that, my Department will seek ways to encourage more applications from ethnic minority communities.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment Figures

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have left the New Deal for young people for jobs lasting less than 13 weeks but have been included in the number leaving for sustained employment as a result of not having returned to jobseeker's allowance. [105699]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* We define sustained jobs as those where the employee is working for at least 13 weeks and does not return to claim jobseeker's allowance (JSA) in that time. If they do return to JSA we drop them from the sustained jobs figure. Using this definition, under the New Deal for young people, 126,190 have found sustained employment. We are not at present able to measure how many, if any, will have left these jobs within 13 weeks and chosen not to claim JSA.

Benefits (Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have had their benefits stopped for failing properly to take up a New Deal option, at each benefit office within the Yeovil constituency and at the Taunton office; and if he will make a statement. [110797]

Ms Jowell: Between 1 April 1999 and 30 September 1999 (the latest date for which data are available), 540 young people started on New Deal and at any one time there were just over 700 young people participating in New Deal in the Employment Service's Somerset Unit of Delivery. During this six month period, eight sanctions were imposed for failing to attend a New Deal option in Somerset. This figure cannot be disaggregated to constituency level. The Somerset Unit of Delivery includes the jobcentres in Taunton, Yeovil, Bridgwater, Burnham-on-Sea, Chard, Frome, Minehead, Street, Wellington and Wells.

Education Maintenance Allowances

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many education maintenance allowances have been awarded in each region to date. [111664]

Mr. Wicks: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 393–94W.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the 12 pilot schemes for education maintenance allowances. [113121]

Mr. Wicks: We are encouraged by the success so far in the overall take up of EMAs, which are being piloted in 15 local education authority areas. EMAs have the potential to make a real difference to the life chances of young people and are an innovative way of helping those with financial difficulties to stay in education.

It is too early to identify the impact which EMAs will have on participation rates, although they have increased in all the pilot areas. Anecdotal information suggests that EMAs are helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds remain in education, when otherwise they may not have participated. A number of institutions have also reported that EMAs have had a positive effect on attendance, effort and discipline. Students recognise that if they want to have the allowance, they have a responsibility to attend regularly and adhere to their learning agreement.

There is a sophisticated evaluation programme in place for the duration of the pilot which will provide more information in due course.

Disabled People

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to expand the clubhouse movement as a way of assisting people with disabilities on the New Deal. [111413]

Ms Hodge: The Government fully support the aim of the Clubhouse movement which engages members and staff together in order to get people with mental health problems back into open paid employment. We are currently considering how the New Deal for Disabled People can best develop and will consider as part of that what role the Clubhouse movement could play.

Secondary School Places

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many secondary age pupils are without a school place in each year group in each London borough; what assistance his Department provides to find places for these children; and if he will make a statement. [111984]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected centrally by my Department. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on individual LEAs to ensure that there are sufficient school places for all children of compulsory school age in their area. Each LEA must produce annually a School Organisation Plan, which is a 5 year rolling plan, setting out how they propose to remedy any excess or insufficiency of school places and to make provision for children with special educational needs. Plans are approved at local level by the School Organisation Committee for the area or, if they cannot agree, by an independent Adjudicator. All but two London boroughs have had the Plans they published in 1999 approved by their local School Organisation Committee.

New Deal

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research his Department has *(a)* completed and *(b)* is undertaking on the social, economic and fiscal costs and benefits of the New Deal. [111170]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The Department for Education and Employment and the Employment Service have a comprehensive programme of research and evaluation underway to measure the impact of all aspects of New Deal. All the evaluation studies are carried out by independent external research organisations and all are published.

The research and evaluation programme comprises quantitative and qualitative research with individual participants, quantitative and qualitative research with employers, case studies of delivery and impact, and macro-economic evaluation and analysis.

As part of this programme the Employment Service has commissioned independent analysis of the economic and fiscal costs and benefits of the New Deal for Young People. First results are reported in "The New Deal for Young People: First Year Analysis of Implications for the Macroeconomy", which was published in December 1999 and is available in the library (reference ESR 33). Analysis will continue and will be published in future annual summary reports of the macroeconomic evaluation of the New Deal for young people.

Information on the wider social effects of New Deal is being collected in various New Deal evaluation surveys and will be analysed in published final reports.

The following elements of the NDYP evaluation have been completed and published:

- Case studies of New Deal delivery and impact in Pathfinder areas
- National case studies of delivery and impact
- Qualitative research with individuals on Gateway in Pathfinders
- Qualitative research with individuals on Options in Pathfinders
- Qualitative research with individuals on Follow-Through in Pathfinders
- Qualitative research with individuals on national Gateway
- Qualitative research with individuals on national Options
- Early qualitative research with employers
- Stage 2 qualitative research with employers
- First annual summary report on progress on New Deal to November 1998
- Quantitative survey of leavers from New Deal Gateway to unknown destinations
- New Deal Gateway: A Labour Market Assessment.

The following strands of the evaluation are still underway:

- Qualitative research with individuals on national Follow-Through
- Second annual summary report
- Quantitative survey of individual participants—Stage 1
- Quantitative survey of individuals participants—Stage 2 follow-up survey (interviews underway)
- Quantitative survey of participating employers
- Evaluation of New Deal for Musicians
- Survey of leavers from Options to unknown destinations
- Evaluation of Intensive Gateway Trailblazers.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will state the number and percentage of participants in the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds in *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales who have entered unsubsidised sustained employment through the New Deal; and if he will list the areas in Scotland where a smaller percentage of participants than the (i) Great Britain average and (ii) the Scottish average figures have entered unsubsidised sustained employment through the New Deal; and if he will list the number and percentage of those entering unsubsidised sustained employment in each of those areas of Scotland. [111280]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The information requested is set out in the tables. Many other young people will have found work without telling the Employment Service.

Percentage of New Deal starts gaining sustained unsubsidised employment

	Percentage
Scotland	28
Wales	30
GB	29

Scottish Units of delivery with a smaller percentage than the GB average

	Sustained unsubsidised jobs	As a percentage of New Deal starts
Ayrshire	1,147	27
Dumfries and Galloway	323	27
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	986	28
Fife	977	28
Glasgow	1,922	23
Grampian	471	28
Renfrewshire	768	28
Caithness and Sutherland	71	27
Orkney	18	26
Shetland	14	23

Scottish Units of delivery with a smaller percentage than the Scotland average

	Sustained unsubsidised jobs	As a percentage of New Deal starts
Ayrshire	1,147	27
Dumfries and Galloway	323	27
Glasgow	1,922	23
Caithness and Sutherland	71	27
Orkney	18	26
Shetland	14	23

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* males aged under 25 years, *(b)* females aged under 25 years, *(c)* males aged over 25 and, *(d)* females aged over 25, in (i) Inverclyde, (ii) Renfrewshire and (iii) Scotland as a whole have participated in the New Deal; of these how many entered full-time employment afterwards; and if he will make a statement. [111501]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The figures shown in the table relate to the period ending December 1999.

	18–24 New Deal		25+ New Deal	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Numbers starting New Deal				
Greenock and Inverclyde constituency	432	180	247	45
Renfrewshire Unit of Delivery	2,118	650	1,328	191
Scotland	33,430	11,370	18,050	3,070
Numbers entering unsubsidised employment				
Greenock and Inverclyde constituency	170	73	25	7
Renfrewshire Unit of Delivery	842	360	137	24
Scotland	14,230	4,080	1,860	318

Note:
These figures demonstrate the effectiveness of the New Deal in getting long-term unemployed people into work

Access Funds and Hardship Loans

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) of 25 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 151W, if he will tabulate the annual cost component element of his package for access funds and hardship loans. [112124]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Of the £68 million which the package will cost in a full year, £10 million is identified for bursaries for disadvantaged young students, administered through Access Funds. The package did not contain any cost component for Hardship Loans. Furthermore, in 2000–01 we are making available £17 million for bursaries for mature students and £57 million for a Hardship Fund.

Further Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the *(a)* adequacy and *(b)* sufficiency of further education funding in the East Midlands. [112116]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Analysis undertaken by the FEFC as part of its monitoring of potential risks to adequacy and sufficiency of provision indicates that there are seven, out of a total of 33 colleges funded by the FEFC within the East Midlands, assessed as category C. That classification implies that a college is financially weak or may become dependent on the goodwill of others. The Council has instigated strategies in regard to these institutions. Where there is any risk to adequacy and sufficiency the Council will be taking a proactive role in working with those colleges needing support.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the change in the number of full-time equivalent students in further education sector colleges funded by the Further Education Funding Council since 1997. [112360]

Mr. Wicks: The Further Education Funding Council estimate that full-time equivalent student numbers were 1 per cent. lower in 1998–99 than in 1997–98, reflecting the clampdown on the unacceptable aspects of franchising which grew up under the previous Administration. The

FEFC will be consulting on measures to support recruitment in line with our plans, which provide for an increase of 700,000 students in FE by 2001–02.

Jean Monnet Projects

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements are in place to monitor the political neutrality of Jean Monnet projects. [112337]

Ms Jowell: The Jean Monnet project awards funds to support European courses in the Higher Education Sector. The project is run by the European Commission in consultation with university authorities. Member States authorities have no involvement in the programme, which is administered by the Commission's Directorate-General Education and Culture.

Free School Meals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children are receiving free school meals in the Greater London area. [112619]

Ms Estelle Morris: In January 1999, the latest date for which information is available, there were 225,566 pupils taking a free school meal in maintained schools in the Greater London area. This figure represents 22 per cent. of day pupils educated in these schools.

Information on free school meals is published annually in the Statistical Volume 'Statistics of Education Schools in England', copies of which are available from the Library.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the 50 local education authorities with the highest percentage of pupils that are entitled to free school meals ranked in descending order of percentage. [113200]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table.

Number and percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools [1] by local education authority area [2] in England January 1999

	Number of pupils known to be eligible for a free school meal	*Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for a free school meal [3]*
Tower Hamlets	21,857	59.2
Hackney	12,140	46.3
Islington	10,871	45.4
Knowsley	13,443	44.8
Manchester	31,045	44.5
Southwark	14,940	43.5
Lambeth	11,872	42.5
Westminster	7,127	39.6
Haringey	13,104	39.5
Newham	18,890	39.1
Liverpool	31,560	38.7
Kensington and Chelsea	4,065	38.7
City of London	83	38.4
Hamersmith and Fulham	6,484	38.4
Greenwich	13,633	37.3
Camden	8,155	35.6
City of Nottingham	15,189	35.4
Lewisham	12,282	35.2
Birmingham	60,800	33.7
Wandsworth	9,115	32.2
Newcastle upon Tyne	13,019	32.2
Middlesbrough	8,281	32.1
Salford	11,142	30.3
Waltham Forest	10,643	29.8
South Tyneside	7,836	29.6
Sunderland	14,716	29.3
Wirral	15,921	28.8
Halton	6,133	27.8
Stoke	10,865	27.6
Blackburn and Darwen	7,200	27.6
Brent	10,293	27.6
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	12,060	27.5
Rochdale	10,072	27.1
Redcar and Cleveland	7,044	26.6
Hartlepool	4,571	26.6
St. Helens	8,031	26.5
Bradford	23,555	26.4
Ealing	11,184	26.1
Blackpool	5,272	26.0
Barking and Dagenham	7,358	25.3
Barnsley	8,739	24.7
Sheffield	18,415	24.2
City of Bristol	12,664	24.1
Hounslow	8,612	24.1
Luton	7,637	23.9
Leicester City	11,680	23.7
Gateshead	7,219	23.6
Oldham	9,878	23.5
Sandwell	12,264	23.2
Sefton	10,864	22.4

[1] Includes maintained and non maintained special schools.
[2] The table includes the 50 local education authorities with the highest percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals.
[3] The number of pupils known to be eligible for free schools meals expressed as a percentage of the number of day pupils in school.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children *(a)* were entitled to free school meals and *(b)* claimed free school meals in each of the past 10 years. [113206]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information is shown in the table:

Number of pupils who take or are known to be eligible for free school meals in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools in England: 1991–99
Position as at January

	Number of pupils who take a free school meal	*Number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*
1999	1,088,194	1,416,709
1998	1,130,476	1,465,213
1997	1,189,415	1,536,300
1996	1,260,426	1,570,561
1995	1,234,837	1,540,505
1994[1]	1,217,126	1,505,875
1993	1,137,895	1,425,141
1992	999,011	[2]—
1991	818,930	[2]—

[1] From 1994, figures exclude sixth form colleges which ceased to be classified as schools
[2] Not available

Summer Camps

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he has made in establishing summer activity camps; when and where the first ones will be held; how many young people will be taking part; what is the expected cost; and if he will make a statement. [112641]

Jacqui Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) on 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 389.

Community Action Programme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on planned use of the Community Action Programme to combat discrimination 2000–2006 in *(a)* the armed forces, *(b)* schools, *(c)* the police force, *(d)* the NHS and *(e)* the social security system; what media campaigns are planned; and what the target audience is for planned publications. [112508]

Ms Jowell: The Community Action Programme to combat discrimination has been put forward by the European Commission as part of the package of proposals under Article 13 of the EC Treaty. The proposals are currently in negotiation in the Working Group of the Social Affairs Council.

Secondary School Teachers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many secondary school teachers in the subjects of *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* science, *(c)* languages and *(d)* technology left the teaching profession in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and how many secondary school teachers entered the profession in the same period. [112982]

Ms Estelle Morris: Figures showing the number of secondary school teachers in the subjects of *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* science, *(c)* languages and *(d)* technology leaving the teaching profession in each of the last 10 years are not held centrally.

The numbers[1] of those entering maintained secondary schools who were teaching for the first time, are as follows:

Year to March	*Number of teachers*
1998[2]	10,380
1997[2]	9,660
1996[2]	9,320
1995[2]	9,490
1994[2]	8,920
1993	7,990
1992	7,290
1991	7,160
1990	7,260
1989	6,840

[1] All figures are rounded to the nearest 10
[2] Excluding sixth form colleges from 1994 onwards

Sixth Form Colleges

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure sixth form colleges get the same level of financial support as secondary schools implementing the new A level curriculum. [112823]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* We have taken steps to ensure that both colleges in the FE sector and schools with sixth forms have the resources they need to introduce the revised post-16 qualifications from September this year. At the Government's request, the Further Education Funding Council has revised its funding system so as to offer colleges a clear incentive to provide students with broader programmes of study than the traditional norm. In addition, £35 million was added to the overall education standard spending settlement for 2000–01 to reflect the potential costs to local education authorities nationally of implementing the reforms in the schools they maintain.

School Exclusions

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the 50 local education authorities with the highest number of exclusions expressed as a percentage of their school population for the last year for which figures are available. [113277]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is shown in the table.

Information on permanent exclusions for the academic year 1998–99 is currently being collected and national estimates are expected to be published in a Statistical First Release in May.

Number and percentage of permanent exclusions in maintained primary, secondary and special schools[1] by local education authority area[2] England 1997–98

	Number of permanent exclusions	*Percentage of the school population*[3]
Kensington and Chelsea	38	0.37
Doncaster	197	0.37
Westminster	63	0.36
Hammersmith and Fulham	52	0.33
Reading[4]	54	0.31
Derby	112	0.30
City of Bristol	151	0.30
Southwark	96	0.29
South Tyneside	74	0.28
Manchester	198	0.28
Wandsworth	76	0.27
City of Nottingham[4]	116	0.27
Richmond-upon-Thames	54	0.27
Telford and Wrekin[4]	69	0.27
Brent	97	0.26
Salford	93	0.26
Stoke	101	0.26
Waltham Forest	89	0.26
Newcastle upon Tyne	102	0.25
Liverpool	206	0.25
Blackburn and Darwen[4]	62	0.24
Bracknell Forest[4]	38	0.24
Coventry	122	0.24
Sandwell	125	0.24
Lambeth	62	0.23
Lewisham	77	0.23
Croydon	108	0.23
Portsmouth	59	0.23
Thurrock[4]	48	0.22
Camden	50	0.22
Leicester City	109	0.22

Number and percentage of permanent exclusions in maintained primary, secondary and special schools [1] by local education authority area [2] England 1997–98

	Number of permanent exclusions	*Percentage of the school population [3]*
Birmingham	390	0.22
Southampton	67	0.22
Slough[4]	40	0.22
Bromley	93	0.21
Harrow	60	0.21
Windsor and Maidenhead[4]	38	0.20
Medway[4]	90	0.20
Hounslow	71	0.20
Blackpool[4]	40	0.20
Hartlepool	34	0.20
Bath and NE Somerset	50	0.20
Islington	47	0.20
Ealing	82	0.19
Havering	70	0.19
Leeds	225	0.19
Tameside	73	0.19
Enfield	87	0.19
Bexley	72	0.19
Darlington	29	0.19

[1] Includes maintained and non maintained special schools
[2] The table includes the 50 local education authorities with the highest percentage of permanent exclusions
[3] The number of permanent exclusions expressed as a percentage of the number (headcount) of full and part-time pupils of all ages in primary, secondary and special schools, excluding dually registered pupils in special schools in January 1998
[4] From April 1998

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total of accumulated TEC surpluses to date. [113212]

Mr. Wicks: Based on the 1998–99 consolidated annual statutory audited accounts of 72 English TECs, the total of accumulated TEC post-tax surpluses/deficits was a deficit £12.7 million.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 31 January concerning political material in schools. [113310]

Jacqui Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply issued today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rat Infestation

Ms Walley: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what was the total expenditure in each of the last three years for treating and controlling rat infestations in the Palace of Westminster. [113068]

Sir Sydney Chapman: The Palace of Westminster does not have a significant problem of infestation by rats, and most of the vermin supposedly identified as rats have, in fact, turned out to be mice. However, the total expenditure on pest control for the Palace of Westminster for the last three years has been as follows:

	£
1996–97	15,881
1997–98	15,185
1998–99	16,405

NORTHERN IRELAND

Local Authority Loans

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will propose an amendment of the law to allow local authorities in Northern Ireland to redeem outstanding long term loans; and if he will make a statement. [112655]

Mr. Ingram: Redemption terms were published in the Belfast Gazette on 13 January 1995.

HMP Maghaberry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date instructions were last issued at HMP Maghaberry, governing the receipt by prisoners of printed materials dealing with political subjects; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [111942]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* There are no specific instructions in existence regarding the receipt by prisoners of printed materials dealing with political subjects at Maghaberry Prison. The admission of all printed material to HMP Maghaberry is governed by Rule 67 of the Prison and Young Offenders Centre Rules (Northern Ireland) 1995. HMP Maghaberry is a fully integrated prison with no segregation on grounds of political, religious or paramilitary affiliation. As a result, the Governor may use his discretion, under Prison Rule 67, to refuse admission to printed material dealing with political subjects if he believes it could prejudice the security, or control, of the prison by raising tensions between such affiliates.

Good Friday Agreement

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking to restore dialogue between the parties to the Good Friday Agreement. [113360]

Mr. Mandelson: Following my decision on 11 February to suspend the operation of the institutions, I have had several meetings with the political parties in Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government. I will have a further series of meetings during the course of this week to determine how the necessary cross community confidence can be rebuilt to enable the institutions to be restored as soon as possible.

Infertility Treatment

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will recommend a minimum level of infertility treatments per 100,000 of population in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [113189]

Mr. George Howarth: I have no plans to recommend a minimum level of treatment for infertility. In line with Health Authorities in Great Britain, it is a matter for the Health and Social Services Boards in Northern Ireland to determine the priority to be given to infertility services in their areas. Such decisions are taken in the light of local needs, available resources and clinical effectiveness.

Central Services Agencies Register

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people there are on the Central Services Agencies Register. [112798]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of General Medical Practitioners on the Central Services Agency's Register was 1,061 at 1 February 2000, the latest date for which figures are available.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112672]

Jane Kennedy: The annual Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies", provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the statement that rural areas received a higher share of National Lottery awards than urban areas on page six of the report by the Cabinet Office, entitled "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity," refers to *(a)* the share of the number of individual lottery awards or *(b)* the monetary value of the awards. [110507]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* The statement that rural areas received a higher share of National Lottery awards than urban areas is based on the number of awards per capita.

Communications Industry

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to create a single regulator for the communications industry. [112616]

Janet Anderson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 3 February their intention to publish a White Paper later this year setting out the Government's proposals for the reform of communications legislation. It is to early to say at this stage what the White Paper will propose concerning the regulatory structures for the communications industry.

Parthenon Marbles

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his policy on the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. [113163]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government believe that the Parthenon sculptures should remain at the British Museum.

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list by constituency the number of pensioner households which *(a)* will and *(b)* will not be eligible for the free television licence in November. [113018]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* This information is not available. 1991 Census information is out of date and no household survey has a sample size sufficient to make reliable estimates of qualifying households at a constituency or local authority level.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioner households will not receive the free TV licence for the over 75s. [111865]

Janet Anderson: The estimated number of households consisting only of people of state pensionable age but below the age of 75 is 2.9 million.

DEFENCE

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many questions to his Department tabled for ordinary written answer during Session 1998–99 were answered *(a)* within two weeks of tabling, *(b)* within one month of tabling, *(c)* within three months of tabling and *(d)* after three months of tabling. [106491]

Dr. Moonie: During the Session 1998–99, 1,347 questions were tabled to my Department for ordinary written answer. Of this total, 1,240 were answered within two weeks of tabling, 1,284 were answered within one month of tabling and 1,304 were answered within three months of tabling. All 1,347 questions were answered after three months of tabling.

Anglo-French Submarine Patrol

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions involving Ministers and officials of his Department have recently taken place or are planned within the Anglo-French Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine concerning joint or co-ordinated ballistic missile submarine patrols with the French Navy. [112423]

Mr. Hoon: None. The UK/France Joint Nuclear Commission, established in 1992, normally meets twice yearly at official level for discussions on a wide range of issues. By joint agreement, these exclude the operational deployment of our respective nuclear deterrent forces.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112146]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given on 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 233W, by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary.

River Class Minesweepers

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the Ministry of Defence Performance report 1998–99 published on 20 December 1999 includes River Class minesweepers transferred to Brazil in 1998; and if he will make a statement. [112431]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence Departmental Performance Report 1998–99 covers the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999. The River Class Patrol Minesweepers—Blackwater, Itchen, Spey and Arun—were reported in two sections of the Report: Paragraph 41 and Annexe B. Paragraph 41 noted their hand-over to the Brazilian Navy, which occurred between the end of April 1998 and mid October 1998. Annexe B, the Royal Navy Force Structure table, detailed all Fleet Force Elements in-service during the period of the Report. Annexe B correctly included three of these four vessels which were still in service between April and July 1998, but failed to include a footnote on their pay off dates. The fourth vessel—Itchen—was paid off at the end of February 1998, outside the reporting period, and should not therefore have been included in this table.

A further error has been found in the Royal Navy Force Structure table at Annexe B of the Performance Report. The section detailing the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Force Elements shows only one Roll-on Roll-off vessel, Sea Crusader, in service during the period. In this case, the strength of the Fleet was understated as the second vessel in the class, Sea Centurion, entered Immediate Operational Service on 19 October 1998.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what written representations on the proposals for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency public–private partnership have been received by his Department from the United States Department of Defense. [112369]

Mr. Hoon: Officials in my Department have received written representations on the proposal to implement a public-private-partnership (PPP) for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) from the following representatives in the US Department of Defense (DOD):

The Hon. Jacques Gansler, Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition and Technology);

Dr. Dolores Etter, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Science and Technology);

Walter Hollis, Deputy Under Secretary of the Army (Operational Research);

Lieutenant General Kadish, Director Ballistic Missile Defence Organisation; and

John Manclark, Director Test and Evaluation, US Air Force.

In addition, officials have received a number of electronic mails from Dr. Craig Dorman, the Chief Scientist of the Office of Naval Research, the DOD's nominated focal point for DERA PPP.

Comment in this written correspondence has focused on the following areas:

Maintenance of existing UK/US Government interactions in science and technology following PPP;

Protection of security and commercially sensitive information, and the application of the proposed "compliance regime";

Legal and contractual issues associated with the proposed PPP;

The need to avoid possible conflicts of interest arising from a private sector DERA's commercial imperatives and government functions;

Possible alternative PPP options and their ability to meet both governments' requirements.

French Navy

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions have taken place involving *(a)* officials and *(b)* Ministers from his Department on arrangements for ballistic missile submarines from the French Navy to visit the UK. [112650]

Mr. Hoon: We hope that a visit by a French ballistic missile submarine to HM Naval Base, Clyde, will be possible later this year. Initial discussions have taken place at official level on the arrangements for such a visit; further meetings are planned. No discussions involving Ministers have taken place.

Victory Gate

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for how long the main gates at Victory Gate, Royal Naval Yard, Portsmouth, are to remain closed. [R] [112689]

Dr. Moonie: The main gates were shut for a matter of a few days to allow essential maintenance work to be undertaken. The gates were re-opened on 24 February 2000 for pedestrian access, although vehicle access will remain restricted until work is completed on the Millennium Walk in the Heritage Area of the Naval Base.

Anthrax Vaccine

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department's policy is on the use of anthrax vaccine which has passed its recommended use-by date; and if such vaccine has been used since 1990. [112999]

Dr. Moonie: Our policy is only to use vaccine which has a current licence granted by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA). Our stocks of anthrax vaccine that were

procured for the 1990–91 Gulf Conflict have, since 1993, had their shelf-life extended by the MCA on a number of occasions and only these stocks have been given to personnel.

UK Hydrographic Office

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the UK Hydrographic Office for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111735]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from J. P. Clarke to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

You recently asked the Secretary of State for Defence a Parliamentary Question relating to the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office (UKHO). As the matters you raise fall within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the UKHO, I have been asked to reply to you direct. The Agency's performance on key targets were reported in our Annual Report and Accounts 1998–99, which is available in the Library of the House.

The following targets for 1998–99 were achieved:

Key Target 2 To achieve 100% of the endorsed and funded Defence Programme to cost, quality and timeliness targets as defined in Tasking Authorisation Forms (TAFs);

Key Target 3 To meet short-notice Defence operational requirements within agreed timescales;

Key Target 4 Implement, by 30 September 1998, new performance indicators of product availability and service levels for response times as perceived from our customers' perspective for improving safe navigation;

Key Target 5 To break even taking one year with another; and

Key Target 6 To achieve an average Return on Capital Employed (ROCE) during the plan period of 7.5 per cent.

The following factors affected the outcome of the remaining two targets for 1998–99:

Key Target 1 To process and promulgate priority safety information within stated timescales from receipt of data.

The five performance indicators that contribute to this target and the actual annual per cent. compliance achieved for each is as follows:

1. 100 per cent. of Radio Navigational warnings (RNW) within thirty minutes for SafetyNet and four hours for NAVTEX. Achieved 100 per cent.
2. 100 per cent. textural Notices to Mariners from textural sources within 5 weeks. Achieved 98 per cent.
3. 100 per cent. textural Notices to Mariners from graphic sources within 10 weeks. Achieved 94 per cent.
4. 100 per cent. Notice to Mariners - issued as Blocks within 15 weeks. Achieved 100 per cent.
5. 100 per cent. Urgent New Editions within 24 weeks. Achieved 99 per cent.

The Notice to Mariners performance indicators are challenging and any failure to meet them is examined for reasons and ways to improve our processes. The Urgent New Editions Performance reflects the delay of one new edition due to higher priority work.

Key Target 7 To achieve efficiency savings of 13.5 per cent. of controllable costs (based on controllable costs for FY95–96) by 31 March 2001.

This Key Target is not due for completion until 31 March 2001. The United Kingdom Hydrographic Office has achieved a net positive efficiency and is on target to meet the five-year objective of 13.5 per cent.

To improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000, the UKHO detailed a range of improvement measures in a five year Corporate Plan that was approved by the responsible Minister. The plan includes proposals for both short and long-term Improvements and details a range of capital investments, performance reviews and an efficiency plan.

RAF Training Group Defence

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the RAF Training Group Defence for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111739]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Training Group Defence Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from G. E. Willis to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the RAF Training Group Defence Agency performance against its 1998–99 Key Targets as these matters fall within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Agency had 4 Key Targets which were published in the Training Group Defence Agency Annual Report and Accounts 1998–1999, a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House.

Key Target 1—Quality of Product. This target is concerned with the achievement of customer satisfaction with the quality of graduate trainees, as reflected in Customer Advisory Committee reports to the Air Officer Commanding in-Chief. The specific target for 1998–99 was the development of a quality monitoring system by 31 March 1999, which was achieved.

Key Target 2—Efficiency. The target was to deliver the savings that accrue from the efficiencies planned for FY 98–99. The requirement for 1998–99 was a saving of £10.042M. The actual savings made of £11.529M means this target was also achieved.

Key Target 3a—Quantity of Output (Flying Training). This target concerns the percentage of trained personnel delivered against RAF requirements. The target set for 1998–99 was 96.0%. The actual achievement was 78.8%. Full output was only achieved in the case of Air Engineers. The reasons for shortfalls in other areas of flying training were as follows:

Fast jet pilots—operational commitments, which took qualified flying instructors away from the flying training task and a temporary problem with aircraft serviceability were the main factors.

Multi engine pilots—student numbers had to be reduced because a backlog was developing due to the delayed delivery of the C130J impacting on the ability of the front line to absorb newly trained pilots.

Rotary Wing pilots—a shortfall arose as the failure rate of trainees was slightly higher than forecast.

Navigators—a temporary instructor shortage and poor weather resulted in the cancellation of one course. Additionally, some navigator recruits were switched to pilot training during their Initial Officer Training to meet increased demand for pilots.

Airmen Aircrew disciplines—insufficient recruits to meet the full requirements.

Key Target 3b—Quantity of Output (Ground Training). This target also concerns the percentage of trained personnel delivered against RAF requirements. The target set for 1998–99 was 97.0%.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The actual achievement was 96.3%. The shortfall was due to recruitment difficulties in certain trades, most notably the RAF Regiment.

Key Target 4—Development of Output Costings and Unit Cost Measures. This target covered the need to provide full output costings and associated unit cost and efficiency measures for the Agency by FY 00–01. The 1998–99 target which was to produce an Output Costing Model was achieved.

You ask what action is being taken to improve performance. The remedial actions taken by the Training Group Defence Agency are as follows:

All non-essential flying tasks cancelled to maximise the flying training hours available.

Management action has increased the serviceability of aircraft and improved the provision of spares.

The Hercules Multi-Engine Operational Conversion Unit's planned output is being increased to eliminate the backlog of students.

The RAF Personnel Management Agency has addressed the availability of instructors.

Recruiting strategy has been reviewed and as a result we are targeting populations where recruitment has been poor.

In addition to the recruitment measures other actions to improve performance against Ground Training targets include pre-training course visits by potential recruits to the RAF Regiment Depot and the development of new training courses that provide the opportunity to gain Modern Apprenticeships. I am pleased to say that these are proving very popular with the recruitment of aircraft technicians.

I hope that this is helpful.

Defence Communications Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Communications Services for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111748]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Communication Services Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from A. J. Raper to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence, about the targets for the Defence Communication Services Agency, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility, being the Chief Executive of the Agency.

I am pleased to report that the DCSA achieved all of its Key Targets for the Financial Year 1998/99. Further information is contained on Page 10 of the DCSA Annual Report 1998/1999, a copy of which is in the Library of the House. The DCSA Key Targets for 1998/99 were essentially developmental targets for the first year of the Agency's existence. They were primarily concerned with *system* availability as opposed to measuring of a *service*. This was a reflection of the approach historically taken by Defence in the provision of information services. However, it is the quality and availability of the *services* which are of importance to Defence customers and the Key Targets for FY 1999/2000 therefore focus on measurement of these services. Clearly, the new Key Targets needed to be both quantitative and measurable. I have included details of them at Annex A for your information.

Given the need to focus upon the provisions of services, the DCSA has changed its internal management processes accordingly and reviews the performance of its services against the new Key Targets on a monthly basis. The information is presented to the Management Board using a Balanced Scorecard approach, supported by a comprehensive monthly report, which provides detailed analysis of Agency performance against its Business Plan and all 4 Key Targets. The Agency has improved performance against the targets by designing and then refining the internal business processes that are needed to deliver services. The proposed Key Targets for Financial Year 2000/01 will not change as radically as the change between the Agency's first years with the exception of the inclusion of a new efficiency target: to achieve an improvement in efficiency by reducing the average unit cost of output for current DCSA products by 5% per annum.

DCSA Key Targets For 1999/00

1. KT1—Service Quality—To achieve a mean 95% of the quality of service performance targets in the Baseline Services Document for the timeliness, accuracy and protection of information transfer services except where other specific targets have been agreed with customers.

2. KT2—Service Provisioning—To commission 90% of new requests for service on or before the dates agreed with customers.

3. KT3 Service Restoration—To restore 95% of interrupted services classed as operationally urgent within 4 hours or within specific other periods agreed with customers.

4. KT4 Operator Services—To answer 85% of calls to DCSA telephone Operator Assistance Centres in UK and Germany within 15 seconds.

5. The following targets were also proposed as Key Targets for FY 1999–2000 but were deemed inappropriate. They have, however, been included within the Agency's Corporate Plan as strategic objectives:

a. Customer Satisfaction—To be graded Moderate or High in 70% of customer surveys.

b. Efficiency Measurement—To establish a baseline of unit costs of the DCSA's outputs against which efficiency targets can be set in future years.

Medical Supplies Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Medical Supplies Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111744]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Medical Supplies Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Brian Nimick to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

1. I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Medical Supplies agency's performance and targets for financial year 1998/99 as these matters fall within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Medical Supplies Agency.

2. The details of those targets for 1998/99, which were achieved are shown below:

a. The Key Targets of this Agency for 1998/99 which were achieved:

(1) Key Target 1. To build, completed and to time and within budget, for all three Services, 95% of the programme for kits, outfits and packs, as defined in endorsed Equipment Tables and as directed by Director Medical Programme and Plans, at the Surgeon General's Headquarters.

(2) Achievement and factors affecting the outcome. The build programme originally defined was met apart from one tranche. In terms of modules completed this represented a 98% success, so the Key Target was achieved. The one tranche not completed was deferred by Director Medical Programme and Plans, because of other urgent operational commitments. These accounted to more than the postponed tranche, but were successfully completed by the Medical Supplies Agency.

(3) Key Target 2. To meet 100% of the Services' requirements for stocked medical material blood products for operations.

(4) Achievement. As at the fourth quarter of 1998/99, all requirements for stocked medical material and blood products for operations had been met despite heavy operational commitments.

(5) Key Target 3. To meet 98% of the Services' requirements for stocked medical material and blood products for exercises and training.

(6) Achievement. The services' planned requirements for exercises and training were fully met by the fourth quarter of the financial year 1998/99.

(7) Key Target 5. To improve the ratio of stock held from 1.30 to 1.72.

(8) Achievement. The Stockturn figures for the financial year 1998/99 was 1.96.

(9) Key Target 6. By 31 December 1998, the Medical. Supplies Agency will have set in place a mechanism, which communicates the full cost of the drugs and medical material supplied. The communicated costs will be in a format which is acceptable to the Agency's major customers, whether or not they have a Service Level Agreement.

(10) Achievement. The means of communicating costs was in place by 31 December 1998. The format has been continually developed by the Agency and its customers.

b. The Key Target of this Agency for 1998/99 which was not achieved with factors affecting the outcome are as follows:

(1) Key Target 4. to meet 85% of demands for Category B items, within the Medical Supplies Agency's new charter standard (next day delivery of priority demands; 72 hours for routine); and 95% within one week.

(2) Achievement and factors affecting the outcome. The Annual Report for 1998/99 recorded an overall improvement throughout the year. The success rate for the fourth quarter was 78% achieved within 1 week for priority demands, with 56% within 1–3 days. Overall the figures show 54% of all demands were achieved within 1 week and 45% of demands were achieved within 1–3 days.

(3) Comment: This new Charter Standard was introduced at the start of the year, which was a step change form the MOD standard of 28 working days for routine delivery. The standard was regarded as aspirational and the first target speculative. In the event, our plans suffered because of an unforecast and substantial increase in the number of demands presented over the period: up from 66,000 in the first quarter of 1997/98 to 78,500 in the last quarter of 1998/99. Had the volume of demand remained constant, it is probable that this target would have been met. In the overall assessment of this Agency's performance Surgeon General accepted these difficulties.

3. Details of the actions taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999/2000 are as follows:

a. A complete review of the inventory to ensure the correct balance between items supplied from stock and those procured to order (benefit all Key Targets).

b. The extension of E-Commerce to cover a larger range of high volume items in the inventory (Key Target 4).

c. The introduction of the use of production orders in the modular build programme (Key Targets 1, 2 and 3).

d. An extensive programme to dispose of unwanted items (Key Target 5).

e. The introduction of computerised interim stock management at the Medical Distribution Centres (Key Target 4).

4. The Medical Supplies Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998/99 are currently being produced. Copies will be lodged in the libraries of The House of Commons and The House of Lords following publication.

Ships Support Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Ships Support Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111737]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Ships Support Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from John Coles to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked for a list of those targets for the Ships Support Agency for 1998–99 which were achieved and those which were not, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case. You also asked for details of the action taken by the Agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Ships Support Agency.

The information that you seek, including a list of the initiatives we are pursuing to improve our performance, is contained in my Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998/99, in particular in the Section entitled Review of Performance. A copy of the report is held in the Library of the House.

In addition to the initiatives referred to in the Agency's report, the introduction of Smart Procurement and the establishment within the Agency of a number of Integrated Project Teams will help to streamline the acquisition and support process from cradle to grave. These too are expected to contribute to improvements in performance, if not in 1999–00, then in the following and subsequent financial years.

Queen Victoria School

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Queen Victoria School for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111758]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Queen Victoria School. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Brian Raine to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence, about the targets for Queen Victoria School, as this falls within my area of responsibility being the Chief Executive of the Agency.

It is pleasing to report that Queen Victoria School achieved all its Key Targets for 1998–99 and the results of that financial year's performance were included in the Annual Report and Accounts which were laid before Parliament on 26th July 1999. For your ease of reference, I am providing extract details of the Key Targets at Annex A.

The Agency's Key Targets (KTs) are reviewed annually by the Board of HM Commissioners for the School and the Adjutant General's staff, to ensure targets are taut, realistic and demanding. No changes to the School's academic targets (KTs 1 - 3) are planned for the year 1999–2000, since these are considered sufficiently

challenging by HM Commissioners, who have taken advice from HM inspectors. In line with the continuing drive for efficiency, the School's per capita rate which has remained largely unchanged fro 1999/2000, will be set at a lower and more challenging target for 2000/01. In addition the income generation target has been reviewed and a more challenging target is being proposed for 2000/01.

Key Targets Achieved for 1998/99

Target 1

Achieve a staying on rate at School for S4 to S5 of at least 68% based on a 3-year trend.

This target was achieved in that 69% stayed on from S4 to S5.

Target 2

Exceeded by 2% the average percentage pass rate for all Scottish presentations obtaining 5 or more Credit awards at Standard Grade.

This target was achieved in that 34% attained at least 5 Credit awards at Standard Grade. The National average was 30 %.

Target 3

Achieve a percentage of the presentations at Higher Grade achieving A to C grade greater than or equal to the Scottish average based on a 3-year trend.

Based on the last 3 years the School average was 69% which is the same as the National average: thus the target was achieved.

Target 4

To achieve a pupil per capita cost of no more than £17,246 (at 1997/98 prices) by March 1999. 1997/98 target was £17,420.

This target was achieved. The pupil per capita cost was £14,458.

Target 5

To generate commercial income to the School of at least £20,000.

This target was achieved. Commercial income of £22,984 was generated.

Army Base Repair Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Army Base Repair Organisation for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111766]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Army Base Repair Organisation. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from J. R. Drew to Mr. Menzie Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about (a) those targets of the Army Base Repair Organisation (ABRO) for 1998/99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving factors affecting the outcome in each case and (b) the action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999/00. This falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive.

The performance of the Agency against its Key Targets is published each in the ABRO Report and Accounts; a document that receives wide distribution to those within ABRO's sector of the defence community. In 1998/99 ABRO was set the five key targets listed at the Annex to this letter and achieved the required level of performance against all but one of them.

In 1999/2000 ABRO has continued to focus on the delivery of service to the Armed Forces. At the same time, following the announcement in the Strategic Defence Review that ABRO should become a Trading Fund, a challenging change programme is being pursued to get the Agency to where it needs to be in order to vest as a Trading Fund. The Agency is on target to commence shadow trading with the Ministry of Defence on a progressive basis from April 2001. Formal Trading Fund Vesting is planned for April 2002. A full record of Agency activities and progress, including performance against its targets, will be included in the Report and Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2000, which will be available later in the year. I will ensure that you receive a copy.

ABRO Performance against its key targets for 1998/99:

Key target 1—Throughput Target

To deliver a responsive service which matches the needs of the customer in peace and for operations to the agreed timeliness, quantity and quality criteria, to the maximum extent possible with available resources.

Result—achieved

Key target 2—Financial Performance Target

To remain within ABRO's allocated budget

Result—not achieved

The allocated cash budget for the Agency was £141.6M, while spend amounted to £144.8M, which was 2.3% over allocation. This exceeds the +/-1.5% tolerance set as the performance indicator for this target. However ABRO deliberately brought forward planned capital expenditure from 1999/00 to 1998/99 and this action contributed to higher budgetary level requirements. Consequently, it had an unfortunately effect upon the ABRO key target.

Key target 3—Efficiency Target

To reduce the ratio of labour costs to hours of production by 2% from those of the averaged last three years.

Result—achieved

Key target 4—Quality Target

To deliver objective measures of customer satisfaction

Result—achieved

Key target 5—Milestone Target

To deliver an Implementation plan embracing the endorsed recommendations from the Agency and ES Next Steps Reviews.

Result—achieved.

RAF Logistic Support Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the RAF Logistic Support Services for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111757]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Logistics Support Services Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from K. A. Bradshaw to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

Parliamentary questions from the right hon. Menzies Campbell CBE QC MP (Liberal Democrats) (Fife North East) concerning the achievement of logistics support services agency key targets:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about achievement of Logistics Support Services Agency

(LSSA) key targets as the matter falls within my area of responsibility. I have numbered the replies to match your questions.

a. LSSA targets

(1) Achieved:

Percentage

Serial	*Key target from LSSA corporate plan*	*1998–99 Target*	*Outturn*
1.	To produce deliverables by the target date agreed with the sponsor	85	89
2.	To deliver outputs at the cost agreed with the sponsor	80	81
3.	To produce deliverables to the sponsor's complete satisfaction	90	97

This year was the first that pan-agency performance targets were set. As we had no knowledge of what was achievable, the targets were tentative. Nevertheless, the targets at serials 1 to 3 were all achieved.

(2) Not Achieved

Percentage

Serial	*Key target from LSSA corporate plan*	*1998–99 Target*	*Outturn*
4.	To achieve a reduction in the cost of a productive hour	3	See below

It was not possible to ascertain the reduction in the cost of a productive hour in 1998–99 because there was no agency-wide system available to record man-hours. Although the LSSA Task and Resource Accounting Management (TRAMS) System was introduced to perform this function, its roll out was delayed by technical problems.

b. Action taken:

The targets for 1999–2000 in the Corporate Plan, which has been placed in the library of the House, remained the same as those for 1989–1999. This was recognition of the immaturity of our target setting. However, the 2000–2001 targets had been made more challenging as follows: serial 1—90%, serial 2—85%, serial 3—92%. The target for serial 4 remained unaltered at 3%. However, TRAMS is now is use in the majority of LSS business areas and the data recorded during 1999–2000 will establish a productive hour baseline for future years.

Naval Manning Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Naval Manning agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [11176!]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Naval Manning Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Jeremy de Halpert to Mr. Menzies Campbell dated 6 March 2000:

In your recent Parliamentary Question, you sought a range of information concerning the targets placed upon the Naval Management Agency (NMA) for 1998–99. You also asked what action the Agency had taken to improve performance against its targets in 1990–00. I have been asked to reply as the Chief Executive of the NMA.

The information you requested is attached to this letter. Details of NMA's performance against its targets will be published shortly in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99. I will arrange for a copy of the Report to be sent to you as soon as it is available.

I hope this is helpful.

Naval Manning Agency—Performance Against Targets—1998–99

Deployment

Filled Officer Billets:

Target: Greater than 94%—Met

Achieved: 94.2%

Overall performance continued to be satisfactory. A similar outturn to last year has been achieved despite a more difficult manning climate that has seen a deterioration in the balance of the Office Strength to Requirement. The RN was 280 Officers short of its requirement as at 1 February 1999 compared to 149 Officers on 1 April 1998.

Filled Rating/Other Rank Billets

Targets:

Ratings: greater than 89%—Not met

Royal Marines Other Ranks greater than 88%—Not met

Achieved:

Ratings: 87.4%

Royal Marines Other Ranks 85.3%

The NMA's performance is little changed from last year (88% and 85.1% respectively) and should be viewed in the light of the difficulties faced by the recruiting Agency in 1998–99 in meeting requested gains to the trained strength.

In year, a defining balance of Strength to Requirement was evident for Royal Navy Ratings and Royal Marines Other Ranks but the rate of decline has now been arrested. This has been achieved through a combination of close monitoring of gains to the trained strength and Premature Voluntary Release figures and greater accuracy in the forecasting and monitoring of demographic trends. This work is being developed during 1990–00. The introduction of the five year second open engagement (20E(5), to complement the existing ten year 20E, has also provided the Agency with added flexibility in its manpower management.

Manpower Planning

Variation of Strength to Requirement

Target: Plus 1% to Minus 2%—Not met

Achieved: Minus 3.3%

This figure is calculated on the basis of a 3-year running average. This reporting method takes into consideration an element of the lag between planning decisions and the consequent inflow of trained manpower and provides a more effective and accurate measure of the NMA's planning performance than an in year 12 month running average.

The NMA's Owner has reduced the upper level of the target for 1999–00 form 11% to zero to reflect the manning difficulties encountered in 1998–99 and ensure that the aim is directed at meeting future manpower requirements without over-providing.

Career Management

Percentage of Officers receiving the required Notice of Move [1]

Target: Greater than 60%—Met

Achieved: 67.6%

The disparity between this target and that for ratings/other ranks reflects the ability of Officers to negotiate their next career move directly with their Appointing Officer

Percentage of Ratings/Other Ranks receiving the required Notice of Move [2]

Target: Greater than 98%—Met

Achieved: 99.5%

The continuing imbalance between Strength and Requirement has made the achievement of this target particularly challenging

Percentage drafts where Minimum Time Ashore (MTA) [3] *criteria are met*

Target: 99%—Met

Achieved: 99.9%

While the NMA has met this target, the difficult manpower supply climate has led to a growth in the number of personnel nearing the MTA criteria

Efficiency

Numeric Reduction in Gapping

Target: 7.5% reduction in gapping—Not met

Achieved: 7%

The high- degree of deploying turbulence and recruiting difficulties experienced in 1998–99 limited the scope for reducing the level of gapping. Earlier efficiencies in the utilisation of the manning margin have also reduced the potential for further savings. To reflect these factors, the Agency's target for the coming year has been adjusted to 5%.

The NMA successfully introduced its Customer Review process in summer 1998. This has helped the Agency to develop its understanding of the issues, besides gapping, that are of concern to its customers. The process has also led to several changes in the way the Agency operates, especially in terms of its external communication and data presentation. The NMA is confident that this will be reflected in the results obtained from the Review, which commenced in April 1999. Additionally, it is intended that the European Foundation Quality Management Model should be introduced into the Agency. This will ensure that NMA continues to develop along the most effective lines and that its performance reflects best practice.

Benchmarking Exercises

Target: Two exercises—Met

Achieved: Two exercises

The NMA's Customer Review Process was the list of these exercises. The second exercise was conducted with the RAF.

Financial

Production of Accounts

Target: To produce Accounts for Period from April 99 to March 99—Met

Achieved: Accounts laid in January 2000.

Comment: None

[1] Within four months of change of their employment

[2] Less than three months for shore service and five months for sea service

[3] The Minimum Time Ashore criterion is a Personnel Management Standard that aims to ensure a reasonable amount of time ashore between sea-going drafts. It differs between Rates and length of Service in a sea draft and is not applicable to Officers.

Defence Secondary Care Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Secondary Care Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111755]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Secondary Care Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from C. G. Callow to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

Performance Against Key Targets

1. I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning the Defence Secondary Care Agency's (DSCA) performance in meeting its 1998/99 Key Targets and the steps the Agency is taking to improve upon this in 1999/2000. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the DSCA.

2. The Agency's Key Targets for 1998/99 and its performance in delivering these is set out on page 21 of the Agency's 1998/99 Annual Report, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. The 1999/2000 Key Targets are shown on page 22.

3. I am aware that Key Targets are designed to set and stimulate year-on-year improvement in Agency performance and I am committed to meeting challenging targets for the DSCA. However, these targets must also be realistic.

4. In 1998/99 the DSCA believed that real performance in patient waiting times was masked by inadequate data reporting systems and that improvements would emerge both by better reporting and better achievement. Neither assumption materialised and it became clear that some targets were out of reach and that adjustments had to be made when setting the Agency's 1999/2000 Key Targets. Accordingly, the performance measurement in respect of Key Target 2 was reduced to the 1997/98 level. However, continuing shortages of clinical manpower, coupled with operational demands upon a limited resource, mean that achievement of the Agency's 1999/2000 Key Targets, even where reduced to 1997/98 levels, continues to pose a stiff challenge.

5. Nevertheless, as a result of great effort, the Agency has to date achieved its Key Target 1, which it regards as the highest priority for the Agency, and it is taking active steps to improve waiting time performance. A senior officer has been appointed with specific responsibility for performance management and the Agency meets regularly with representatives from the single Services to discuss ways of improving patient throughput, for example, by reducing the incidence of Service 'Did Not Attend' appointments. Other patient filtering mechanisms have also been introduced, for example, in the field of orthopaedics, the speciality most in demand by the Services. This aims to identify those patients whose conditions do not require them to see a consultant and who could be treated outwith the Agency by primary care physiotherapists, thereby enabling the DSCA to treat more patients. Again manpower difficulties, coupled with the need to introduce new financial accounting systems, have hindered progress in developing new efficiency targets for the Agency but this is being addressed. The Agency is making great strides in the field of Clinical Governance. Individual military training requirements have been reflected in the Agency's Corporate Training Plan and the Agency is discussing with the single Services ways of de-conflicting exercise requirements to spread the impact on the Agency, thus enabling it to meet its obligations in the area most easily.

6. I hope this is helpful.

Pay and Personnel Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Pay and Personnel Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111759]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Pay and Personnel Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from M. A. Rowe to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the targets of the Pay & Personnel Agency as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Pay & Personnel Agency is responsible for providing pay and personnel services for the Ministry of Defence. The Agency's performance against its key targets for 1998/99 was reported in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts, House of Commons Paper No. 595, which was laid before the House on 16 July 1999.

The key targets covered performance in the areas of service delivery, customer satisfaction, efficiency, systems, and people. All targets were achieved except those covering the timeliness of payments, where performance ranged from 97.3% to 99.9% against the aim of 100%, and the achievement of Investors in People accreditation. With several million payments to make each year across all areas of the PPA's business these shortfalls were the result of inevitable but minimal processing errors. Recognising this realism but also the need not to abandon the aim of payment on time every time, the key service delivery targets for the current year have included just a single Agency wide target of 100%. During 1998/1999 the Agency launched a major internal efficiency review which has now delivered efficiency savings well above the Departmental target but which persuaded us to defer the Investors in People assessment in view of the temporary turbulence caused by the review. Training was also a factor and the Agency is carrying out an intensive training programme which is intended to improve performance across the range of services provided and which will contribute to the Agency's aim to achieve Investors in People accreditation before the end of this financial year.

Weather Information

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements will exist for the provision of weather information for aircrew using the Northumberland low-flying area following the planned closure of the manned Meteorological Office stations at RAF Boulmer and at Newcastle. [112824]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Ewins to Mr. Alan Beith, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the provision of weather information for aircrew using the Northumberland Low-Flying Area (LFA 12). This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of The Met. Office.

Forecasts for LFA 12 are prepared by our forecasters at military airfields. They use a range of data including observations from Newcastle Weather Centre and RAF Boulmer, and also computer-generated forecasts, rainfall radar, satellite imagery and observations from other sites, like Carlisle, Eskdalemuir, Spadeadam and Newcastle airport.

The provision of these forecasts will not be adversely affected by changes we are making to our network of weather centres and observations sites. Nor will their quality. We recognise that our customers, both public and private, are under pressure to reduce their costs, which, in turn, will continue to place downward pressure on Met. Office prices. We are, therefore, continuing to put emphasis on the lowering of unit costs, while at the same time improving the quality of output. Increased automation and rationalisation of our forecasting and observations networks are important parts of this strategy.

When Newcastle Weather Centre closes, an automatic observing station will be retained. Similarly, if a decision is taken to cease manned observations at RAF Boulmer, an automatic system will be maintained in that area. While these automatic systems do not provide all of the elements contained in a 'human' observation, they are capable of reporting more frequently and will be enhanced as new sensors are developed. They may also have co-located CCTV cameras; two such cameras will soon e deployed at Eskdalemuir and St Mary's Loch and will provide useful additional data for aircraft operating in the Borders area.

In summary, the 'human' elements of the observations from Boulmer and Newcastle Weather Centre are not crucial to the task of forecasting for LFA 12 and, given the other advances that are being introduced, I can assure you that there will be no degradation in the service provided to aircrew using the area.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many de-mining staff his Department has in *(a)* Mostar and *(b)* Pristina. [113353]

Dr. Moonie: There are no British military Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) personnel in Mostar. One team of four personnel is currently based in Pristina, and there are three further teams at other locations in Kosovo.

Under UN arrangements in Kosovo, demining is predominantly the task of a number of commercial contractors and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). British military EOD teams undertake demining tasks in support of KFOR operations, although they have also responded positively to local requests to clear unexploded ordnance where there was a pressing humanitarian need.

Food Products (Welfare Standards)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out the prescribed welfare standards which govern imported food products supplied to HM Forces. [112967]

Dr. Moonie: The supply of food products to HM Forces by its contractor "3663" is governed by contract conditions based on UK and EC trade quality standards. In the case of meat sourced in EC countries this is based on standards laid down by the EC Meat Commission and set down in The Meat Buyers Guide.

Mozambique

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to deploy *(a)* HMS 'Ocean' and *(b)* other RN ships to Mozambique. [112970]

Mr. Hoon: We have diverted the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Fort George from the Gulf. The ship is currently en route to Mozambique to assist in the international relief effort; we have no plans to divert HMS 'Ocean' or other RN ships at this time.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Commission Reform

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress made on Commission reform since the joint declaration at the British-Italian summit of July 1999. [112343]

Mr. Vaz: The Council of Ministers has discussed Commission reform on several occasions since the British-Italian Summit in July 1999. This year, in January, the Commission published the Kinnock report, which the Government strongly support.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the basis of his oral statement of 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 760, that 3.5 million jobs depend on UK membership of the European Union. [112388]

Mr. Vaz: The figure reflects the jobs ultimately dependent on British exports to the other 14 members of the European Union. It includes jobs in indigenous British businesses exporting to the rest of the EU, inward investors locating here as a result of our being the gateway to the whole of the Single Market, and enterprises who in turn make supplies to those companies. It excludes jobs dependent on exports to the fast-growing markets of the EU applicant countries.

The figure is in line with independent research carried out for Britain in Europe by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research and by Professor Iain Begg at the South Bank University. Both of these reports conclude that over three million jobs are linked with our membership of the European Union.

Press Rebuttal Unit

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what guidance he has issued to his Department's EU Press Rebuttal Unit; what is its cost in the current financial year; how many staff are assigned to it; and how many rebuttals it has issued to date. [112424]

Mr. Vaz: I have decided to rebut press articles which contain factual inaccuracies about Government policy towards Europe or our membership of the EU. This entails no extra costs to the FCO budget. There are no dedicated FCO staff assigned to this task. Since the beginning of the year, I have written 17 rebuttals, of which seven have been published.

MOX Fuel

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions since 15 December 1999 he, other Ministers and officials of his Department, have raised with Japanese Ministers and officials nuclear commerce and MOX plutonium exports to Japan; and if he will place in the Library copies of all correspondence since May 1997 he has had with Japanese Ministers or officials on MOX plutonium fuel. [112357]

Mr. Hain: Since 15 December, the only occasion when FCO Ministers have discussed nuclear commerce and MOX fuel exports with Japanese Ministers was on 12 January, when my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the Japanese Foreign Minister in London. There have been many occasions when these subjects have been raised between FCO and Japanese officials. These contacts are commonplace under the UK/Japan Nuclear Co-operation Agreement on the Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy.

I have not corresponded with Japanese Ministers or officials on MOX fuel since May 1997.

Nuclear Policy

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if the work of the Anglo-French Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine has led to adoption of joint positions with France in international bodies or forums; [112417]

(2) what activities have been undertaken in the Anglo-French Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine since January 1998; and if he will place in the Library the *(a)* reports and *(b)* other documents produced by the Joint Commission since that date; [112421]

(3) on how many occasions since 1992 officials of the French Government have visited his Department to discuss nuclear co-operation; and if he will make a statement; [112420]

(4) on how many occasions since 1992 officials from his Department have visited France to discuss nuclear co-operation; and if he will make a statement; [112419]

(5) if he will list the official discussions and meetings between Ministers and officials in his Department and their French counterparts since November 1995 to pursue the implementation of the 1995 Anglo-French Joint Statement on Nuclear Co-operation; [112418]

(6) what discussions involving Ministers and officials of his Department have recently taken place or are planned within the Anglo-French Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine concerning joint or co-ordinated nuclear missile submarine patrols with the French Navy. [112422]

Mr. Vaz: British and French officials meet frequently to discuss nuclear issues of mutual interest. One powerful example of the co-operation which has resulted was the UK and France jointly depositing our instruments of ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in April 1998.

The UK/French Joint Nuclear Commission normally meets at official level every six months, alternately in London and paris. The Commission's discussions cover a wide range of issues, but they exclude, by joint agreement, the operational aspects of our respective deterrent forces. There are no plans for joint or co-ordinated submarine patrols.

I am withholding records of these meetings under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the European Commissioner, Mr. Javier Solana about the numbers of international police officers in Kosovo. [112485]

Mr. Hain: The European Secretary General/High Representative, Mr. Javier Solana, appealed to EU Foreign Ministers at the beginning of February for more police officers for UNIP. This followed a request from the UN for additional police deployments, to which we have responded by doubling our contribution to the UN international police force in Kosovo.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations have been made to him by the head of UNMIK, about the numbers of international police officers in Kosovo; [112488]

(2) what representations he has received from the UN Secretary-General about the numbers of international police officers in Kosovo. [112486]

Mr. Hain: The UK, along with its Quint, EU and G8 partners, is in regular contact with Secretary-General Annan and his Special Representative for Kosovo, Bernard Kouchner, about all aspects of the international effort in Kosovo, including the need for more police officers. The UN Secretariat has made two requests for police officers, both of which the UK has been able to respond to positively, bringing the total number of UK police officers pledged to UNIP to 120.

Pakistan

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of difficulties experienced by former Pakistani politicians returning to Pakistan from the UK; and what monitoring the High Commission is carrying out. [112489]

Mr. Hain: We are not aware of any problems faced by former Pakistani politicians returning to Pakistan from the UK. Our High Commission in Islamabad continues to follow closely all aspects of life in Pakistan, including the political scene.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112670]

Mr. Hain: The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Since the publication of the 1999 edition of "Public Bodies", no new public bodies have been established. However the Commonwealth Institute has ceased to be a FCO non-departmental public body and is now an independent charity, as I announced to the house on 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 542W.

United Nations Human Rights Commission

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the British Government have to raise the human rights situations in *(a)* China, *(b)* Mexico and *(c)* Burma at the forthcoming session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. [112674]

Mr. Hain: The information is as follows:

China

We are at present discussing with our EU partners our policies on China at this years Commission on Human Rights (CHR).

Burma

The UK, together with EU partners, will jointly table a strong resolution on Burma at CHR. The resolution will refer to the whole catalogue of human rights violations in Burma and call for the UN Special Rapporteur to be allowed access.

Mexico

We are committed to helping Mexico improve its human rights record. But where criticism is due, the UK will support a strong reference to Mexico in the EU omnibus country statement at the CHR.

GCHQ

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what percentage of the costs of GCHQ are met by the United States Government. [113119]

Mr. Robin Cook: None of GCHQ's costs are met by the US Government.

Congo

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what factors were taken into account in evaluating applications for export licences for arms to parties involved in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [112702]

Mr. Hain: We uphold the EU arms embargo (imposed 7 April 1993), which prohibits the export of equipment on the Military List from the EU to the DRC. We are similarly upholding the UK sanctions on non-governmental forces in Rwanda, which also apply to the sale and supply of arms to neighbouring states if they are for use in Rwanda; and on UNITA rebels in Angola.

Since 28 July 1997, we have examined export licence applications to all destinations against the new criteria that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced that day, *Official Report*, columns 26–29W. In addition, we have also examined applications against the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Sales since it was agreed in June 1998.

The Prime Minister's reply to a question from the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 184–85, set out the basis of our new tighter policy on arms sales to countries intervening in the DRC.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what involvement his Department has had recently in attempting to find a political solution to the problems of the Democratic Republic of Congo; and if he will make a statement. [112697]

Mr. Hain: Britain is playing an active and constructive role in international efforts to resolve the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I represented Britain at January's Security Council meeting, which secured re-endorsement of the Lusaka Agreement and strong support for the deployment of a UN observer force. On 23 February, I chaired a meeting of UK Heads of Mission and US, French, Belgian and EU representatives in Nairobi to discuss the way forward in bringing peace to DRC. On 24 February, Britain supported the Security Council Resolution authorising a 5,500-strong observer force as the next phase of the UN mission.

Our aim now is to help all the parties implement the Lusaka Agreement; support the early deployment of the UN observer force as soon as conditions allow; get the national dialogue on the future governance of DRC under-way; and keep DRC on the international agenda.

We are already providing practical support: British officers are deployed in the region as part of the UN mission and we have made contributions of £160,000 to the Joint Military Commission and £25,000 to the national dialogue. We are ready to do more, as the parties actively demonstrate their commitment to the Lusaka Agreement.

International Criminal Court

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have ratified the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court; and when he expects the UK to ratify the treaty. [112925]

Mr. Hain: Seven countries have ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to date: Senegal, Trinidad and Tobago, San Marino, Italy, Fiji, Ghana and Norway. The UK will ratify as soon as the necessary primary legislation has been passed.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to introduce draft legislation to enable the UK to comply with the treaty to establish an international criminal court. [112928]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 258W.

Chechnya

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what monitoring of human rights in Chechnya is being undertaken by his Department; and what departmental representatives have visited Chechnya. [112696]

Mr. Vaz: We monitor a wide range of sources on the human rights situation in Chechnya, including international humanitarian and human rights organisations and the Russian and Western media. An FCO official visited Chechnya as part of an OSCE delegation in February 1995; he was subsequently seconded to the OSCE Assistance Group in Grozny from August to December 1996 and served as an election observer in the Chechen Presidential elections in January 1997. No departmental representatives have visited Chechnya since then, in view of the serious deterioration of the security situation. But our Embassy in Moscow and experts in London continue to monitor the situation closely.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent involvement his Department has had in the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka; and if he will make a statement. [112703]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answers I gave on 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 416W and 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 401W.

India and Pakistan

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what factors were taken into account by his Department in the evaluation of export licence applications to *(a)* India and *(b)* Pakistan during 1998. [112700]

Mr. Hain: All export licence applications to India and Pakistan are considered on a case-by-case basis against the UK national criteria on arms sales and, since June 1998, the EU code of conduct. Following India and Pakistan's nuclear tests in May 1998, the UK introduced additional measures. These measures are set out in the statement made to the House by the then Minister of State, the hon. the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 687–88.

Diego Garcia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the agreement relating to the loan of Diego Garcia to the United States with special reference to the stocking of anti-personnel land mines. [113352]

Mr. Vaz: The 1966 Exchange of Notes between the UK and the USA concerning the availability of the British Indian Ocean Territory for defence purposes provides for the Territory to remain available to meet the defence needs of both Governments, while remaining under UK sovereignty. There are no US APM on Diego Garcia. We understand that the US stores munitions of various kinds on US warships anchored off Diego Garcia. Such vessels enjoy state immunity and are therefore outside the UK's jurisdiction and control. The US understands the importance we attach to their adherence to the Ottawa Convention as soon as possible.

Hawk Jets

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the advice he has received on resuming the licensing of Hawk jets to *(a)* Indonesia and *(b)* Zimbabwe. [113213]

Mr. Hain: This Government have not issued any export licences for the sale of Hawk jets to either Indonesia or Zimbabwe. Such licences were, however, issued by the previous Administration.

Gibraltar (R2)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what representations, at what level, were made to the Spanish Foreign Ministry following the diversion of the Renaissance cruise liner R2 from its intended docking in Gibraltar on 27 February; [113132]

(2) if he will make a statement on the circumstances surrounding the diversion of Renaissance cruise liner R2 scheduled to dock at Gibraltar on 27 February; [113133]

(3) when he will advise the European Commission on the circumstances surrounding the diversion of the Renaissance cruise liner R2 from its intended docking in Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement on the implications of this incident for *(a)* Community law compliance and *(b)* bilateral relations with Spain. [113131]

Mr. Vaz: The British Ambassador in Madrid raised the issue of the Renaissance Cruises liner R2 with the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Spanish Prime

Minister's Office over the weekend. The Spanish Ambassador in London was summoned to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 28 February to discuss the issue. Later the same day, the Spanish Government's spokesman said that the problem relating to movements of this vessel between Gibraltar and Spanish ports had been resolved. The liner R2 docked in Gibraltar on schedule on 2 March.

The vessel in question is American-owned and Liberian-registered. We are not aware of European Community law directly relevant to the exact circumstances of this case.

East Timor

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his UN counterparts concerning the establishment of an international tribunal to try those suspected of crimes against humanity and human rights violations in East Timor. [112827]

Mr. Hain: We have held extensive discussions at the UN and elsewhere, including with the Indonesian Government and the East Timorese leaders, on how to ensure those responsible for the grave human rights violations in East Timor are brought to justice.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received concerning fighting in the Heglig and Unity oil fields in Sudan. [112832]

Mr. Hain: We continue to receive troubling reports of fighting in the Upper Nile; most recently last week. Much of the fighting is factional, but there have also been attacks on Government forces.

The SPLA and other opposition forces have made clear that they see oil installations as military targets.

Peace in the Sudan remains a priority. The UK has been and will continue to be active in promoting peace in the Sudan.

Timorese Refugees

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Indonesia regarding the repatriation of East Timorese refugees; [112825]

(2) what representations he has received concerning UNHCR access to refugees in West Timor; and if he will make a statement. [112826]

Mr. Battle: We have received several representations about access to the refugee camps in West Timor for UNHCR and other agencies. I visited the camps myself on 19 January to see at first hand the situation on the ground. Our Ambassador and others from our Jakarta Embassy have also visited since then. Over 140,000 refugees have now returned to East Timor, but up to 100,000 remain. We are concerned that militia activity continues in the camps, but are encouraged by reports that security forces have recently been dispatched to ensure the safety of officials and aid agency representatives as they try to establish the wishes of the remaining refugees. While many of them may choose not to return, we will continue to press the Indonesian authorities to allow those who wish to return to East Timor to do so safely and securely.

HEALTH

Voluntary Organisations

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will investigate the salary on-call payments and mileage payments made to senior staff of Integrate Services while the organisation was in receipt of a section 64 grant. [104822]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans at this time to investigate the salary on-call payments and mileage payments made to senior staff of Integrate Services while the organisation was in receipt of a grant under section 64 of the 1968 Act. Health authorities make section 64 grants to voluntary organisations out of their general allocation. Section 64 grants are subject to the rules and scrutiny processes for propriety and regularity that govern all health authority expenditure. Integrate Services is currently the subject of an inquiry by the Charity Commissioners.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to investigate the use of a section 64 grant by Integrate Services to purchase holiday facilities; and if he will make a statement. [104819]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans at this time to investigate the purchase of holiday facilities by Integrate Services while in receipt of a grant under section 64 of the 1968 Act. Health authorities make section 64 grants to voluntary organisations out of their general allocation. Section 64 grants are subject to the rules and scrutiny processes for propriety and regularity that govern all health authority expenditure. Integrate Services is currently the subject of an inquiry by the Charity Commissioners.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that all organisations in receipt of section 64 grants comply with the requirements of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. [111821]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 protects workers who disclose information about certain types of matters from being dismissed or penalised by their employers as a result. Section 64 grants awarded by health authorities are subject to the rules and scrutiny processes for propriety and regularity that govern all health authority expenditure. Section 64 grants awarded by Ministers to national voluntary organisations include a condition that a voluntary organisation, and anyone acting on its behalf, must comply with the law for the time being in force in the United Kingdom.

Asperger's Syndrome

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support the Government are providing for research into the causes and treatment of Asperger's Syndrome. [112690]

Mr. Hutton: The Medical Research Council (MRC)—which receives most of its income via grant in aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—is the main agency through which the Government support research on the causes and treatment of clinical conditions. In 1998–99 the MRC's spend on research related to autism and Asperger's Syndrome was £1.03 million. The National Research Register also contains details of work supported through the National Health Service Research and development levy or from other sources. It lists a number of Asperger's Syndrome projects currently in progress or recently completed.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support the Government are providing to organisations catering for the needs of adult suffers of Asperger's Syndrome. [112688]

Mr. Hutton: We are currently funding a three-year project which the National Autistic Society is undertaking to identify the support and care needs of people with Asperger's Syndrome. A key objective of this work is to disseminate the findings to local authorities, other service providers and professionals. These will inform improvements and additions to local provision of services for this group.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate the Government have made of the number of sufferers of Asperger's Syndrome *(a)* below and *(b)* above the age of 18 years. [112687]

Mr. Hutton: Prevalence of Asperger's Syndrome in England is uncertain. A recent estimate provided to the Department is that it appears to affect one child in every 350. This suggests that the number of people in England with Asperger's Syndrome might be approximately 140,000.

Pensions Agency

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the future status of the NHS Pensions Agency. [113419]

Mr. Milburn: A quinquennial review of the NHS Pensions Agency completed in 1998 concluded that the Agency had performed well since it was established and in particular had successfully implemented a major programme of change to improved efficiency and the quality of service to all its customers. I am placing a copy of the report in the Library today.

In the first instance I have decided to leave administration of the core NHS Superannuation Scheme within the Agency but I have committed them to outsource, under one facilities management contract, the Agency's support and ancillary services. This contract will cover at least 55 per cent. of the Agency's current running costs. I have tasked the Agency in partnership with the supplier to secure further improvements in efficiency that approach the best returns forecast by the review for full contractorisation.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Take-up (Rural Areas)

20. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the level of take-up of benefits in rural areas. [111851]

Mr. Bayley: Information on the level of take-up of benefits specifically in rural areas is not available.

Benefit Fraud

21. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he last reviewed his target for the reduction of benefit fraud for the year 2000–01. [111852]

Mr. Rooker: As published in the Public Service Agreement, for the first time we have set a single outcome target to reduce fraud and error in the two major benefits by 30 per cent. by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002.

The latest results were published by the Government Statistical Service on 28 January 2000.

30. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the level of fraud within the social security system. [111862]

Mr. Rooker: We are determined to reduce the level of fraud and error in the Social Security system. We are now measuring the level of fraud and error, in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, the two most vulnerable benefits, by thoroughly investigating a monthly random sample of cases in each Benefit Agency area. These measurements allow us, for the first time, to set targets for cutting fraud against which our progress can be judged.

32. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will report on progress in tackling housing benefit fraud. [111866]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to my right hon. Friend's oral answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) today, *Official Report*, column 756.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people were employed in the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service on 1 March in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [112789]

Mr. Rooker: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Oliver Heald, dated 3 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people were employed in the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service on 1st March in (a) 1997, (b) 1998, (c) 1999 and (d) 2000.[112789]

The figures below represent the number of staff in post for the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service (BFIS) for each operational year since April 1996. Figures for specific dates are not available.

BFIS	Total
1996–97	5,000
1997–98	5,184
1998–99	5,183
1999–2000	[1]5,064

[1] Figure correct as at October 1999, end of year figures not yet available

I hope this is helpful.

Housing Benefit

22. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on Housing Benefit for students. [111853]

Angela Eagle: Most full-time students are supported by the student support system which is designed to meet their needs. Full-time students in the vulnerable groups are entitled to claim Housing Benefit as are part-time students.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when his Department will issue a standard housing benefit form for those local authorities not participating in the verification framework scheme. [112155]

Angela Eagle: The Department is considering the supplementary recommendations of John Scampion's report on organised benefit fraud that a common "baseline" application form for Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) should be introduced following consultation with local government and the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.

Disabled People

24. **Mr. Levitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to help disabled people stay in work. [111855]

Mr. Bayley: The New Deal for Disabled People pilots have already helped over 2,000 disabled people to move into or stay in employment. The Disabled Person's Tax Credit is helping to make work pay; and our recently announced improvements in the support provided by the Independent Living Funds are intended to help severely disabled people to keep a higher proportion of their income from work.

31. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on progress made with the New Deal for the Disabled. [111863]

Mr. Bayley: The New Deal for Disabled People is piloting a range of measures. The results have been very encouraging, with over 2,000 disabled clients starting work so far. We are now considering how the help provided by this New Deal might be extended in the light of the lessons emerging from the pilots.

Minimum Income Guarantee

25. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are eligible to benefit from the minimum income guarantee; and how many have done so. [111856]

Mr. Bayley: Around 1.5 million pensioners are already receiving their Minimum Income Guarantee through income support. We must now turn our attention to 500,000 pensioners, more who may not be claiming their Minimum Income Guarantee. We will be announcing details of the national campaign shortly.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a guide to pensioners' entitlement to the minimum income guarantee; and how it can be claimed. [112555]

Mr. Bayley: The minimum income guarantee is delivered through Income Support. Details on pensioners' entitlement and how to make a claim are contained in the Income Support guide, IS20. I am a placing copy in the Library.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people aged 65 years and over are currently receiving the minimum income guarantee in *(a)* the Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency and *(b)* the City of Leeds. [112552]

Mr. Bayley: The minimum income guarantee relates to income support pensioners. The information is in the table.

Income support pensioners aged 65 and over, by parliamentary constituency—November 1999

Thousands

Constituency	Pensioners aged 65 and over
Leeds Central	2.9
Leeds East	2.4
Leeds North East	2.4
Leeds North West	1.6
Leeds West	2.4
Elmet	1.5
Morley and Rothwell	2.1
Pudsey	2.1

Notes:
1. Sample size 5 per cent., therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where either the claimant and/or their partner is aged 65 years or over.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999.

Income Support

26. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to raise the current savings thresholds for income support. [111857]

Mr. Bayley: We will bring forward our proposals later.

Lone Parents

27. **Ms Blears:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the impact of Government measures since May 1997 on the level of benefit dependency among lone parents. [111858]

Angela Eagle: Lone parents are benefiting from the raft of measures introduced by this Government to help them move into work and to ensure that work pays. These include the New Deal for Lone Parents; the Lone Parent's Benefit Run-On; the Working Families Tax Credit (including the child care tax credit) the National Childcare Strategy and the National Minimum Wage.

NDLP has helped over 41,000 lone parents obtain jobs, one in three of those participating in the programme. The evaluation of the NDLP prototype phase showed that it had a small positive effect on the number of lone parents moving off Income Support.

New Pensioners (Payments)

28. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on delays in the calculation and the making of payments to new pensioners. [111860]

Mr. Rooker: Most State Pensions are being paid to new pensioners within the normal clearance target timescales. The National Insurance Recording System computer (NIRS2) is providing the information to enable the Benefits Agency to invite people approaching pension age to claim their pension and to process the claim on receipt.

However, NIRS2 cannot provide the additional pension (SERPS) component of the pension award in all cases. The Benefits Agency has put in place contingency arrangements to make clerical calculations in these cases. Extra staff have been provided for this.

Welfare to Work

29. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what further proposals he has to assist those moving from welfare to work. [111861]

Angela Eagle: Welfare to Work is a key priority for us. We believe in a modern welfare state which encourages and helps people to work when they can, as well as providing support for them when they cannot. We have already set in place many innovative projects, some involving the public and private sectors working in partnership, to do just that.

We have a wide range of initiatives already in place, including the New Deal for Young People and the New Deal for Lone Parents which have helped over 200,000 find employment, and the New Deal for Disabled People which is providing practical help enabling those who want to work to realise their ambitions. Two million disabled people already work and over one million more want to. From April this year, the New Deal for the Over 50s will be rolled out nationally.

In addition, the ONE Service is currently being tested in 12 pilot areas around the UK. This offers personalised advice and support through a Personal Adviser to those of working age. Participation in ONE is, at present, voluntary but, from April this year, participation in a work-focused meeting with a personal adviser will become part of the normal process for people of working age claiming benefits in the pilot areas.

These reforms link in with the wider Government agenda. Colleagues in the Treasury and the Inland Revenue are ensuring that work pays by improving in-work incomes through initiatives such as the National Minimum Wage and the Working Families Tax Credit.

Pensions

33. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to improve the public's knowledge about pensions and saving for retirement. [111867]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 7 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 5W.

ONE Service

34. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on progress in the implementation of the ONE service. [111868]

Angela Eagle: All 12 of the ONE pilots are successfully operating in various parts of the country. We are already helping people plan ways to become more independent. We are improving the level of service we provide by ensuring that the Benefits Agency, Employment Service, local authorities and private and voluntary sector bodies work in partnership.

Although it is too early to judge the level of success we have had in helping people move from welfare into work, the initial response from clients using the new service has been very encouraging.

State Earnings-related Pension Scheme

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has made to the Ombudsman about his inquiry into the administration of the state earnings-related pension scheme. [111854]

Mr. Rooker: With the Department's assistance, the Ombudsman has been investigating four sample complaints from individuals about the inheritance of SERPS. We look forward to receiving his report.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the process for checking the accuracy of arrears statements at the time when existing child support cases are transferred to the new system for child support. [111777]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Mr. Kidney, dated 3 March 2000:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

The process of migrating data from the existing Child Support Computer System to the new system will be complex and work is being undertaken to asses show this is to be achieved. No decisions have yet been made on a preferred approach. However, the Agency is committed to performing case checks on all live cases bringing assessments up to date where appropriate prior to migration of cases to the new system.

From 30 May 2000, changes are being made to the existing Child Support Computer System to enable non-resident parents, and parents with care, to receive payment statements on a regular basis.

The statement will explain how any arrears balance has been calculated. Procedures are in place to enable cases to be corrected where inaccuracies are detected.

I hope this is helpful.

Vaccine Damage Deaths

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many awards have been made under the Vaccine Damage Payment Act 1979 in respect of children who have died following vaccination. [112624]

Mr. Bayley: The existing Vaccine Damage Payment scheme, which has been in place since 1979, provides a one-off payment to people severely disabled by vaccination against certain diseases. In three cases the vaccinated person had died by the time the payment was made, two children and one adult.

Verification Framework

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities *(a)* have the Verification Framework in place and fully operational, *(b)* are implementing it at present and *(c)* have accepted funding and intend to implement it. [113187]

Angela Eagle: At 3 March 2000, 140 local authorities had certified that, having received set-up funds from the Department, they are fully complying with all the requirements of the Department's Verification Framework. A further 102 local authorities have either already received funds or accepted the offer of funds to implement the Verification Framework fully and are at various stages of their implementation. 242 local authorities have accepted funds to implement the Verification Framework.

Unclaimed Benefits

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of women over the age of 60 years who are not claiming the benefits to which they are entitled in the *(a)* constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East, *(b)* Teesside Region, *(c)* Northern Region and *(d)* United Kingdom. [113211]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency, regional or sub-regional levels. There is no evidence that the pattern of Northern Region take-up of Income Support for women over 60 is above or below the national average; the scope for Regional estimates will be kept under review. Information on a national level is in the table.

Estimates of single female pensioners not taking up their entitlement to benefit in 1997–98

Thousand

Benefit	*Females*
Income Support	450,000
Council Tax Benefit	480,000
Housing Benefit	120,000

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.
2. The questions were interpreted as requesting information on single males and single females.
3. Figures are based on data from the Family Resources Survey, 1997–98.
4. Figures are subject to sampling error.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of men over the age of 65 years who are not claiming the benefits to which they are entitled in the *(a)* constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East, *(b)* Teesside Region, *(c)* Northern Region and *(d)* United Kingdom. [113210]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency, regional or sub-regional levels. The scope for Regional estimates will be kept under review. Information on a national level is in the table.

Estimates of single male pensioners not taking up their entitlement to benefit in 1997–98

Thousand

Benefit	*Males*
Income Support	100,000
Council Tax Benefit	130,000
Housing Benefit	40,000

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.
2. The question was interpreted as requesting information on single males.
3. Figures are based on data from the Family Resources Survey, 1997–98.
4. Figures are subject to sampling error.

Benefits Agency Staff (Scotland)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the current staffing levels in local Benefits Agency offices in *(a)* Inverclyde and *(b)* Scotland. [111840]

Angela Eagle: As at 25 February, the number of staff employed in Inverclyde is 179, and as at 31 January the number for Scotland was 7,215.

Pensioners (Benefit Take-up)

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to ensure that all pensioners receive the benefits to which they are entitled. [111836]

Mr. Rooker: We will be announcing details of a national campaign, to encourage pensioners to claim their minimum income guarantee, shortly.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will update his estimates based on the Family Resources Survey 1996–97 of *(a)* median pensioner incomes, excluding means-tested benefits, by age, sex and marital status, consistent with his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 372W and *(b)* the size of each group. [113283]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my right hon. Friend to the written answer I gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 128–30W.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when action will be taken to ensure that all pensioners entitled to income support receive it; and what

administrative obstacles exist to backdating the resulting awards of benefit to *(a)* April 1999 and *(b)* the date when eligibility commenced. [113128]

Mr. Bayley: An announcement of our plans to encourage pensioners to take-up their entitlement to the Minimum Income Guarantee will be made shortly.

There are no administrative obstacles to backdating awards of benefit to April 1999. However, the prescribed time limit for claiming Income Support would prevent any claim made today being backdated to that date. That time limit, even with an extension for special circumstances, could result in payment for no more than three months prior to the date of claim.

Anyone who claims Income Support can be considered for entitlement from the date of his or her claim. Generally this will be the first date that they contact the department to let the Secretary of State know of their intention to claim, provided that they then complete the appropriate claim form and provide the necessary evidence within one month of that first contact. If the customer is in receipt of Retirement Pension, Income Support will be paid on the same day as that Retirement Pension. In such circumstances entitlement to Income Support will begin on the first such payday, which may be later than the date of claim.

Stakeholder Pension

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to consult insurance companies in establishing the stakeholder pension. [111845]

Mr. Rooker: Insurance companies have been actively involved in the extensive consultation undertaken for stakeholder pensions and will shortly be invited to comment on the draft regulations.

Children in Poverty

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children were living in poverty in each of the past 10 years; and what estimate he has made of the number of children living in poverty over the next three years. [113205]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the Written Answer I gave him on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 790–91W.

TREASURY

Gross Domestic Product Statistics

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to publish regional GDP statistics. [112364]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 6 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on plans to publish regional GDP statistics. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

ONS last published GDP by Government Office Region (GOR), for years up to 1997, in an ONS News Release in January 1991[1]. An article with additional tables and commentary was published in the March 1999 edition of Economic Trends[2]. Sub-regional estimates of GDP up to 1996 were last published in an ONS News Release in October 1998[3].

ONS plans to publish estimates of regional GDP up to 1998 and sub-regional GDP up to 1997 in the summer of 2000.

[1] ONS(99)36. Regional gross domestic product. 29 January 1999.

[2] J. S. Virdee. Regional Accounts 1997: Part 1. Economic Trends No. 544, March 1999.

[3] ONS(98)351. Local area gross domestic product. 22 October 1998.

Licence Evasion

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the amount of money the Exchequer loses annually through non-payment of *(a)* television licences, *(b)* car tax, *(c)* vehicle insurance and *(d)* MOT certificates. [111431]

Mr. Timms: It is estimated that around £183 million is lost annually to the Exchequer through non-payment of vehicle excise duty. The loss of revenue through non-payment of MOT test certificates is estimated to be around £870,000.

To help tackle this evasion, DVLA continues to be proactive in improving enforcement regimes and last year recovered £80 million through penalties and fines.

The non-payment of vehicle insurance represents costs to insurance companies. Figures are not available on the costs to the Exchequer, though these costs are likely to be negligible.

The burden of any losses resulting from non payment of TV licence fees fall with the BBC.

Pensions (Economic and Monetary Union)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress made since the 1999 British-Italian conference on considering the effect of EMU on pension provision. [112342]

Miss Melanie Johnson: All Member States of the EU are involved in regular discussions on a range of issues, including pension provision. For example, the Cardiff peer review process ensures that each Member State is assessed on its progress on economic reform, including to pension systems, and a sub-group of the Economic Policy Committee is currently looking at the impact of ageing populations on the sustainability of Member States' public finances.

Employment (EU Membership)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of jobs that are dependent on continued UK membership of the European Union. [112504]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is estimated that up to $3\frac{1}{2}$ million jobs in the UK are linked, directly and indirectly, to the exports of goods and services to the European Union from the UK.

Mortgage Lending

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what arrangements he has to review prudential upper limits on loan-to-value ratios by mortgage lenders; what are the rules of the Treasury in setting prudential limits; if he will obtain and publish copies of the rules of the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority relating to setting prudential limits; and when the prudential limits were last reviewed. [112516]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Services Authority and the Building Societies Commission are the independent prudential supervisors of banks and building societies respectively. All their prudential notes are publicly available. In carrying out their responsibilities, the supervisors take a wide range of factors into account, which includes assessing lenders' exposure to mortgage risks, and undertake regular reviews of market practice. It is a requirement of authorisation that banks and building societies should run their operations prudently, and they should apply a minimum 50 per cent. risk weighting to assets fully secured on land.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will refer the commission and penalty charges levied by the Kensington Mortgage Company to the Financial Services Authority; [112774]

(2) what steps he is taking to improve the transparency of the conditions offered by mortgage lenders to their customers; [112773]

(3) if he will ask the Financial Services Authority to conduct an inquiry into the non-status mortgage lending sector; [112775]

(4) what recent discussions he has had with the Financial Services Authority regarding the activities of non-status mortgage lenders. [112776]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I announced on 26 January that the Treasury would give the Financial Services Authority (FSA) responsibility for regulating most residential mortgages. All mortgage lenders, including those which specialise in the non-status market, will have to be authorised by the FSA, with specific permission to lend on mortgage. All mortgage lenders will have to satisfy the FSA that they are honest, competent, trustworthy and solvent, before permission can be given. The FSA will regulate mortgage advertising and require all mortgage lending activity to include specific disclosure of the main features of the loan.

I also announced on 26 January that the Treasury would set new benchmark, CAT standard (cost, access, terms) mortgages for variable and fixed or capped interest rate mortgages. Although voluntary, these will provide a yardstick to help borrowers make better informed, confident mortgage choices and avoid products which have in some cases caused detriment in the past. It is expected that CAT standards will be finalised shortly, following discussions with the mortgage industry.

The FSA will embark on a formal consultation process in the early summer and will consult on detailed rules for mortgage regulations towards the end of the year. Unauthorised mortgage providers will need to apply to the FSA by the middle of 2001, and the FSA expects to have the new regime in place by the third quarter of next year. The Treasury is in frequent contact with the FSA to discuss how these matters are progressing. However, it will be for the FSA to decide whether to initiate investigations into particular areas or firms in the mortgage market, once it has the powers to do so.

In the meantime, all mortgage lenders in the non-status market have to comply with the guidelines issued by the Director General of Fair Trading in November 1997. These guidelines include the need for transparency in all dealings with potential and actual borrowers, and to ensure they do not engage in unfair business practices. Failure to comply with the guidelines could call into question a firm's fitness to hold a consumer credit licence.

Disposable Incomes

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the equivalised net disposable incomes, using conventional assumptions of *(a)* a dual-earner couple with two children under 11, both earning the minimum wage, where one works full-time and the other 16 hours a week, *(b)* a single-earner couple with two children aged under 11 earning the national minimum wage where one works (i) full-time and (ii) 16 hours a week and *(c)* a single parent with two children aged under 11 earning the minimum wage and working (i) full-time and (ii) 16 hours a week. [112503]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is contained in the table:

Equivalised net disposable income

£ per week

Family type	*Two children aged 1 and 2*	*Two children aged 3 and 5*
Dual earner couple—one working full-time[1], one part-time	201.14	183.78
Single earner couple—one working full-time[1]	180.73	165.13
Single earner couple—one working part-time	136.69	124.89
Lone parent—working full-time[1]	260.83	229.53
Lone parent—working part-time	197.27	173.60

[1] full-time assumed to be at 35 hours per week

Notes:

1. Net disposable income is defined as earnings net of Income Tax and National Insurance and includes child benefit and entitlement to WFTC, it does not include entitlement to Housing and Council Tax Benefit.

2. Income has been equivalised using the before housing costs McClements scale.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112671]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government are committed to keeping the number of NDPBs to a minimum, and to ensuring that those which remain are open, accountable and effective.

The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Since the 1999 edition was published, the Statistics Advisory Committee was disbanded on 4 May 1999. The Statistics Commission will come into being on 1 April 2000.

The Policyholders Protection Board and the Financial Services Tribunal will be disbanded, subject to enactment of the Financial Services and Markets Bill now before Parliament. The Bill provides for the creation of a Financial Services and Markets Tribunal under the Lord Chancellor's Department, and a Financial Services and Markets Compensation Scheme.

Self-assessment

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will introduce a rolling deadline for individuals for the submission of self-assessment tax forms. [112613]

Dawn Primarolo: There are no current plans to introduce a rolling deadline for self-assessment taxpayers.

Local Taxation

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate for the last 20 years the total revenue yield from local domestic taxation *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* as a share of national income distinguishing between those periods when the revenue base was (i) domestic rating, (ii) community charge and (iii) council tax. [112515]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Dr Vincent Cable, dated 6 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on local domestic taxation. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

Table A shows local government receipts (£ million) from domestic taxation. Since 1989 there have been regional differences in the types of local taxation, so the table shows a split of the receipts into domestic rates, community charge and council tax. Table B repeats this presentation, but shows receipts as a percentage of gross national income.

Table A—Local government receipts from household taxation

£ million

	Total	*Domestic rates NMHK*	*Community charge NMHL*	*Council tax NMHM*
1979	2,809	2,809	—	—
1980	3,551	3,551	—	—
1981	4,314	4,314	—	—
1982	5,083	5,083	—	—
1983	4,962	4,962	—	—
1984	5,212	5,212	—	—
1985	5,705	5,705	—	—
1986	6,521	6,521	—	—
1987	7,214	7,214	—	—
1988	8,384	8,384	—	—
1989	9,433	8,810	623	—
1990	11,276	2,259	9,017	—
1991	8,545	67	8,478	—
1992	8,276	69	8,207	—
1993	8,169	56	2,122	5,991
1994	8,508	58	—	8,450
1995	9,209	58	—	9,151
1996	9,923	62	—	9,861
1997	10,751	61	—	10,690
1998	11,667	64	—	11,603

Table B—Local government receipts from household taxation (as percentage of gross national income (ABMX))

	Total	*Domestic rates NMHK*	*Community charge NMHL*	*Council tax NMHM*
1979	1.44	1.44	—	—
1980	1.57	1.57	—	—
1981	1.72	1.72	—	—
1982	1.86	1.86	—	—
1983	1.65	1.65	—	—
1984	1.61	1.61	—	—
1985	1.62	1.62	—	—
1986	1.71	1.71	—	—
1987	1.73	1.73	—	—
1988	1.80	1.80	—	—
1989	1.86	1.74	0.12	—
1990	2.05	0.41	1.64	—
1991	1.48	0.01	1.47	—
1992	1.37	0.01	1.36	—
1993	1.29	0.01	0.33	0.94
1994	1.25	0.01	—	1.24
1995	1.29	0.01	—	1.28
1996	1.31	0.01	—	1.30
1997	1.32	0.01	—	1.32
1998	1.36	0.01	—	1.35

EU Fines

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total number of fines *(a)* owed and *(b)* paid under Article 228(2) by each EU member state; and how much debt in respect of such fines, broken down by country, has been written off. [112505]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

There have not yet been any fines imposed under Article 228(2) of the Treaty of Amsterdam, nor were there any fines imposed under ex Article 171.

Drug Smuggling

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were charged with drug smuggling offences in the UK during 1999. [112804]

Dawn Primarolo: 2,271 persons.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were (i) charged, (ii) convicted and (iii) imprisoned for drug smuggling offences in the UK during 1999. [113083]

Dawn Primarolo: In 1999, 1,813 men and 458 women were charged by Customs and Excise for drug smuggling offences. 1,072 people were convicted and 941 sentenced to imprisonment. A breakdown by gender of those convicted and sentence is not held centrally. The figures for convictions and sentences do not necessarily relate to the same cases as those for charges.

Pay Awards

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to *(a)* compensate local authorities for national pay awards above inflation and *(b)* make an appropriate contribution to the block grant for (i) Scotland, (ii) Wales and (iii) Northern Ireland, to cover them. [112919]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In the Comprehensive Spending Review we provided support to local government which took account of pay pressures. Consequential amounts were allocated to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government have made it clear that all pay awards will need to be paid from within the spending limits set in the Comprehensive Spending Review. We do not expect to give additional support in the light of national pay awards.

Insurance Records

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the numbers of people of working age with *(a)* no insurance records and *(b)* incomplete insurance records for each year of the past 30 years; and if he will express these data as a proportion of the working population. [112159]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* A full answer could only be provided at disproportionate cost. However the following information is available:

The numbers of people with qualifying years for retirement pension in Great Britain for the 18 financial years between 1978–79 and 1995–96 can be found in table 5 of "Contributions and Qualifying Years for Retirement Pension 1995–96—Volume 2", a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

The numbers of people of working age in Great Britain (women 16 to 59: men 16 to 64) are shown in the table.

Year	*Number of people of working age*
1978	32,322,300
1979	32,576,900
2980	32,740,300
1981	32,905,600
1982	33,055,200
1983	33,311,300
1984	33,581,700
1985	33,770,100
1986	33,930,700
1987	34,106,100
1988	34,239,300
1989	34,359,800
1990	34,453,000
1991	34,524,700
1992	34,575,700
1993	34.621,200
1994	34,712,800
1995	34,863,500
1996	35,036,000

Source:
Population Estimates Unit, ONS

The numbers of deficiency notices issued in respect of each financial year between 1990–91 and 1995–96 for Great Britain are shown in the table.

	Number of deficiency notices issued in respect of the tax year
1990–91	3,391,000
1991–92	3,422,000
1992–93	3,544,000
1993–94	3,747,000
1994–95	3,970,000
1995–96	4,360,000

Source:
National Insurance Contributions Office

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if any small business will be exempt from delivering the working families tax credit through the pay packet. [112757]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Paying WFTC through the pay packet is central to demonstrating the rewards of work and making work pay for families on low incomes. From April employees awarded tax credits will generally receive them with their pay except where they have opted for the credit to be paid to their spouse or partner or where their employer does not operate a PAYE scheme or only operates a simplified PAYE scheme for domestic staff. The Inland Revenue is providing an extensive range of direct practical help and support for employers who will be paying tax credits through the pay packet.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of recipients of the Working Families Tax Credit who currently receive payment at a post office who will from April 2000 receive payment through the wage packet. [112791]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 214W.

Households (Full-time Workers)

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each of the last 30 years the numbers of households headed by a full-time worker *(a)* with children and *(b)* without children. [112163]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Frank Field, dated 6 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the number of households headed by a full-time worker. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

In August 1998 the ONS introduced Labour Force Survey (LFS) databases especially designed for analyses of labour market data on households. Estimates form the LFS using these databases giving the number of households headed by a full-time employee or self-employed person with children and without children are given in the attached table. However, the household datasets are only available for 1990 and from 1992 onwards.

The analyses have been restricted to working-age households, which are defined as households including at least one person of working age, i.e. a man aged 16 to 64 and a woman aged 16 to 59.

Working-age [1] households [2] with a head of household in full-time work [3], by whether with dependent children [4] or not UK, spring quarters, 1990, and 1992 to 1999, not seasonally adjusted

000s

Spring	*Total*	*With dependent children [5]*	*Without dependent children [6]*
1990	12,088	5,458	6,630
1992	11,804	5,140	6,664
1993	11,728	5,110	6,618
1994	11,855	5,108	6,747
1995	12,057	5,195	6,862
1996	11,817	5,143	6,674
1997	11,858	5,211	6,647
1998	12,058	5,247	6,811
1999	12,122	5,300	6,822

[1] Working age households are defined as those having at least one person of working age, i.e. men aged 16 to 64 and women aged 16 to 59.

[2] Figures have not been adjusted to take account of heads of households with unknown economic activity.

[3] Employees and self-employed only.

[4] Dependent children are those aged 0 to 15, or those aged 16 to 18 and in full-time education.

[5] Totals include households with dependent and non-dependent children.

[6] Totals include households with non-dependent children.

Source:

Labour Force Survey Household Datasets, ONS

IR35

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many individuals he calculates will be affected by the introduction of IR35. [112990]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* This information is provided in the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill published in October 1999.

Mortality Statistics

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the average death rates allowing for age and sex standardisation for *(a)* all causes, *(b)* coronary heart disease, *(c)* stroke and *(d)* cancer for each ward in Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency and for the City of Leeds as a whole. [112551]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Hilary Benn, dated 6 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on death rates in Leeds. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The attached table shows indirectly standardised mortality ratios (SMRs) for all causes of death, coronary heart disease, stroke and cancer, for each ward (as constituted at the time of the 1991 Census) that lies wholly in Leeds Central parliamentary constituency, in the years 1991–1993, based on populations from the 1991 Census. Comparable figures are also provided for Leeds metropolitan county district (based on 1991 boundaries).

We have provided indirectly standardised ratios rather than European standardised rates as the latter do not incorporate sex standardisation and are likely to be less accurate for small numbers of deaths by cause in each ward.

An SMR is defined as the ratio of the observed deaths in a given population over the expected deaths in that population if it experienced the age-specific death rates of a standard population (in this case the United Kingdom). The SMR for the UK is 100. Values greater than 100 indicate higher than average mortality and values lower than 100 indicate lower than average mortality.

Standardised Mortality Ratios (SMRs) by ward and cause of death [1], 1991–1993 Wards in Leeds Central Parliamentary Constituency, and Leeds MCD

Standardised Mortality Ratio (SMR)

	Wardcode	*All-causes*	*Coronary Heart Disease*	*Stroke*	*Cancer*
Wards in Leeds Central					
Beeston	DAFD	94	105	65	100
City and Holbeck	DAFH	116	124	91	110
Hunslet	DAFQ	118	117	126	113
Richmond Hill	DAGB	110	126	69	119
University	DAGF	125	109	123	123
Leeds metropolitan county district		100	103	89	103

[1] Cause of death is based on the underlying cause, using the following codes from the International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision
Coronary Heart Disease: 410–414
Stroke: 430–438
Cancer: 140–208

Emergency Vehicles (Fuel Tax)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review the level of tax paid on fuel by the emergency services for running their vehicles. [113184]

Dawn Primarolo: There are no plans to review the level of tax paid on fuel by the emergency services for running their vehicles.

Departmental Secondment

Mr. Willis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff were seconded from the private sector to his Department in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to the latest date for which figures are available, stating in each case the companies from which staff have been seconded. [109291]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 9 February 2000]:* During the respective periods, the number of staff seconded from the private sector were as follows:

(a) 18

(b) 20

(c) 18.

Regional Economic Conference

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry over the staging of a regional economic conference for the North. [112921]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry discuss a wide range of issues on a regular basis.

Cashpoint Machines

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what powers he has *(a)* to stop and *(b)* to regulate the application of charges for the use of ATM cash points in the LINK system. [113182]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 1 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 416W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike).

Mozambique

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent debt write-off arrangements have been agreed with the Government of Mozambique that cover payments to countries which are in receipt of IMF assistance. [112927]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As my hon. Friend will be aware, at the Chancellor's initiative, the UK will relieve 100 per cent. of Mozambique's outstanding bilateral official debt and will receive no further debt payments from that country.

In July 1999, as part of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries debt initiative, bilateral official creditors in the Paris Club agreed to 90 per cent. debt reduction for Mozambique. Two of these creditors are in receipt of IMF assistance. The Government are not a party to the negotiations of other bilateral official creditors which have been encouraged to offer similar levels of debt reduction.

International Monetary Fund

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the selection of a new managing director of the IMF; and if he will make a statement. [112828]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The usual informal consultations are now under way to appoint a new managing director of the IMF. We expect the Executive Board to reach a formal decision in due course.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what recent representations he has received regarding loans by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to the west/east joint venture company, KomiArcticOil; and if he will make a statement; [112427]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of lending by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to Russian oil companies and its compatibility with its rules on lending. [112426]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development seeks to engage in high quality projects with a strong transition impact. This approach is fully in line with the Bank's mandate and lending policies. All loans are subject to a rigorous review process within the Bank and must be approved by the Bank's Board of Directors, which represents 60 member nations and international organisations, including the UK.

In terms of decisions relating to a change in ownership in a company in which the EBRD has an interest, the Bank reaches its decision based on commercial considerations with proper regard to the integrity and corporate governance standards of the purchaser.

CABINET OFFICE

Information Technology

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to oversee the introduction of major Government IT projects into Government Departments. [112615]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Cabinet Office is leading a review of the Government's handling of IT projects to identify the pillars that support successful projects to make sure that these are in place from the start in the future.

The first recommendations from this review were announced to the House on 21 February 2000, *Official Report,* columns 739–40W. These include ways to improve Ministers' awareness of their role in major IT projects and the establishment of a new system to share knowledge about IT projects across Government, so that all Departments have the benefit of the best practice available. These recommendations demonstrate that the Government are committed to taking action to improve performance in the introduction of major IT projects. Further measures to address other aspects of the handling of IT projects will be put forward in due course.

Responsibility for the implementation of the recommendations will be shared between the Centre and Departments, although individual projects remain the responsibility of the Accounting Officer of the relevant Department.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the new public bodies established by her Department since May 1997. [112673]

Mr. Stringer: The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions lists public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Departmental Staff (South-West)

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many staff are employed by each Government department and agency in *(a)* the South-West, *(b)* Devon and *(c)* Exeter. [113209]

Mr. Stringer: The number of staff employed in Government Departments and agencies in the South-West, Devon and Exeter is listed in the table. Figures are quoted on a Full-Time Equivalent basis.

Permanent staff in post in the South-West region
Industrial and non-industrial

Department (including agencies)	*South-West*	*Devon*	*Exeter*
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	1,256	374	356
Cabinet Office	15	0	0
Crown Prosecution Service	338	92	61
Customs and Excise	954	191	51
Culture, Media & Sport	0	0	0
Defence	22,877	2,660	196
Education and Employment	2,247	562	75
Environment, Transport and the Regions	1,699	144	90
Health and Safety Executive/ Commission	73	16	0
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	0	0	0
Health	138	0	0
HM Land Registry	1,528	694	0
Home Office	253	10	0
HM Prison Service	2,814	925	268
Inland Revenue	3,906	821	304
International Development	0	0	0
Intervention Board	0	0	0
Lord Chancellor's Department	358	0	0
National Statistics	0	0	0
Ordnance Survey	60	15	7
Registers of Scotland	0	0	0
Scottish Office	0	0	0
Scottish Prison Service	0	0	0
Social Security	5,018	2,065	269
Trade and Industry	235	87	35
Treasury	0	0	0
Welsh Office	0	0	0
Royal Mint	0	0	0
Other Departments			
ACAS	82	0	0
Charity Commission	161	0	0
Central Office of Information	15	0	0
Office of the Rail Regulator	9	0	0
Offer	9	0	0
Ofsted	26	1	1
Ofwat	9	9	9
Privy Council Office	4,692	0	0
Treasury Solicitors	76	0	0

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the new public bodies established by her Department since May 1997. [112657]

Clare Short: My Department has established one new public body since May 1997. It is an Advisory Body called the Development Awareness Working Group.

Women's Radio

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list radio projects funded by her Department which aim to disseminate information for women. [112830]

Clare Short: We actively support a range of radio projects that are specifically designed to disseminate development information to women, or which contain women focused information within a more general media for development initiative. Some current examples of such include:

BBC World Service Great Lakes Lifeline Service—Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo—features programmes on women and a soap opera produced by Health Unlimited addressing women's health issues.

Soul City Multimedia (TV, radio and press) project—South Africa/Southern Africa Region—support information on violence against women, rape and HIV/AIDS. Developed in conjunction with the strengthening of the National Network on Violence Against Women.

Others include: Radio Gulu in Northern Uganda; Search for Common Ground radio soap opera in Angola; BBC Education Children in Conflict Radio Service; Project SPEAR emergency radio broadcasting for Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo; Farm Broadcast Unit in Bangladesh, BBC Radio Education for Afghan Children in Afghanistan.

Storm Warnings (Indian Ocean)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reports she has received on the operation of the early warning system for cyclones and tropical storms in the Indian Ocean area; and if she will make a statement. [112698]

Clare Short: The region is serviced by the French Government's Regional Forecasting Centre for Tropical Cyclones based on Reunion Island, east of Madagascar. We also receive regular bulletins on all potentially serious weather situations from the UK Meteorological Office. My officials in London and Mozambique use other monitoring resources available on the World Wide Web including the World Meteorological Organisation and the South African Weather Bureau.

Disasters (Telephone Lines)

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make it her policy to establish a single number disaster telephone line for public responses to events such as the floods in Southern Africa; and if she will make a statement. [112744]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 20 April 1999, *Official Report*, column 471W.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farm Bankruptcies

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farming businesses have *(a)* closed and *(b)* gone bankrupt during each of the past five years. [110529]

Ms Quin: There are no statistics on farm business closures. The data requested on bankruptcies are set out in the table.

Number of bankruptcies in the agricultural and horticultural sector: England and Wales 1994–99

Date	Bankruptcies of self-employed individuals	Company [1] insolvencies	Total
1994	231	166	397
1995	218	99	317
1996	168	89	257
1997	155	51	206
1998	157	65	222
1999	[2]149	[2]52	[2]201

[1] Including partnerships
[2] Not including data for the fourth quarter
Source:
Department of Trade and Industry

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 25 January, *Official Report*, column 189W, on live animal exports, how many live sheep were exported from the UK in 1999 for breeding. [110810]

Ms Quin: A total of 2,673 live sheep for breeding were exported from the UK in 1999 to EU member states and to Third Countries.

These figures are derived from the computer system used to issue export health certificates and are subject to updating and amendment.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many live pigs were exported from the UK in 1999 for *(a)* slaughter, *(b)* further fattening and *(c)* breeding in 1999, broken down by each country of destination. [110811]

Ms Quin: The total number of live pigs exported from the UK during 1999 for *(a)* slaughter, *(b)* further fattening and *(c)* breeding are shown in the following tables:

EU member states	Pigs for slaughter	Pigs for fattening	Pigs for breeding
Belgium	—	—	12,922
Denmark	—	—	140
France	—	—	5,179
Germany	—	—	52,991
Greece	—	—	829
Ireland	83,537	4,205	109
Italy	260	—	6,000
Luxembourg	—	—	24
Netherlands	—	—	19,180
Portugal	—	—	327
Spain	—	50	5,214
Total	83,797	4,255	102,915

Non-EU destinations	Pigs for slaughter	Pigs for fattening	Pigs for breeding
Canada	—	—	300
Croatia	—	—	190
Czech Republic	—	—	273
India	—	—	100
Isle of Man	—	—	2
Japan	—	—	846
Kenya	—	—	10
Latvia	—	—	139
Mexico	—	—	26
Poland	—	—	8
Slovenia	—	—	181
South Korea	—	—	525
St. Helena	—	—	20
Switzerland	—	—	6
Thailand	—	—	146
China	—	—	1,780
U.S.A.	—	—	120
Total	0	0	4,672

These figures are derived from the computer system used to issue export health certificates and are subject to updating and amendment.

Bees

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what scientific studies he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated regarding the import of bees from New Zealand; what assessment he has made of the probability of such an importation carrying Kashmir Bee virus into the United Kingdom; and what advice he has received concerning the role of varroa mites as vectors for KBV. [110125]

Ms Quin: The Central Science Laboratory's National Bee Unit was requested to undertake a formal qualitative risk analysis on the importation of package bees from New Zealand. This was completed in March 1999. The importation of queen bees from that country which has high bee health standards, has been allowed under licence since 1980 without problem. Germany also allows imports of bee packages from New Zealand. However, the risk of importing Kashmir Bee virus (KBV) cannot be ruled out and the virus may already be present in UK bees. It has not yet been proven that KBV is vectored by varroa. There is certainly no indication from those major honey-producing countries where both varroa and KBV are endemic that the virus is causing concern, or measurable damage, to industry.

BSE (France)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the European Commission about the increased incidence of BSE and CJD in France. [109851]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 969W.

Flood Defence

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what powers flood defence committees have in respect of the exercise by the Environment Agency of its permissive powers. [111586]

Mr. Morley: Section 106 of the Water Resources Act 1991 sets down the relationship between the Environment Agency and flood defence committees. Section 106(1) requires the Agency to arrange for its flood defence functions (except certain financial functions specified in section 106(2)) to be carried out by Regional Flood Defence Committees.

In practice the committees will decide a forward programme of flood defence works based on Environment Agency proposals. The committees also provide the majority of funding for flood defence, through the levies on constituent councils.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the Environment Agency has discretionary use of permissive powers under present legislation affecting the Environment Agency flood defence supervisory duty. [111585]

Mr. Morley: Flood and coastal defence legislation is permissive, empowering the Environment Agency (and the other operating authorities) to carry out works but not requiring them to undertake such works, either at all or to a given standard. The Government nevertheless expect operating authorities to exercise their powers, and respond to flood risks, in a responsible way, and to be ready to explain their policy in this regard.

We have provided operating authorities with guidance to allow them to take prioritised decisions on flood defence provision within a strategic framework. This has been further developed through the Government's High Level Targets for flood and coastal defence, published in November 1999, which include a requirement for all operating authorities to prepare a publicly available policy statement setting out their approach to flood and coastal defence.

The Environment Agency has a duty, under section 6(4) of the Environment Act 1995, to exercise a general supervision over all matters relating to flood defence in England and Wales. The way in which this duty will be exercised acknowledging other operating authorities' responsibilities was elaborated, alongside the High Level Targets, in November 1999.

Farm Subsidies (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many farmers in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire received subsidy payments in each £10,000 band in each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement; [111410]

(2) if he will provide a breakdown of the subsidy payments to farmers in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire for each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [111441]

Ms Quin: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Glufosinate Ammonia

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 289W, if the use of glufosinate ammonia and its effects on the environment is being monitored as part of the trials being undertaken on GM winter oil seed rape. [111364]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Yes.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps would have to be taken to lift the prohibition on winter use of glufosinate ammonia; and in what circumstances the lifting of the ban would be considered. [111354]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The prohibition is contained in the five approvals for the commercial use of glufosinate ammonium products on oil seed rape. Lifting the prohibition would only be considered if an application, accompanied by information to demonstrate that this particular use posed no unacceptable risk to people, wildlife or the wider environment, were received. Experimental approvals, allowing strictly limited use but no sales, may be granted in order for experimental information to be collected to support such an application.

Agriculture (Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many people were employed in agriculture in Somerset in each year from 1984–85 to 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111963]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* People employed on main agricultural holdings in Somerset for the years 1984–85 to 1999–2000 are as follows:

	Employees	*Total labour*
1984	7,081	15,373
1985	7,187	15,436
1986	6,924	15,241
1987	6,808	15,229
1988	6,970	15,398
1989	6,579	15,056
1990	6,604	14,863
1991	6,501	14,605
1992	6,385	14,503
1993	6,491	14,611
1994	5,984	14,282
1995	5,879	13,866
1996	5,696	13,715
1997	5,724	13,695
1998	5,764	13,841
1999	5,277	13,197

Notes:
1. Employees consists of salaried managers, regular workers and seasonal/casual workers.
2. Total labour consists of employees and principal farmers, spouses, other farmers, partners and directors.
3. In 1998, fundamental changes were introduced to the labour questions on the June Agricultural and Horticultural Census in England, Wales and Scotland. It appears that this change in questions may have led to the recording of additional Labour who were not previously included in the returns. The change in questions has also led to a redistribution of labour between the various categories, most notably for salaried managers.
4. We therefore advise caution when comparing the 1998 results with previous years.

Source:
Agricultural and Horticultural Census

Milk

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are his latest estimates for the price paid to farmers, in *(a)* pence and *(b)* euros per litre for milk in (i) the UK and (ii) in each of the EU member states which has a milk sector. [111788]

Ms Quin: 1998 is the latest year for which farm-gate milk prices are available for all member states. The table shows the annual average price paid to farmers in 1998 for milk in each EU member state for raw milk, based on a milk fat content of 3.7 per cent. to ensure comparability. 1997 prices have been shown for comparison.

Average price paid to farmers for raw milk, 3.7 per cent. fat content

	£ per 100kg		Euros per 100kg	
Member state	*1997*	*1998*	*1997*	*1998*
Austria	18.63	18.60	26.91	27.50
Belgium	18.35	18.25	26.50	26.98
Denmark	21.37	20.83	30.87	30.80
Finland	22.11	20.99	31.94	31.03
France	19.47	19.31	28.13	28.55
Germany	19.52	19.96	28.19	29.51
Greece	23.32	22.13	33.69	32.72
Ireland	19.54	18.89	28.23	27.92
Italy	25.78	23.57	37.24	34.84
Luxembourg	19.86	20.16	28.69	29.81
Netherlands	20.19	29.69	29.17	30.59
Portugal	19.87	19.20	28.70	28.39
Spain	18.76	18.93	27.10	27.99
Sweden	23.50	22.15	33.94	32.75
United Kingdom	20.67	18.10	29.85	26.75

Notes:
1. Prices are reported to Eurostat by member state in national currency per 100kg
2. Conversion factors to litres are not available for each member state. In the UK 1 litre is approximately equal to 1.03kg of milk

Source:
Eurostat

Feeding Stuffs Regulations

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what recent representations he has received concerning the impact of proposed Regulation 13 of the Draft Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 on animal husbandry in the hill and upland areas of the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement; [112066]

(2) if he will amend Regulation 13 of the Draft Feeding Stuffs Regulation 2000 to allow the continued use for animal husbandry in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland of cobalt, selenium, copper and other trace minerals. [112065]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* My Department has received a large number of representations concerned with the effect of the proposed regulation including on hill and upland areas of the United Kingdom.

Our recent consultation on the draft Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 specifically requested comments on this regulation. This was in order that all the implications of such a measure on additives in animal husbandry used outside feeds could be assessed. We will be in a position to make a decision on this issue shortly, when we have considered all the responses.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much agrimonetary compensation has been received by British farmers in the last three years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [111783]

Ms Quin: The approximate figures are set out for the following CAP scheme years.

£ million

Scheme Year	
1997	85
1998	48
1999	264

Because payments relate to scheme years, some of the expenditure falls between calendar years.

Fish Discards

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the research study on discards commissioned from Nautilus Consultants will be completed. [112345]

Mr. Morley: The study commenced in June 1999 and will take 18 months to complete. The final report is expected in December this year.

Pig Industry

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many times he has raised the issue of BSE-related costs to the pig industry with the Agriculture Commissioner in Brussels in the last 12 months; [111704]

(2) when he last raised the issue of BSE-related costs to the pig industry with the Farm Commissioner in Brussels. [111705]

Ms Quin: Ministers and officials have had a number of discussions with the European Commission in the last 12 months on the current difficulties being faced by UK pig producers. My right hon. Friend's most recent discussions with Agriculture Commissioner Fischler were in the margins of the Agriculture Council on Monday 24 January and at the National Farmers Union Annual General Meeting on 1 February.

Greyhounds

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent research his Department has conducted into the welfare standards for racing greyhounds raised in the UK in Vietnam; and if he will make a statement. [112389]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* No such studies have been undertaken by this Department. We have no powers in relation to the matter raised.

Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the members of SEAC, indicating which *(a)* are and *(b)* have been involved in the production of vaccines, and listing their declared commercial interests. [111899]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* In accordance with the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee's code of practice, members are asked to declare any commercial and non-commercial interests. The table lists the members of SEAC and their currently declared interests. This information is also published in the Committee's Annual Report.

SEAC member	*Name of organisation*	*Nature of interests*
Commercial interests		
Professor A. Aguzzi	Boehringer Ingelheim	Occasional consultancy
	Abbott Laboratories (Chicago)	Support of some laboratory costs e.g. care of mice, instrumentation
	Immuno AG (Vienna)	Support of some laboratory costs e.g. care of mice, instrumentation
Professor R. Anderson	Decode	Scientific Advisory Board
	SKB	Scientific consultancy
	Abbott Pharmaceuticals	Scientific consultancy
	IBHSC Ltd.	Director
M. R. Bradley	European Natural Sausage Casings Association	Adviser
	Meat and Livestock Commission	Adviser
Professor C. Bostock	Safeway	Share holding
Professor J. Collinge	None	None
Dr. J. Ironside	—	—
Professor H. Kimbell	Bass Plc.	Small share holding
	Tesco's Plc.	Small share holding
Professor C. Masters	Merck	Consultant
	PRANA Biotechnology Plc.	Director
Professor I. McConnell	Marks and Spencer	Veterinary consultant on occasional basis
Dr. M. Painter	None	None
Dr. D. B. Pepper	The Veterinary Defence Society Ltd.	Director and Claims consultant
	Pfizer Animal Health (Pfizer Ltd.)	Adviser
	Intervet International BV (Netherlands)	Adviser
	Intervet UK Ltd.	Adviser
Dr. J. Safar		Dr. Safar has no commercial interests but according to the intellectual property policies of the University of California (UC) is entitled to a portion of income when UC licences to a commercial entity any patents on which he is named as an inventor
Professor P. Smith (Acting Chairman)	None	None
Dr. D. B. Pepper	The Veterinary Defence Society Ltd.	Director and Claims consultant
	Pfizer Animal Health (Pfizer Ltd.)	Adviser
	Intervet International BV (Netherlands)	Adviser
	Intervet UK Ltd.	Adviser
Dr. J. Safar	—	—
Professor P. Smith (Acting Chairman)	None	None
Non-commercial interests		
Professor A. Aguzzi	Swiss National Foundation No: 31–36059.92 3100–040827.94	Principal investigator
	Cancer league of the Kanton Zurich	Principal investigator
	European Union No. BMHI-CT93–1142	Co-investigator
	National Institute of Health	Co-investigator
	Swiss National Research Program NFP38 and NFP38+	Principle investigator
Professor. R. Anderson	The Wellcome Trust	Governor
	Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET)	Trustee
	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	Court of Governors
	Hamburg Institute of Tropical Medicine	Scientific Advisory Board
	Isaac Newton Institute, Cambridge	Scientific Advisory Board
	Maxwell Institute, Edinburgh	Scientific Advisory Board
Mr. R. Bradley	MAFF	Adviser
	Veterinary Laboratories Agency	Adviser
	World Health Organisation	Adviser
	Office International des Epizooties	Adviser
	European Commission	Adviser
	National Governments and individuals; especially in Africa, Europe and Americas	Adviser

SEAC member	Name of organisation	Nature of interests
	International Natural Sausage Casings Association (INSCA)	Adviser
	North American Natural Casing Association (NANCA)	
	Natural Sausage Casings Association (NSCA)	
	Hard Brothers Ltd.	Adviser
	Animal Proteins Corporation (APC) Europe SA	Adviser
	Crackwillow Ltd.	Adviser
Professor C. Bostock	The UK and some overseas Governments	Research contracts with IAH
	Non-governmental organisations and companies, spanning a wide range of interests including food, agriculture, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Further details of customers of IAH can be found on the Institute's website (www.iah.bbsrc.ac.uk)	Research contracts with IAH
Professor J. Collinge	Wellcome Trust	Research grant holder
	Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council	Research grant holder
	Department of Health	Research grant holder
	European Commission BIOMED programme	Research grant holder
	Medical Research Council	Research grant holder
	Motor Neurone Disease Association	Chairman, Research Advisory Panel
	World Health Organisation	Adviser
Dr. J. Ironside	Baxter Healthcare USA	Research investigator on a Baxter funded project on the transmission of CJD (Principle investigator Dr. Paul Brown USA)
	Department of Health	Research grant holder: Surveillance of CJD (neuropathology) DoH 1216469—National retrospective review of CJD and respective disorders DoH 1216982—Immunocytochemical testing for disease-associated prion protein in lymphoid tissues Adviser: Decontamination of surgical instruments Assessment of risk of exposure to vCJD: infectivity in blood and blood products
	Medical Research Council	Grant holder: G9708080—Edinburgh HIV brain and tissue resource G9627376—Phenotypic variation in CJD, a clinical pathological and molecular study
	BBSRC	Grant holder: 15/BS204814—Neuronal pathology in CJD: an immunocytochemical study with quantitive and microscopic analysis 201/BS410537—The relationship between neuron damage and clinical disease: relating murine and ovine scrapie to BSE and CJD Adviser: BSEP
	European Union	Grant holder: EC BI04–98–6046—Diagnosis of TSE using PrP^{sc}/PrP^{c} EC CT98–6015—European centralised facility for human transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (prion disease) EC PL97–6003—Transgenic mice expressing human prion protein. Use for characterisation of human encephalopathies and sensitivity for detection of infectivity EU CT98–6048—Quantitative analysis of MR scans in CJD (QAMRIC) Adviser
	Committee on safety of medicines	Adviser
	World Health Organisation	Adviser
	UK Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Body	Adviser
Professor H. Kimbell	—	—
Professor C. Masters	National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia Several research grants	Principle and Associate investigator
	World Health Organisation	Occasional consultancies on CJD
	Australian Government	Occasional consultancy on CJD and Director of the National CJD Registry
Professor I. McConnell	Wellcome Trust	Fellowship holder Research grant holder Panel member for Veterinary Interest Group
	BBSRC	Research grant holder
Dr. M. Painter	None	None
Dr. D. B. Pepper	None	None

SEAC member	Name of organisation	Nature of interests
Dr. J. Safar	National Institute of Health, Grant # AGO-10770	Co-investigator
	World Health Organisation	Adviser
	Swiss National Research Programme	Adviser
	Medical Research Council	Adviser
	Non-governmental organisations and companies	Research contracts with UCSF
Professor P. Smith (Acting Chairman)	Department of Health	Grant holder
Dr. D. B. Pepper	None	None
Dr. J. Safar	—	—
Professor P. Smith (Acting Chairman)	Department of Health	Grant holder

Correspondence

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Banbury dated 23 December concerning Mr. C. Lane of Village Farm, Bletchingdon. [112654]

Ms Quin: I replied to the letter from the hon. Member for Banbury on 2 March 2000.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Christopher Snelling

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what grounds he authorised the early release of Christopher Snelling, the murderer of Police Sergeant Robertson; and if he will make a statement. [111786]

Mr. Boateng: Christopher Snelling was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for conspiracy to rob and the manslaughter of Police Sergeant Robertson. No decision as to his release has yet been taken.

His application for release on parole is currently being considered by the Parole Board, pursuant to the authority delegated to it under the Parole Board (Transfer of Functions) Order 1998. I have asked the Chairman of the Parole Board to write to the hon. Member directly once the Board has concluded its deliberations, setting out its decision.

When considering a case such as Mr. Snelling's, the Parole Board takes into account Directions as to the release of determinate sentence prisoners given by the Secretary of State, under section 32(6) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. These focus primarily on the risk to the public of a further offence being committed at a time when the offender would otherwise be in prison. This is balanced against the benefit, both to the public and the offender, of early release back into the community under a degree of supervision which might help rehabilitation and so lessen the risk of reoffending in the future.

European Public Prosecutor

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which EU member states currently support the establishment of a European public prosecutor; and what is the position of the Commission on this matter. [112339]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In its Opinion for this year's Intergovernmental Conference, the Commission proposes the creation of a European Public Prosecutor to investigate and prosecute before national courts cases of fraud against the European Community's budget. I have made clear that I am not persuaded of the case for a European prosecutor and see a number of significant difficulties in such a proposal. To date, I am not aware that other member states have publicly declared positions.

Europol

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the cost in the next financial year of the increase in remuneration, pensions and other financial entitlements to Europol employees of December 1999. [112509]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Total personnel costs, including salaries, pensions and other staff allowances, in the Europol budget for 2000 is 17,261,000 euro in respect of 185 posts. These figures compare with a personnel budget for 1999 of 11,130,500 euro for 139 staff. A copy of Europol's draft budget for 2000 (reference 2210–87r6) giving a detailed breakdown of costs was deposited with the Parliamentary scrutiny committees on 20 September 1999.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what powers his Department *(a)* has and *(b)* will have after 1 April compulsorily to acquire local government properties used to house asylum seekers, (i) if it needs further such accommodation for such purposes and (ii) if it needs such accommodation on a longer basis than the local authority plans to use it for such purposes. [112477]

Mrs. Roche: Section 101 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (which comes into force on 3 April) provides that the Secretary of State may by order designate areas in England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland as reception zones. The Secretary of State may direct a local authority of the Northern Ireland Executive to make available any suitable housing accommodation within such a zone for the purpose of providing support to asylum seekers under section 95 of the 1999 Act. The period for which such accommodation is to be made available cannot exceed five years.

In relation to Scotland, the Secretary of State may not direct a local authority to provide accommodation unless Scottish ministers have confirmed that the criteria specified in a designation order are in their opinion met in relation to that authority.

Housing accommodation will be suitable for the purposes of the provisions of section 101 if it is unoccupied, likely to remain unoccupied for the foreseeable future if not made available, and appropriate for the accommodation of asylum seekers.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list those local authorities which are currently supporting asylum seekers who are unaccompanied minors, indicating how many such people are being supported by each such local authority; [113318]

(2) if he will list those local authorities which are currently supporting asylum seekers, indicating how many asylum seekers are being supported by each such local authority. [113316]

Mrs. Roche: Information on local authority-supported asylum seekers is available only for the Greater London local authorities. I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 166–67W, which gives the available information, as at 7 January 2000, on asylum seekers supported by each London borough, split between families, singles and unaccompanied minors.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what changes he has made since 2 May 1997 to the list of countries where, in terms of section 1 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, there is in general no serious risk of persecution; [113322]

(2) which countries are designated by him under section 1 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 as ones where there is in general no serious risk of persecutiog; what plans he has to amend that list; and if he will make a statement. [113321]

Mrs. Roche: The countries designated as ones where there is in general no serious risk of persecution are Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ghana, India, Pakistan, Poland and Romania. No changes have been made to this list since 2 May 1997.

When Part IV and Schedule 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 are brought into force later this year, the list of designated countries will cease to operate. Cases from these countries will then be dealt with, where appropriate, using the fairer and more effective case-specific procedures in the 1999 Act for dealing quickly with unfounded claims.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason payments to Scottish local authorities for supporting asylum seekers differ from such payments to English and Welsh local authorities. [113319]

Mrs. Roche: In England and Wales, local authorities may recover costs associated with supporting asylum seekers subject to unit cost limits of £140 a week for single adults and £240 a week for families. These unit costs have been agreed with the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government.

In Scotland, asylum seeking adults are supported under the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and families and children under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. The Home Office and the Scotland Office agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, for the 1999–2000 financial year, to continue previous arrangements under which a flat rate grant of £165 per person is paid for support of asylum seeking adults and families. In future, there will be United Kingdom arrangements for asylum support under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his Department's investigation into allegations of the misuse of public money to house asylum seekers in Northamptonshire. [113355]

Mrs. Roche: I understand that Northamptonshire County Council is currently conducting an investigation into these allegations to determine whether there are matters that should be referred to the police for possible criminal investigation. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the organisations which have agreed with his Department to provide first contact support for asylum seekers on or after 1 April. [113314]

Mrs. Roche: The following organisations have agreed to provide staff to act as reception assistants to help deal with persons seeking support under the national asylum support scheme. Refugee Arrivals Project; Migrant helpline; Refugee Council; Scottish Refugee Council; Welsh Refugee Council; and Refugee Action.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to apply the new support scheme under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to all asylum seekers whose applications are made on or after 1 April; and if he will make a statement. [113320]

Mrs. Roche: I propose to bring in the new support arrangements on Monday 3 April 2000 for asylum seekers who make their applications at a port of entry from that date. The entitlement of new port applicants to cash, social security and housing benefits will thereupon cease; in-country applicants do not have this entitlement.

Those who apply for asylum from that date and who are then detained at Oakington reception centre, whether their application is port or in-country, will go on to the new support arrangements.

I shall also make arrangements for asylum seekers who claim asylum and support from 3 April in Scotland or Northern Ireland and who are eligible for support to come on to the new support arrangements.

It is my intention to bring the new support arrangements on stream as soon as possible for other asylum seekers who make in-country applications for asylum in England and Wales and for those in England and Wales who claim asylum at their port of entry prior to 3 April 2000 who receive a negative decision and who then go on to appeal. Until then, responsibility for providing support will continue under the terms of Schedule 9 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy in publishing asylum statistics to differentiate between claimants from different parts of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; and if he will make a statement. [113317]

Mrs. Roche: Asylum statistics are recorded on a nationality basis and Serbs, Kosovans and Montenegrins are nationals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. To attempt to provide statistics on a regional basis would incur a great deal of effort and disproportionate cost.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the organisations which have agreed with his Department to provide accommodation for asylum seekers on or after 1 April under the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, indicating how many asylum seekers each contractor has agreed to accommodate. [113315]

Mrs. Roche: All information about the organisations that have tendered to provide accommodation for asylum seekers under the national asylum support scheme and about the details of their bids is commercially confidential. I am, therefore, unable to provide the information requested.

Prison Staff (Assaults)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many assaults on prison staff were carried out in the latest year for which figures are available by prisoners in *(a)* PFI prisons and *(b)* non-PFI prisons; and if he will make a statement. [112497]

Mr. Boateng: Provisional information on the number of proven assaults adjudicated upon in prisons in England and Wales during 1999 is given in the table.

Proven adjudications on assaults in prisons in England and Wales, 1999 [1]

Number/per 100 population

	Assaults on staff	*Assaults on prisoners*	*Assaults on others*	*All assaults*
Number				
All establishments	2,556	3,344	418	6,318
of which:				
PFI establishments[2]	71	99	10	180
Other private sector establishments[3]	111	246	28	385
Public sector establishments	2,374	2,999	380	5,753
Number per 100 population				
All establishments	3.9	5.1	0.6	9.7
of which:				
PFI establishments[2]	3.2	4.4	0.4	8.0
Other private sector establishments[3]	4.1	9.2	1.0	14.4
Public sector establishments	4.0	5.0	0.6	9.6

[1] Provisional
[2] Private Finance Initiative establishments: Altcourse, Ashfield, Lowdham Grange and Parc
[3] Other privately managed establishments: Blakenhurst, Buckley Hall, Doncaster and The Wolds

Prisoner Welfare

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the welfare of prisoners who are held in *(a)* PFI-prisons and *(b)* non-PFI-prisons; and if he will make a statement. [112476]

Mr. Boateng: The welfare of all prisoners, including those housed in the five Private Finance Initiative Design, Construct, Manage and Finance (DCMF) prisons now open, is assessed according to the same procedures and standards. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons conducted 21 full inspections in 1999 including three DCMF prisons, Parc, Altcourse and Lowdham Grange. Conditions for prisoners in directly managed prisons were reported to range from the unacceptable to the excellent. In his report on Parc, the Chief Inspector stated that Parc was a challenging place and that there was still much to do but that he was impressed with the potential and the obvious willingness of most staff to make the prison successful. The reports on Altcourse and Lowdham Grange prisons have not yet been published.

The Prison Service itself continuously monitors the performance of all prisons including the treatment of inmates through various procedures such as Key Performance Indicators and standards audits.

Immigration and Asylum (Computer Systems)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the functioning of his Department's computer systems relating to control of immigration and asylum. [112479]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office relies on a number of computer systems in the control of immigration and asylum. All systems are functioning effectively under appropriate management arrangements and contracts with suppliers to provide for day to day operation and development where required.

Mobile Telephones

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his plans to monitor the use of mobile telephones for criminal purposes. [112501]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill was introduced to the House on 9 February. The Bill will ensure that the current regime for intercepting the communications of those involved in serious crime is updated, to deal with the technological changes which have taken place since the Interception of Communications Act was enacted in 1985. The strict criteria for the approval of interceptions will remain the same.

Schengen Convention

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the general principles governing the payment of informers as part of the Schengen process; and what guidelines have subsequently been passed to UK agencies. [112507]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The United Kingdom's application to participate in those parts of the Schengen acquis relating to police and judicial co-operation included a list of relevant Decisions of the Schengen Executive Committee. These include one relating to the payment of informers (SCH/Com-ex(99)8 rev 2). As the United Kingdom's application has yet to be approved, no action has yet been taken in relation to this Decision.

The United Kingdom's application has been subject to the Parliamentary scrutiny process. Accordingly those Decisions of the Schengen Executive Committee in which the United Kingdom is seeking to participate have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those items of information to be shared by the UK on accession to elements of the Schengen system. [112512]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The United Kingdom is seeking to participate in the exchange of data under Article 95 and Articles 97 to 100 of the Schengen Convention. These Articles broadly cover areas of police and judicial co-operation. A copy of the Schengen Convention may be found in the Library.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place the Schengen Manual on Bogus Drug Deals in the Library. [112506]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am unaware of any such Manual. If the hon. Member were able to provide more details we would be happy to explore the matter further.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff were employed in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on 1 February. [112620]

Mrs. Roche: The current publicity surrounding the rise in asylum seekers and the backlogs of work in Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) has provided a flurry of Parliamentary Questions relating to the number of staff employed in IND at various times.

There is no particular significance to the date of 1 February 2000.

Immigration Documents

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has issued to immigration officers at ports regarding the issue of SAL1 and SAL2 documents; and if he will place a copy of the guidance in the Library. [112707]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has issued no guidance on these matters to Immigration Officers. These are administrative procedures covered by internal operational instructions.

Safe Cells

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many safe cells there are in *(a)* prisons and *(b)* police stations; what plans he has for further ones to be installed; and if he will make a statement. [112975]

Mr. Boateng: By 31 March 2000, 185 improved standard cells (previously known as "safe" cells) will have been provided in 19 existing prisons. In addition, there are 1,088 cells in use at two new privately managed prisons (Forest Bank prison and Ashfield young offenders institution) which reflect the new design requirements. All future new prisons will similarly incorporate these requirements. No central record exists of the number of such cells in police stations in England and Wales and the information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the same safe cell specification applies to *(a)* prisons in HM Prison Service, *(b)* privately-run prisons and *(c)* prisons funded by the Private Finance Initiative; and if he will make a statement. [112976]

Mr. Boateng: Private sector consortiums seeking to build and manage new prisons are required to reflect the design requirements of the Prison Service's improved standard cell in all new prison cells. While such cells may not be identical to those built by the Prison Service, all cells will incorporate the key elements of the Service's design specification.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners committed suicide in safe cells in the last year for which figures are available. [112974]

Mr. Boateng: None of the prisoners who committed suicide in 1999 were located in the improved cell design, formerly known as "safe" cells.

Prisoner Complaints

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints of racist behaviour were made by prisoners against prison officers in 1997, 1998 and 1999. [113012]

Mr. Boateng: The number of alleged racist incidents recorded by establishments against staff on prisoners for the past three years are:

112 (1996–97)

92 (1997–98

218 (1998–99).

An incident may have been reported by the prisoner or by anyone else witnessing it.

All incidents which are alleged to have a racist element are required to be reported to the race relations liaison officer (RRLO) for recording and investigation. The majority of alleged racist incidents are resolved informally. Race relations and the role of the RRLO were given added prominence following the setting up of the Director General's Race Relations Group in July 1998 and further guidance on the definition of a racist incident has been issued since the publication of the Macpherson report in February 1999.

Race Relations Training

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what anti-racist training has been provided to the dedicated search team at HMP Full Sutton. [113009]

Mr. Boateng: All dedicated search team staff at Full Sutton receive training on race relations. In addition, the dedicated search team also receives training on equal opportunities and anti-bullying, both of which incorporate an element of race relations.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what anti-racist training is provided to Prison Service staff. [113013]

Mr. Boateng: All Prison Service staff are trained nationally, by the Prison Service's training services, and locally by each race relations trainer who must have attended the national race relations training for trainers course. All race relations training, and associated procedures, are auditable by the national standards unit and are underpinned by the Prison Service Order on Race Relations (PSO 2800), issued in May 1997, a copy of which is available in the Library. Topics covered in the training include:

Acceptable/unacceptable terminology; prejudice, discrimination and related processes;

the definition and investigation of complaints and racist incidents;

the significance of religious artefacts/objects; and

the importance of the individual in the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equality.

Prisoner Telephone Call Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what guidelines are provided to prison officers on the recording of monitored telephone conversations of prisoners; [113011]

(2) what monitoring is undertaken by the Prison Service of prison telephone monitoring indexes; [113010]

(3) what guidelines have been established by the Prison Service for the monitoring of prisoners' telephone calls. [113008]

Mr. Boateng: Guidelines to prison staff on the recording and monitoring of prisoners' telephone calls are contained in the Prison Service Security Manual, Prison Standing Order 5G, Circular Instruction 21–1992, Chapters 1 and 2 of Prison Service Order 4400 and Instructions to Governors 87–1995 and 73–1995, copies of which are available in the Library.

These require that all prisoners' telephone calls, other than in open establishments, are recorded and capable of being monitored contemporaneously and from playback of the recordings. Calls made by high and exceptional risk category A prisoners are contemporaneously monitored. Monitoring of other prisoners' calls takes place on a selective basis where there is justifiable suspicion of abuse, supplemented by random monitoring to the extent it is considered necessary for the purposes of security, control and the detection of crime.

Prisons (Rats)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total expenditure in each of the past three financial years on controlling and treating rat infestations in prisons. [113043]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not available.

Regular inspections take place in all prison establishments to check for infestations of pests of all types, and establishments have contracts with pest control firms for action to be taken to deal with any infestations discovered.

Primates

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what primates were brought into this country through Dover on 3 February having sailed on the 'Cap Afrique' from Dunkirk; what was their *(a)* origin and *(b)* destination; and what arrangements were made for their welfare during their journey. [110231]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

According to our records, 60 primates from Mauritius came into Dover on 3 February. These were inspected by a veterinary surgeon at the quarantine premises which was their destination and were found to have travelled well with no signs of ill health or disease. According to Home Office records the ship on which they arrived was the 'Cap Afrique.'

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the terms of reference for the review which he has asked Gurbux Singh to conduct on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress. [113586]

Mr. Straw: I have asked Gurbux Singh to conduct a review with the following terms of reference:

To review the events leading up to the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, including possible implications for corporate governance of the Commission for Racial Equality, and to make recommendations.

The findings of the review will be laid in the Library.

Police Investigations (War Crimes and Torture)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many investigations have been undertaken to date by the Metropolitan police under the provisions of the *(a)* War Crimes Act 1991 and *(b)* International Convention on Torture. [112923]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan police has informed me that, between May 1991 and 2 March 2000, 381 individuals have been investigated under the War Crimes Act 1991. He also informs me that two allegations under section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (the offence of Torture) have been investigated.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Metropolitan police officers are assigned to the investigation of cases referred to the Metropolitan police under *(a)* the War Crimes Act 1991 and *(b)* the International Convention on Torture; and if he will make a statement. [112926]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan police has informed me that no officers are currently assigned to the investigation of cases under the War Crimes Act 1991.

He also informs me that no officers are assigned specifically to the investigation of allegations of torture. Officers are assigned, principally from the Organised Crime Group, as and when allegations are made.

Police Vehicles (Accidents)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many accidents involving police vehicles there were in each police area in each of the past three years; and what was the severity of the injuries incurred in each case. [112924]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information set out in the table has been provided by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, to which forces submit statistical returns. The statistics collect all incidents in which a police vehicle sustains damage, including those where no other vehicle is involved. Figures for the injury classifications are available only for collisions where the police vehicle was responding to an emergency call or in pursuit of another vehicle.

1996

	Total police vehicle accidents	*No immediate response/ pursuit*	*Immediate/ pursuit*	*Fatal RTAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Police serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Police other injuries immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian fatal PVAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian other injuries immediate/ pursuits*
Avon and Somerset	507	229	82	0	1	45	2	13	21
Bedfordshire	205	93	19	0	2	5	0	1	11
Cambridgeshire	256	107	19	0	2	15	0	4	7
Cheshire	194	102	28	0	3	18	0	5	16
City of London	80	19	4	0	1	7	0	0	4
Cleveland	75	22	7	0	0	8	0	2	2
Cumbria	116	19	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Derbyshire	320	96	27	0	7	18	0	4	14
Devon and Cornwall	250	64	21	0	0	9	0	4	20
Dorset	119	56	12	0	0	2	0	2	8
Durham	159	73	18	0	0	14	0	0	16
Dyfed-Powys	75	19	6	0	0	5	0	0	4
Essex	391	93	20	0	1	15	1	0	16
Gloucestershire	196	91	13	0	3	6	0	1	3
Greater Manchester	957	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	0	7	61	2	7	30
Gwent	195	38	2	0	0	2	2	0	2
Hampshire	555	161	24	0	0	12	0	0	25
Hertfordshire	223	75	15	0	3	16	0	1	6
Humberside	188	37	9	0	0	6	0	2	5
Kent	423	180	27	0	5	12	1	4	5
Lancashire	449	85	20	0	2	7	2	2	17
Leicestershire	214	78	12	0	0	2	2	1	7
Lincolnshire	71	36	5	0	0	2	0	0	3
Merseyside	320	135	139	0	3	101	2	3	139
Metropolitan Police	3,783	1,308	320	0	43	352	1	27	189
Norfolk	192	45	10	0	0	6	0	0	7
North Wales	95	22	9	0	2	7	0	0	3
North Yorkshire	131	48	11	0	1	6	0	4	9
Northamptonshire	134	68	19	0	0	11	0	2	14
Northumbria	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a
Nottinghamshire	298	135	28	0	1	22	0	4	12
South Wales	597	79	4	0	0	2	0	0	0
South Yorkshire	292	98	33	0	1	33	0	2	21
Staffordshire	557	156	39	0	0	33	0	0	6
Suffolk	136	21	4	0	0	3	0	0	3
Surrey	270	125	26	0	3	18	0	1	8
Sussex	401	140	35	0	1	19	0	8	33
Thames Valley	888	398	19	0	3	5	1	2	8
Warwickshire	137	46	15	0	0	7	0	0	8
West Mercia	175	55	12	0	5	10	0	0	5
West Midlands	1,503	295	53	0	0	54	1	1	35
West Yorkshire	728	15	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a
Wiltshire	53	10	3	0	0	1	0	0	2
Provincial total	13,125	3,664	850	0	57	627	14	80	555
England and Wales Total	[2]16,908	[3]4,972	[4]1,170	[5]0	[5]100	[5]979	[5]15	[5]107	[5]744

1997

	Total police vehicle accidents	*No immediate response/ pursuit*	*Immediate/ pursuit*	*Fatal RTAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Police serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Police other injuries immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian fatal PVAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian other injuries immediate/ pursuits*
Avon and Somerset	477	184	21	0	4	8	0	0	9
Bedfordshire	320	83	14	0	0	5	0	2	7
Cambridgeshire	303	123	26	0	8	20	0	5	10
Cheshire	111	83	21	0	1	19	0	0	6
City of London	62	13	4	0	3	0	0	0	3
Cleveland	86	39	9	0	1	5	0	0	15
Cumbria	133	20	5	0	0	4	0	0	1
Derbyshire	383	84	22	0	0	19	1	0	14
Devon and Cornwall	308	93	18	0	0	14	0	1	11
Dorset	139	44	12	0	0	5	0	3	4
Durham	142	33	14	0	1	15	0	1	8
Dyfed-Powys	42	9	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Essex	396	109	27	0	0	18	0	5	21
Gloucestershire	147	61	7	0	0	3	0	0	4
Greater Manchester	774	195	56	0	3	46	8	4	18
Gwent	182	57	3	0	0	5	0	0	0
Hampshire	594	78	13	0	0	3	0	2	8
Hertfordshire	196	55	11	0	0	5	0	1	7
Humberside	207	66	18	0	2	18	0	0	5
Kent	546	138	22	0	3	25	0	1	6
Lancashire	268	53	41	0	2	32	0	2	31
Leicestershire	173	30	26	0	0	8	0	3	33
Lincolnshire	94	26	7	0	0	5	0	0	2
Merseyside	414	119	59	0	4	89	1	3	28
Metropolitan Police	4,045	1,422	396	0	47	419	1	28	246
Norfolk	211	36	15	0	1	4	0	2	16
North Wales	48	9	4	0	0	2	0	0	2
North Yorkshire	140	51	19	0	4	9	0	2	14
Northamptonshire	139	43	6	0	0	2	0	0	5
Northumbria	489	180	47	0	1	37	1	1	22
Nottinghamshire	278	141	38	0	2	50	0	1	18
South Wales	563	104	21	0	2	11	0	1	7
South Yorkshire	357	139	19	0	1	13	0	2	12
Staffordshire	644	142	33	0	0	24	0	0	9
Suffolk	122	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Surrey	108	55	16	0	0	12	0	1	4
Sussex	282	138	34	0	2	14	3	11	22
Thames Valley	688	394	61	0	1	43	0	3	56
Warwickshire	135	41	19	0	2	13	0	0	4
West Mercia	270	49	11	0	0	10	0	0	7
West Midlands	1,367	291	99	0	6	60	0	6	27
West Yorkshire	500	[1]n/a	66	0	4	53	0	2	42
Wiltshire	63	23	7	0	0	6	0	1	6
Provincial total	12,901	3,635	972	0	59	734	14	66	524
England and Wales Total	[2]16,946	[3]5,057	[4]1,368	[5]0	[3]106	[3]1,153	[3]15	[3]94	[3]770

1998

	Total police vehicle accidents	*No immediate response/ pursuit*	*Immediate/ pursuit*	*Fatal RTAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Police serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Police other injuries immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian fatal PVAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian other injuries immediate/ pursuits*
Avon and Somerset	531	149	29	0	1	35	0	2	34
Bedfordshire	161	77	15	0	0	6	1	2	6
Cambridgeshire	238	98	22	0	0	9	0	5	13
Cheshire	142	69	16	0	4	14	0	0	4
City of London	64	25	7	0	0	6	0	1	3
Cleveland	44	30	8	0	0	12	0	0	4
Cumbria	87	21	11	0	3	10	0	3	8
Derbyshire	399	69	20	0	2	10	0	1	14
Devon and Cornwall	337	57	10	0	0	7	0	1	7
Dorset	129	53	13	0	1	5	0	0	7
Durham	184	86	27	0	0	11	1	0	22
Dyfed-Powys	40	9	2	0	0	1	0	0	1
Essex	406	104	27	0	0	15	1	2	23
Gloucestershire	163	87	14	0	0	9	0	0	12
Greater Manchester	933	210	61	0	1	66	2	1	26
Gwent	217	50	14	0	1	20	0	0	5
Hampshire	560	96	21	0	0	6	0	1	14

1998

	Total police vehicle accidents	*No immediate response/ pursuit*	*Immediate/ pursuit*	*Fatal RTAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Police serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Police other injuries immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian fatal PVAs immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian serious injury immediate/ pursuits*	*Civilian other injuries immediate/ pursuits*
Hertfordshire	197	70	20	0	3	11	0	7	11
Humberside	236	70	11	1	0	10	0	0	6
Kent	448	81	19	0	0	17	0	4	4
Lancashire	160	29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Leicestershire	186	20	8	0	0	16	2	0	2
Lincolnshire	185	37	10	0	0	7	0	0	3
Merseyside	262	113	50	0	0	67	0	2	16
Metropolitan Police	4,645	1,683	426	0	45	280	1	25	310
Norfolk	184	30	6	0	0	3	0	1	5
North Wales	46	10	6	0	1	10	0	0	2
North Yorkshire	140	59	12	0	1	6	0	6	8
Northamptonshire	91	26	8	0	1	9	0	3	2
Northumbria	472	141	50	0	1	29	0	7	17
Nottinghamshire	225	107	19	0	2	23	0	0	2
South Wales	651	168	19	0	3	16	0	0	3
South Yorkshire	400	185	54	0	2	30	1	3	18
Staffordshire	646	167	31	0	0	19	0	3	9
Suffolk	168	16	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Surrey	108	43	11	0	0	8	0	1	8
Sussex	223	42	17	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a	[1]n/a
Thames Valley	918	350	71	0	1	63	0	0	62
Warwickshire	123	51	12	0	0	6	0	0	6
West Mercia	260	33	5	0	0	6	0	0	2
West Midlands	1,210	201	33	0	0	38	0	1	27
West Yorkshire	453	[1]n/a	29	0	29	0	1	22	0
Wiltshire	66	15	8	0	0	5	0	2	4
Provincial total	12,693	3,354	828	1	58	642	9	82	421
England and Wales Total	[2]17,338	[3]5,037	[4]1,254	[5]1	[5]103	[5]922	[5]10	[5]107	[5]731

[1] n/a appears where the force was unable to supply the data
[2] Covers all collisions involving police vehicles
[3] Collisions occurring where the police vehicle is on an immediate response or in pursuit of a vehicle
[4] Collisions where injury occurred
[5] Classification only for collisions where the police vehicle is on an immediate response or in pursuit

Romanian Orphans Trust

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason the Charity Commission took no action following their investigation of the financial affairs of the Romanian Orphans Trust in 1998. [112929]

Mr. Boateng: After a comprehensive review of the Romanian Orphanage Trust's activities and administration, following allegations of financial impropriety in 1998, the Charity Commission concluded there was no evidence to substantiate the allegations. The Commission decided that, while the charity was having to operate in extremely difficult circumstances, charitable funds were protected and proper safeguards and management controls were in place.

The Charity Commission has been in contact with the charity about new allegations which have recently come to light and is evaluating them carefully. Commission Investigation officers will continue to seek to ensure that charitable funds are used appropriately and properly.

Essex Constabulary

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* constables there will be in (i) the Colchester Division and (ii) the Tendering Division of the Essex Constabulary on 31 March; and what were the equivalent figures for the same date in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; [113108]

(2) how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* constables there will be in the Essex Constabulary at the time when the new boundaries for the Metropolitan police come into force; and if he will provide the equivalent figures for the same enlarged area for 31 March in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [113111]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information has been provided by the Chief Constable of Essex. I understand that the force is only able to provide figures as at 1 March for each year for the number of officers in the Colchester and Tendering Divisions. These are set out in the tables.

Ministers have no direct control over police numbers. Under legislation passed by the previous Government in 1994, it is for individual chief constables to determine the number of police officers in their forces within the resources that are available. It is not, therefore, possible for us to estimate how many officers Essex would have had if the boundary changes had been implemented in earlier years. I understand from the Chief Constable that for 2000–01 it is estimated that the Essex Police will have 2,995 police officers (115 more than on 1 March 2000) following the boundary changes on 1 April; 2,307 out of this total will be constables (90 more than on 1 March 2000).

I understand from the Chief Constable that the reduction in police numbers in Colchester and Tendering Divisions is a result of centralisation of the force information room and

the civilianisation of non-operational police posts. This has contributed to an increase in the number of operational officers that are available.

Colchester Division

Year (as at 1 March)	*Total police numbers*	*Constable numbers*
1997	185	146
1998	187	147
1999	179	141
2000	167	128

Tendering Division

Year (as at 1 March)	*Total police numbers*	*Constable numbers*
1997	199	152
1998	195	151
1999	202	156
2000	175	136

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what areas are to be transferred from the Metropolitan Police to the Essex Police. [113106]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 1 April 2000, the responsibility for policing the part of Epping Forest District currently policed by the Metropolitan Police Service will transfer to the Essex Police. This area is defined in legislation as the parish of Waltham Abbey and the area of the former urban district of Chigwell. It includes Waltham Abbey, Chigwell, Loughton and Buckhurst Hill.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been applied for in each police force area in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales; and if he will make a statement. [113134]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 824W.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has held with local authorities about increasing the use of anti-social behaviour orders. [113125]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 15 October 1999, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to the Chief Executive of each local authority about the provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, including the anti-social behaviour order, to tackle problems caused by unruly behaviour. An action group was subsequently established, involving representatives of local authorities and others, to consider issues relating to the use of anti-social behaviour orders. That group is now arranging a series of 10 regional seminars. The seminars will be held over the next few weeks and will provide an opportunity to share good practice, based on the rising number of successful applications for anti-social behaviour orders, and to consult on the terms of a model agreement, or protocol, which local partnerships can use as a basis for effective co-operation in tackling anti-social behaviour.

Departmental Recruitment

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the total cost to public funds of his Department's current recruitment advertising campaign for *(a)* press officers and *(b)* internal communications advisers; and if he will make a statement. [113208]

Mr. Straw: The total cost of current press officer recruitment advertising is approximately £31,700, including VAT. The Government Information and Communication Service has funded this advertising centrally, as the appointed press officers will be members of the Service and the recruitment process is likely to provide candidates for other Government press offices. There has been no cost to the Home Office. The total cost of advertising for internal communication advisers is £26,555 plus VAT. In addition, Capita RAS has charged the Home Office £15,300 plus VAT for its recruitment services, which include sifting and preparing interview panel facilities for the internal communication posts.

Voting Methods (Pilot Projects)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, further to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and the Weald of 29 February on pilot projects of alternative voting methods, *(a)* for what reasons (i) the Local government Association and (ii) journalists were informed of his provisional decisions, and why he imposed no restriction on publication before Parliament had been informed, *(b)* why he chose not to inform Parliament of his provisional decisions, *(c)* if he expects his final decisions on the projects to differ from his provisional decisions, and *(d)* if he will list the journalists whom he informed of his provisional decisions on 15 February; and if he will make a statement. [113279]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information was made available to journalists and the Local Government Association because they requested it.

No statement was made to Parliament as my decisions were only provisional. Final decisions will not be made until after the Representation of the People Bill has received Royal Assent, at which point Parliament will be informed of them.

One journalist from "The Independent" newspaper was given the information on 15 February. Others were given it, on request, later in that week.

Press Office

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to increase the size of his Department's Press Office; what will be the cost of those plans; and if he will make a statement. [113207]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to the replies I gave her on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 384–85W.

Refugee Dispersal

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the outcome to date of the policy of dispersal of refugees. [99707]

Mrs. Roche *[pursuant to her reply, 6 December 1999, c. 379–80W]:* I propose to bring in the new support arrangements on Monday 3 April 2000 for asylum seekers who make their applications at a port of entry from that date. The entitlement of new port applicants to cash, social security and housing benefits will thereupon cease; in-country applicants do not have this entitlement.

Those who apply for asylum from that date and who are then detained at Oakington reception centre whether their application is port or in-country will go onto the new support arrangements.

I shall also make arrangements for asylum seekers who claim asylum and support from 3 April in Scotland or Northern Ireland and who are eligible for support to come on to the new support arrangements.

It is my intention to bring the new support arrangements on stream as soon as possible for other asylum seekers who make in-country applications for asylum in England and Wales and for those in England and Wales who claim asylum at their port of entry prior to 3 April 2000 who receive a negative decision and who then go on to appeal. Until then, responsibility for providing support will continue under the terms of Schedule 9 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

The new support arrangements comprehensively change the system by which asylum seekers are supported. A phased implementation of the kind described in this answer is the sensible course, drawing on the lessons from previous experience in implementing major change. The arrangements have been tested in simulated trials. Bringing port applicants on to the scheme first will enable the National Asylum Support Service to deal with any teething difficulties before rolling out the scheme fully.

The new support arrangements provide that asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute may be supported by the National Asylum Support Service. Support will consist of the provision of accommodation on a no-choice basis in cluster areas in the United Kingdom. Essential living needs will be met either in kind or by the provision of vouchers. There will also be a cash voucher valued at £10 per person per week which can be exchanged for cash.

The scheme is intended fully to meet the United Kingdom's international obligations in relation to those who are genuinely fleeing persecution while, at the same time, deterring those who are seeking to evade immigration control by using the asylum process.

During the passage of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, we gave an undertaking that new asylum applications from families with children would not be brought on to the new support arrangements in April 2000 unless we are satisfied that the targets of delivering most initial asylum decisions within two months and most appeals in a further four months could be met in such cases.

We have put in place arrangements to identify and deal promptly with new asylum applications from families with children: the arrangements are being closely monitored. As a result, provisional figures show that, of the new family applications made in eight weeks after 1 November, over 70 per cent. have received an initial decision within two months of receipt. At the end of January, the average waiting time for all asylum appeals to be dealt with by an adjudicator was 13 weeks. On this basis, I have decided that from 3 April, the new asylum support arrangements should apply to new applications from families with children as they apply to other applicants.

I have also decided that some modification of the targets is necessary for applications which might be the responsibility of another European Union member state under the Dublin Convention. In these cases, the process of consulting other member states normally takes more than two months, but there is then no suspensive right of appeal if another country accepts responsibility for consideration of the substantive claim. For that reason, the target for reaching an initial decision in potential Dublin cases will be to resolve most cases within four months of receipt. The normal further four month target for dealing with an appeal will apply in the event that the case is not transferred and there is a substantive refusal.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 7 March 2000

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police Federation Meetings

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions, and on what dates in the past three years, each regional board of the Police Federation has held special meetings. [108489]

Mr. Ingram: The following table shows the number of special meetings held by each region of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland in the last three years.

Region	*Dates*
No. 1	15 October 1999
No. 2	None
No. 3	9 February 1999; 13 May 1999; 24 May 1999; 4 November 1999; 7 March 2000
No. 4	None
No. 5	9 September 1999 ; 22 September 1999; 17 November 1999; 20 January 2000
No. 6	None
No. 7	28 January 1999; 2 March 1999

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112668]

Mr. Ingram: The annual Cabinet Office publication, "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies including those in Northern Ireland. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions lists public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

New Departments (Titles)

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the process by which the titles of the new departments and the Information Service of the Northern Ireland Executive were decided. [112788]

Mr. Mandelson: The titles of the Northern Ireland Departments are set in statute in the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. The Order was made following a statement issued by the First Minister (Designate) and Deputy First Minister (Designate) on 18 December 1998 on structures (including Departmental titles) and functions across the then proposed new Departments. The statement was considered and ratified by the shadow Northern Ireland Assembly in January 1999 and the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 specifies the Departmental titles agreed at that time.

In relation to the Information Service this was an interim short title designed to distinguish the Information Service of the Executive from that of the Northern Ireland Office. The title would have been subject to consideration by the Executive Committee in the context of proposals for corporate identity and for a communications strategy which were in preparation at the time of suspension.

Rosemary Nelson

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the current position on the investigation into the murder of Rosemary Nelson. [113637]

Mr. Ingram: A dedicated team, selected and led by Deputy Chief Constable Colin Port, continues to work tirelessly to track down and bring before the courts those responsible for this cowardly murder. This team, which consists of representatives from 25 policing agencies, including the Royal Ulster Constabulary, has in excess of 60 personnel, 60 per cent. of whom are from outside the RUC. To date they have interviewed more than 5,000 individuals, taken 1,500 statements and established 5,000 lines of investigation in their efforts to catch the killers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has kept in touch with DCC Port, today took the opportunity to meet his team at one of their bases in Lurgan and to hear at first hand about the progress to date in this investigation. The Government are convinced that Mr. Port continues to lead a credible and effective investigation and welcome all the support and co-operation that can be given to the team in its work to solve this appalling crime.

Northern Ireland Act 2000

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the terms and scope of the review to be carried out under Section 2 of the Northern Ireland Act 2000. [113454]

Mr. Mandelson: Following my decision on 11 February to suspend the operation of the institutions, both Governments will be consulting the political parties in Northern Ireland this week. These consultations are expected to continue during and after St. Patrick's Day following which the two Prime Ministers will review progress. They will focus on how best confidence can be rebuilt to enable the institutions to be restored so that the full implementation of the Agreement can be achieved.

TREASURY

Social Enterprise Sector

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he has initiated since the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit Policy Action Team 3 report on Enterprise and Social Exclusion (A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal) to improve access to finance for social enterprises; and if he will make a statement. [113452]

Mr. Timms: Since the publication of the PAT3 report, the Government have announced the creation of the Phoenix Fund, a £30 million programme to promote better access to business support and finance in deprived communities. This will include an enterprise development fund, help for community finance initiatives, and a network of 1000 volunteer business mentors. The Government have also announced that HM Treasury will have an observer role on the Social Investment Taskforce, established by the UK Social Investment Forum. This Task Force will look at the next steps in devising a strategic framework for social investment, including investment in social enterprises.

Fuel Excise

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate his Department has made of the loss of taxation revenue from excise duty and VAT from hauliers purchasing fuel on mainland Europe; [112910]

(2) what recent studies his Department has made of the number of hauliers purchasing fuel from mainland Europe and the Republic of Ireland; and what were the conclusions of the studies. [112911]

Mr. Timms: HM Customs and Excise has responsibility for excise revenue. There are no current studies or estimates for the numbers of hauliers purchasing fuel from mainland Europe and the Republic of Ireland.

Pensions

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the legislative basis is for the Inland Revenue taxing pensions on the amount entitled to rather than the amount received in one year. [112920]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The legislation governing the basis of assessment of pensions under Schedule E is in Section 41 of the Finance Act 1989.

Tobacco Duty

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of additional revenue which will be made available to the National Health Service in 2000–01 as a result of hypothecation of increased levels of tobacco duty. [112786]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Projections of tobacco revenue will be published at the time of the Budget.

Social Investment Taskforce

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the *(a)* aims, *(b)* objectives and *(c)* work programme of the Social Investment Taskforce; and if he will make a statement. [113055]

Mr. Timms: The Social Investment Taskforce is an initiative led by the UK Social Investment Forum. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked the Social Investment Taskforce to report to him in the autumn with proposals for a new strategic framework for the development of social investment in the UK. The Taskforce will:

examine the case for social investment in regeneration and community economic development;

identify barriers to the further development of social investment; and

propose models for the future development of social investment.

EU Tax Policy

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those third countries and dependent or associated territories which the EC Commission intends to consult, pursuant to ECOFIN's report to the European Council on Reinforced Tax Policy Cooperation. [113071]

Dawn Primarolo: As the report makes clear, it is for member states to pursue discussions with their dependent or associated territories in co-operation with the Commission. The Presidency and the Commission would deliberate with third countries. The geographic coverage of these further discussions and deliberations is for future consideration.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Legislation (Human Rights)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General what training is being provided for Government lawyers to ensure that legislation is prepared to comply with human rights. [113453]

The Solicitor-General: The main responsibility for training rests with individual Departments which are best placed to identify the legal skills and knowledge required by their lawyers and the most economic and effective way of meeting those needs.

Training on the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA) has been provided, and is continuing to be provided, to all Government lawyers. This has taken the form of Civil Service/GLS wide Conferences (open to both lawyers and administrators) at which outside speakers including Judges and Counsel have spoken; two intensive one-day courses provided last year by the Civil Service College, in conjunction with the GLS, and to be run again this year; and internal training programmes run by individual Departments (but often open to lawyers from other Departments) where speakers have included both specialist Counsel and Government lawyers with ECHR/HRA expertise. In addition, many Government lawyers have attended the external training courses/seminars run, for example, by leading human rights sets of barristers' Chambers. The introductory course for all lawyers new to the GLS also includes a session on human rights.

Such training has meant that Government lawyers are fully equipped, not only to ensure that all new legislation complies with the European Convention on Human Rights, but also to advise their Departments on all human rights issues when they arise in the decision making process or in the context of litigation.

PRIME MINISTER

Correspondence

Mr. Brady: To ask the Prime Minister when he will reply to the letter dated 12 January which was sent to him by the Chairman of the Royal Society of St. George. [112482]

The Prime Minister: My Office has no record of having received this letter.

National Health Service

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Prime Minister if the five point plan for the National Health Service announced on 29 February will apply to Wales. [112912]

The Prime Minister: The responsibility for health issues in Wales has been devolved to the National Assembly for Wales and it is for it to decide whether or not to adopt the five point plan.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister when he was informed of the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd, and by whom; and if he will make a statement. [112719]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* My Office was informed that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary had decided that it would not be justifiable to use substantial public funds to support the Global Cultural Diversity Congress on 21 February 2000.

World Education Forum

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to attend the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal; and if he will make a statement. [113087]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom delegation to the conference has yet to be decided.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will discuss with *(a)* President Clinton and *(b)* the Federal German Chancellor the resignation of (i) Hans von Sponeck and (ii) Jutta Burghardt from their UN assignments in Baghdad. [113359]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* No.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Visitor's Bond Scheme

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those countries outside the UK which operate a visitor's bond scheme. [113138]

Mrs. Roche: We do not have comprehensive information, but we understand that broadly comparable schemes exist in Canada, Germany and the United States of America.

Police

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason injury awards made to police officers in lieu of earnings remain payable after retirement age. [112556]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An injury award is payable as a form of compensation where a police officer becomes permanently disabled for police duty as the result of an injury received in the execution of their duty.

The award compensates an officer for the reduction in their earning capacity. In the wider context, it is considered that earning capacity should be related to a person's main source of livelihood. Therefore, where a police officer has reached retirement age their injury pension will continue to be paid where their opportunity to obtain a larger pension has also been reduced by the injury.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the police personnel procedure regulations in respect of the provision to allow those suffering from long-term sickness to have their employment terminated. [112557]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no provision within Police Regulations for the termination of employment solely on the ground of long-term sickness.

The Police Pensions Regulations provide for compulsory retirement on the ground of permanent disablement.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the applicability to current conditions of the police pension regulations; what plans he has to update these; and if he will make a statement. [112562]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am currently considering what changes are required to the police pensions regulations, following the current major review of all aspects of police pension arrangements. I hope to publish specific proposals in spring this year.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people *(a)* in total and *(b)* from ethnic minorities (i) applied and (ii) were recruited to the police in each year since 1995. [113466]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The table sets out the information requested for 1995 to 1998. Figures for 1999 are not yet available.

The figure for the total of appointments on probation for 1996 differs from that mentioned in my reply to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 796W. This is because North Wales Police have since corrected their figure of "0" for 1996 to "49".

Total police officer applications and recruitment in England and Wales from 1995

	Ethnic minorities	*Total officers*
1995		
Police officer appointment on probation	217	5,585
Police officer applications	1,426	53,909
1996		
Police officer appointment on probation	161	5,712
Police officer applications	1,613	42,774

Total police officer applications and recruitment in England and Wales from 1995

	Ethnic minorities	Total officers
1997		
Police officer appointment on probation	169	5,859
Police officer applications	1,904	44,334
1998		
Police officer appointment on probation	408	4,961
Police officer applications	2,030	36,095

[1] 5,712 = figure updated from 5,663 as a result of a change notified by North Wales Police (delete "0" and insert "49")

Source:

Figures supplied by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

Pets

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to encourage local authorities to use the options of *(a)* restriction of species range and *(b)* restriction of numbers under the Pet Animals Act 1951; and if he will make a statement. [112561]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government keep under review legislation on animals, but have not announced any plans to change it. Existing legislation bears on the range of species and number of animals which can be sold in pet shops.

Pet shops are licensed by local authorities under the Pet Animals Act 1951 (as amended in 1983), and subject to licence conditions to safeguard the health and welfare of the animals in their charge. In considering whether to grant a licence to run a pet shop, a local authority will need to satisfy itself that the welfare of the animals will not be compromised. The species and numbers of animals will have a direct bearing on the overall welfare conditions.

In addition, certain endangered animals imported for the pet trade are also protected under European Wildlife Regulations, which implement the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Some exotic pets can be lawfully sold to people only subject to stringent licence controls imposed under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, and there are statutory restrictions on trade in United Kingdom wildlife species. It is also an offence under the Protection of Animals Act 1911 to cause unnecessary suffering to any domestic or captive animal.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, (1) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experiments, how many of the pigs used were transgenic; and if he will make a statement; [112633]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experiments, how many primates were killed by order of the Home Office Inspectorate under the provisions of section 18(3) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, on the ground that they were undergoing excessive suffering; what procedures they had been subjected to; and if he will make a statement; [112564]

(3) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experiments, in the case of primates used in organ transplant experiments, how many primates had an organ of their own removed and replaced with a pig organ; how many had a pig organ inserted into them but kept their own organ; and if he will make a statement; [112565]

(4) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experiments, how many of these primates were wild-caught; and if he will make a statement; [112629]

(5) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experimentation, if he will provide a breakdown of the cause of death of all the primates used in xenotransplantation research between 1996 and 1999; and if he will make a statement; [112630]

(6) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experiments, if he will describe the experiments in which these primates were used; and if he will make a statement; [112631]

(7) pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 257–58W, on animal experimentation, how many pigs were used in *(a)* breeding experiments aimed at producing pigs with certain desired genetic characteristics and *(b)* experiments involving the removal of pig organs for transplantation into primates; and if he will make a statement. [112632]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None of the primates were killed by order of the Home Office Inspectorate under the provisions of Section 18(3) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 on the ground that they were undergoing excessive suffering. All of the decisions to treat or euthanase the animals were made by the relevant named veterinary surgeon.

My previous answer explained that the majority of the primates were euthanased once they began to show clinical or biochemical evidence of terminal organ failure or when their clinical condition began to give cause for concern. The aim of this procedure is to prevent unnecessary suffering to the animals.

Twenty-nine wild-caught primates were used in xenotransplanation research in 1996; 16 in 1997; three in 1998 and none in 1999.

I am unable to provide answers to the hon. Gentleman's remaining questions as to do so would involve the release of commercially sensitive information on experimental design and production strategy, which is precluded by section 24 of the 1986 Act.

As I stated in my previous answer, we understand that the company concerned has already briefed the hon. Gentleman on its xenotransplanation programme and it has indicated that it would be happy to update the hon. Gentleman and other parliamentary colleagues on the most recent position.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department with reference to table 11 of the Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals in GB for 1998, relating to procedures carried out on dogs to satisfy legislative requirements, if he will identify the legislative requirements, indicating the number of licences awarded

in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999 to allow procedures to be carried out and the number of procedures carried out under each licence; and if he will make a statement. [112563]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government recognise the particular concern about the use of dogs in scientific procedures. Under the terms of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, animals may be used only where there are no alternatives and where the benefits of the programme outweigh any suffering caused to the animals concerned. In addition, certain species (including dogs) can be used only where animals of no other species are suitable. Special conditions, tailored to each project, control and minimise any pain or suffering caused.

Examples of specific legislative requirements relevant to Table 11 (Scientific procedures (toxicology) by species of animal, type of legislation and toxicological purpose) are provided in the Introductory Notes to the Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals (Great Britain 1998). They are:

The Medicines Act 1968;

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974;

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations;

Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986;

European Union Pesticides Directives; and

The Food Safety Act 1990.

Table 11 records 4,275 procedures carried out on dogs in 1998. These were conducted under 39 separate project licenses. Tables 13, 15 and 16 provide further information on the type of toxicological tests used. The number of procedures carried out under each licence was as follows:

Licence	*Procedures*
1	50
2	13
3	28
4	417
5	50
6	46
7	180
8	10
9	28
10	25
11	18
12	242
13	4
14	106
15	290
16	435
17	483
18	8
19	6
20	34
21	18
22	43
23	9
24	46
25	98
26	6
27	8
28	4
29	93
30	25
31	253
32	148
33	24
34	39
35	8
36	859
37	18
38	10
39	63

Figures for 1999 are being collated now and are not yet available. They will be published in July.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police officers have been involved in the protection of Senator Pinochet since October 1998; [113513]

(2) how much has been spent from public funds on protecting Senator Pinochet since October 1998 *(a)* in total and *(b)* broken down by the principal heads of expenditure. [113514]

Mr. Straw: The information requested cannot be provided for security reasons. The number of officers deployed to protect Senator Pinochet by the Surrey police and the Metropolitan police are operational issues for the appropriate chief officer of police.

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the costs to public funds of Government participation in legal activity relating to General Pinochet *(a)* to date and *(b)* in total; and if he will break this information down by the principal heads of expenditure. [113529]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, Lord Bassam, on 2 March 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords,* column WA87.

Local Government Elections (Freepost Mailings)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the Government's policy regarding freepost mailings at local government elections; and if he will make a statement. [112457]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* Under current legislation, there is no provision for freepost mailing at local government elections because of the considerable financial burden which would have to be borne by local authorities, and the lack of evidence that such schemes would contribute to improved democracy at local level.

We are now seeking two changes to this position. First, in view of the exceptional size of the electorate, we intend to provide special arrangements for the first election of the Mayor of London to allow the compilation of a single booklet of election addresses for mayoral candidates to a standard format. This will be distributed to all London electors at taxpayers' expense. For future elections, we propose that there should be an Order making power to allow the Greater London Authority to organise and pay

for mailings (or other ways of informing the public about candidates). Any such scheme would be developed in consultation with the proposed Electoral Commission.

Secondly, we are providing the opportunity for local authorities to pilot, at their own expense, a freepost mailing scheme.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were living in the Greater London area on 1 February. [113085]

Mrs. Roche: This information is not held centrally.

Harmondsworth Detention Centre

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* injuries have occurred in Harmondsworth Detention Centre in the last 12 months. [113007]

Mrs. Roche: Between the period 1 March 1999 and 29 February 2000, there was one death at the Harmondsworth Detention Centre. This occurred on 24 January when a 49-year-old Lithuanian national was found hanged. A date for the Coroner's inquest is awaited.

During this same period, there were a total of 10 incidents involving injuries to detainees. These included six incidents where detainees sustained injury by self harm, and one incident involving detainees fighting which led to a detainee being injured. On three occasions, an accident in the Centre resulted in injury to a detainee.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what review of health and safety procedures in Harmondsworth Detention Centre has been undertaken following the recent death of an asylum seeker in the centre. [113006]

Mrs. Roche: Following this tragic incident, immediate steps were taken to further reduce the number of possible ligatures points within the Harmondsworth Detention Centre. An investigation into the death of the detainee has been completed and a copy of the report has been sent to the Coroner. The Immigration Service is examining in detail all those recommendations that refer to health and safety procedures.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the provision of an on-call Samaritan service to detainees in Harmondsworth Detention Centre. [113004]

Mrs. Roche: Within the Harmondsworth Detention Centre there are notices, translated into a number of languages, detailing the services of the Samaritans. Information on contacting them is also provided in a brochure given to each detainee upon arrival at the Centre. Any detainee unable to make a telephone call to them is advised to speak to a member of staff who will allow the use of an official telephone for such calls.

A representative of the Samaritans visits the Centre once a month.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines are provided to staff at Harmondsworth Detention Centre about monitoring detainees with suicidal tendencies. [113003]

Mrs. Roche: All detainees who are considered to be at risk of committing suicide are interviewed by staff on their arrival at the Centre to identify their immediate needs. A Suicide Prevention Committee, chaired by the Centre Manager, monitors potential suicide risks and considers what steps can be taken to minimise the risk of such an event.

Within the Centre, those detainees who are considered to be at high risk of suicide are placed on a constant watch and may be confined to a small area where their behaviour can be closely monitored. Where the risk of suicide is lower the detainee is monitored every 15 minutes. It is recognised that the Harmondsworth Detention Centre is not a suitable location for those detainees displaying serious suicidal tendencies and arrangements are made to transfer such detainees to more suitable locations.

Suicide awareness training has been provided by a member of the Samaritans who is also the Chairman of the Harmondsworth Visiting Committee.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department has taken in response to the annual report of the Harmondsworth Detention Centre's Visiting Committee in relation to the care of asylum seekers with depression and suicidal tendencies. [113005]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration Service commissioned an assessment to enable a better understanding of the health needs of immigration detainees to be achieved. This was completed by Dr. Geraint Thomas, the medical practitioner at Tinsley House, and incorporated a general overview of the medical requirements, mental health and morbidity of male and female detainees and families. This was completed in April 1999 and distributed to medical health staff at Harmondsworth. The provision of nursing services at Harmondsworth Detention Centre was also extended to 12 hours each day.

Ticket Touting

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to implement the provisions contained in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to make ticket touting an offence at all major sporting events. [112958]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This matter is kept under close review and representatives of other sports are periodically consulted. Section 166 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 currently makes it an offence for an unauthorised person to sell, or offer or expose for sale, a ticket for a designated football match. The law applies to football because the risk of disorder associated with that sport is increased if ground segregation is undermined by the sale of unauthorised tickets. There is no evidence to suggest that other sports are currently experiencing significant crowd safety and security problems as a result of ticket touting.

Paedophiles

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if all police divisions in the UK have in place a computer system to exchange information with each division on paedophiles. [112915]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Police National Computer (PNC) is the premier national information system available to police officers in all United Kingdom forces, and will increasingly become available to other Criminal Justice agencies. Data on all sex offenders are held on the PNC which is accessible to police officers in all forces.

In addition, the Sex Offenders Act 1997 requires offenders cautioned or convicted of certain sexual offences, including certain sexual offences against children, to notify the local police of their name, address and any changes, as well as their date of birth within 14 days of caution/conviction or change of address.

Police Pension Scheme

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers in each police force in England have opted out of the Police Pension Scheme. [112962]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Police Pension Scheme is administered locally by individual police authorities. The information requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) of 27 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 249W, if he will list, for each category of offence, the specific offences for which those prisoners released to date under the Home Detention Curfew scheme were convicted; what was the *(a)* average and *(b)* maximum sentence (i) received and (ii) served for each offence; and if he will make a statement. [112739]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* A further breakdown of the original offences committed by prisoners released under the Home Detention Curfew scheme in 1999 is shown in the table. The data are taken from the Prison Service's inmate information system based on the data recorded by each prison. The maximum sentence for each type of offence, and maximum time served, could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by manually sifting the details of some 15,000 prisoners who were placed on Home Detention Curfew in 1999.

In operating the Home Detention Curfew scheme the Prison Service has an overriding duty to protect the public. No prisoner can be placed on Home Detention Curfew without first passing a risk assessment. Where there is a likelihood of offending while on curfew, or of breaching the curfew, or where the risk to the public is unacceptable, Home Detention Curfew is refused. The effectiveness of the risk assessment is demonstrated by the fact that overall the scheme has an impressive success rate of 95 per cent. of curfewees completing their period of curfew licence.

Months

Offence	*Average Sentence*	*Average Time served*
Manslaughter	33.7	15.0
Other homicide and attempted homicide	23.6	10.0
Wounding	15.5	6.2
Assaults	7.4	2.6
Cruelty to children	15.2	6.3
Other violence against the person	15.8	6.4
Sexual offences	8.9	3.2
Indecent assault	10.2	3.8
Unlawful sexual intercourse	6.0	1.2
Bigamy	7.4	2.5
Burglary	19.1	7.1
Robbery	25.6	11.0
Taking and driving away	9.9	3.7
Other theft	11.2	4.2
Handling stolen goods	13.5	5.2
Fraud	12.9	4.9
Forgery	11.1	4.1
Drugs	20.1	8.4
Arson	22.1	9.3
Criminal damage	13.0	5.1
In charge or driving under the influence of drink or drugs	4.4	1.4
Other motoring offences	5.4	1.7
Drunkenness	4.7	1.4
Blackmail	20.1	8.3
Kidnapping	19.6	8.2
Affray	9.6	3.4
Violent disorder	14.9	5.8
Perjury/libel/pervert the course of justice	10.1	3.7
Threat/disorderly behaviour	9.2	3.4
Breach of Court Order	9.3	2.9
Other offences	12.2	4.7
Offence not recorded	12.4	4.7

Interception of Communications

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the number of interceptions of communications on non-public telecommunications networks in 1998 and 1999 by *(a)* law enforcement agencies and *(b)* others. [111134]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The statutory framework regulating interception of communications sent by post or by means of public telecommunication systems in the United Kingdom is provided by the Interception of Communications Act 1985. This Act does not extend to non-public telecommunications networks. The Government are legislating, through the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, to extend the law to regulate this kind of interception.

Because current law does not require a warrant to be signed by the Secretary of State in order for interception to be carried out on non-public telecommunications networks, figures for such interceptions are not held centrally.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Parental Leave

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cost of extending the entitlement to unpaid parental leave to staff in his Department in respect of their children born before 15 December 1999. [113136]

Mr. Wills: It is not known how many civil servants in the Department for Education and Employment have children born before 15 December 1999, nor how many would take parental leave if they became entitled to it. Information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

A-level Computing Examination, 1999

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* requests for re-marks, *(b)* requests for re-marks with reports and *(c)* appeals against decisions were lodged with the AQA in respect of the 1999 GCE 'A' level computing examination. [112035]

Mr. Wicks: I understand from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority that the information requested is as follows:

	Number
Requests for re-marks	188
Requests for re-marks with reports	85
Appeals against decision	1

Bishop Gilpin Primary School

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will authorise the age of transfer proposals in relation to the two form entry year four at Bishop Gilpin Primary School due to go ahead in September 2000. [R] [111618]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State hopes to make a decision on the age of transfer proposals across Merton Local Education Authority by April.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to the Question from the hon. Member for Putney tabled on 17 February relating to Bishop Gilpin School. [113449]

Jacqui Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the above reply.

Examination Scripts

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make available to candidates the marked scripts of 'A' level and GCSE examinations. [112034]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 30 November 1999 that measures would ensure access to all GCE 'A' level and some GCSE marked examination scripts in 2000 and all GCSE scripts from 2001.

School Exclusions (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many permanent school exclusions there were in each year since 1990 *(a)* in total and *(b)* of pupils of ethnic minority origin. [113497]

Jacqui Smith: The number of permanent exclusions from maintained schools (except Special Schools) submitting returns under the voluntary National Exclusions Reporting System which covered the period from April 1990 to April 1992 was 2,910 in year one and 3,833 in year two.

The first set of complete data systematically collected by the Department on permanent exclusions by ethnic minority from maintained schools in England related to the school year 1995–96. The latest available data relate to the school year 1997–98. These figures, which are not directly comparable with those derived from the National Exclusions Reporting System, are shown in the table.

Information on permanent exclusions for the academic year 1998–99 is currently being collected and national estimates are expected to be published in a Statistical First Release in May.

Numbers of permanent exclusions, including pupils of ethnic minority origin in schools [1] in England 1995–96—1997–98

	Number of permanent exclusions [2]	*Number of ethnic minority permanent exclusions*
1997–98	12,298	1,995
1996–97	12,668	2,113
1995–96	12,476	2,196

[1] Includes Maintained Primary, Secondary, Special and Non-maintained Special Schools.

[2] Includes some pupils who were unclassified according to ethnic group.

Source:

January schools' census

Renewable Energy

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of his Department's electricity is generated from renewable sources; and what target his Department has for meeting its electricity needs from renewable sources by 2010. [113052]

Mr. Wills: My Department has secured 10 per cent. of its supply of electricity from renewable sources, from October last year. This meets the aim set for achievement by the year 2010. We will continue to monitor developments in renewable energy provision to improve on this wherever possible.

"Computers for Teachers"

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will extend the Computers for Teachers Programme to teachers in sixth form colleges. [112822]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* Schools have a legal obligation to teach IT, both as a curriculum subject in its own right, and across all other subjects. The burden of this teaching role falls largely upon the classroom teacher. In order to provide teachers with the skills to discharge this responsibility, the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) ICT Training programme was developed specifically for teachers in schools, and it aims to give serving teachers the opportunity to raise their pedagogical capability to that now required of newly qualified teachers.

The purpose of the Computers for Teachers initiative is to complement that training by raising teacher competence and confidence in their personal use of ICT. For this reason, the scheme has given priority to school teachers and there are no current plans to extend it to teachers in sixth form colleges.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he was informed of the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd., and by whom; and if he will make a statement. [112797]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The decision to notify interested parties of the cancellation of the Congress and the collapse of Global Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. were matters for the company. They informed my Department on 23 February 2000 that the Congress had been cancelled.

Free School Meals

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the *(a)* cost in the current financial year of providing free school meals and *(b)* additional annual cost of extending the scheme to include (i) children in full-time education whose families are in receipt of working families tax credit and (ii) all children in full-time education. [112946]

Jacqui Smith: The Department does not collect information on the cost of providing free school meals. We estimate that *(a)* the cost of providing free school meals in England in the current financial year is over £300 million; and that *(b)* the additional annual cost of (i) extending free school meals to children in full-time education whose families are in receipt of working families tax credit would be over £400 million; and (ii) extending free school meals to all children would be almost £2 billion.

We have no current plans to extend eligibility for free school meals, which would require primary legislation, but we are working closely with the Child Poverty Action Group on ways of increasing take-up by entitled pupils.

Physical Education

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils at *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools are currently meeting the Government's target that they participate in more than two hours a week of physical education. [112957]

Jacqui Smith: Ofsted collects information about the percentage of taught time for each subject when inspecting schools. The number of school hours spent on physical education varies from school to school. Evidence from Ofsted inspections during 1998 of the average number of hours per week primary and secondary schools currently spend teaching National Curriculum PE is as follows.

	Average hours of PE per week (approx.)
Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7)	1 hour 20 minutes
Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11)	1 hour 35 minutes
Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14)	2 hours
Key Stage 4 (ages (14–16)	1 hour 15 minutes

Our aspiration is that pupils receive two hours of physical activity a week, including the National Curriculum and extra curricular activities.

My officials are meeting regularly with DCMS and representatives of PE and sports organisations to discuss ways of promoting this.

Computers on Loan

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made towards the provision of computers on loan as outlined in his speech of 28 October 1999 to the United Kingdom Internet Summit. [112642]

Mr. Wills: The Government are making £15 million available for a pilot scheme—'Computers Within Reach'—to enable those who cannot afford new computers to acquire reconditioned computers for use in the home on a loaned or owned basis for the purpose of improving their employment prospects, for lifelong learning, or for their children's homework. The pilot scheme will run from May, and evaluation findings of the initiative will be made available in due course.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112662]

Mr. Wills: The annual Cabinet Office publication 'Public Bodies' provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

EU Discussions (Schools)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his Department's policy respecting the maintenance of political neutrality in discussing the future of the EU in schools. [112341]

Jacqui Smith: Pupils in England are taught about Europe and the European Union at secondary school. From the start of the school year 2000 they will be taught about the history of Britain in its European and wider context within National Curriculum History and from 2002 they will be taught about the world as a global community, the role of the European Union and the UK's relations in Europe, including the European Union in National Curriculum Citizenship.

There are safeguards in law to ensure that where political issues are discussed in school it is in an unbiased and balanced way. Local Education Authorities, governing bodies and head teachers are required under section 407 of the Education Act 1996 to take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

Racism

Lorna Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what proportion of *(a)* primary schools, *(b)* secondary schools and *(c)* colleges of further education have procedures in place to record racist incidents; [111291]

(2) what was the total number of racist incidents recorded during the period 15 April 1999 to 31 December 1999 in England in *(a)* primary schools, *(b)* secondary schools and *(c)* colleges of further education. [111292]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Our "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" guidance in July 1999 states that all schools' behaviour policies must make clear that racial harassment will not be tolerated, and say how staff and pupils should deal with it. Schools should record all racial incidents and parents and Governors should be informed of such incidents and the action taken to deal with them. Governing bodies should inform LEAs annually of the pattern and frequency of any incidents. Colleges of Further Education have policies in place to deal with complaints, and procedures to investigate incidents. Information on the total number of racist incidents recorded in schools and colleges in England during the period 15 April 1999 to 31 December 1999 is not held centrally.

New Deal

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many calls have been made to the New Deal Hotline in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK; how many were from (i) clients and (ii) employers; and how many were (1) positive comments and (2) complaints. [111137]

Ms Jowell: In the period October 1998 (when records started) to January 2000; a total of 1,652 calls were made to the New Deal Hotline of which 376 came from Scotland. We do not disaggregate the source of calls by category of caller and only the complaints are identified separately from all other calls. In the UK, 344 of the calls made were classed as complaints of which 62 came from Scotland. The Employment Service follows up every complaint to a conclusion.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of New Deal participants who have undertaken an option have moved into the employment option; to what extent Government targets in exercise of the employment option have been achieved; and if he will make a statement. [109283]

Ms Jowell: Since the start of New Deal 7.9 per cent. of young people leaving Gateway have moved onto the employment option. Although this is less than the original planning assumption, a further 35.5 per cent. have gone directly into unsubsidised jobs. Together these figures demonstrate how New Deal significantly improves the changes of many young people finding work.

Child Care

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of people had access to Government-funded child care *(a)* in rural areas and *(b)* in urban areas, (i) in the most recent year for which figures are available and (ii) five years ago. [111976]

Ms Hodge: We are unable to provide the information in the format requested, but can provide data on the overall number of new child care places created through government funding. In 1998–99 some 66,000 new child care places were funded through the Out of School Childcare Initiative, the Further Education Funding Council and DfEE grants to Early Years Development Partnerships. This compares with 22,286 new child care places created by the Out of School Childcare Initiative in 1994–95.

Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) are responsible for ensuring full coverage of both urban and rural areas within their areas of remit. EYDCPs have been set up in every local authority area of England. DfEE's planning guidance to Partnerships requires them to pay particular attention to the development and maintenance of provision in rural areas.

Equal Treatment Directive

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his policy on the proposed Commission directive on equal treatment, as set out in COM (1999) 566, with particular reference to *(a)* gender mainstreaming, *(b)* minimum entitlement to redress, *(c)* burden of proof, *(d)* indirect discrimination, *(e)* definition of harassment and *(f)* positive discrimination. [112350]

Ms Hodge: The Government welcome the European Commission's proposal for a directive covering discrimination on the grounds of race (COM (1999) 566) as an important contribution to combating racial discrimination throughout member states and accession countries. The proposal raises a number of issues including those mentioned by the hon. Member in his question and we will be considering the full implications of these during the course of negotiations. Negotiations are still at an early stage within the Working Group of the Social Affairs Council and adoption will require unanimous agreement by the member states.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fisheries Protection Work

Mr. Burden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the review of MAFF grant in aid on fisheries work undertaken by the Environment Agency and other fisheries protection work. [113343]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 27 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 922W.

Flood Defence

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if a definition of the developed environment exists allowing flood defence committees to ensure that the risk of flooding is minimised. [111584]

Mr. Morley: The Government's policy is to

> reduce the risk to people and the developed and natural environment from flooding and erosion.

The phrase "developed and natural environment" is intended to embrace all of the country's assets. No firm definition of the term "developed environment" exists for the purposes of flood and coastal defence but we generally regard it as land on which development has taken place, for example buildings and roads, as compared with the natural environment which would generally be undeveloped land.

In prioritising funding for flood and coastal defence works one factor which the Government takes into account is whether schemes will protect "urban" or "rural" areas. A scheme will be classified as "urban" only where 50 per cent. or more of the calculated direct benefits relate to industrial, commercial or domestic property, or major infrastructure.

Farmer Suicides

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many suicides amongst farmers have been recorded in each of the past five years. [110528]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 7 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 77W.

In addition, the hon. Member may be interested in the information given in the table:

Proportional mortality ratios by occupation, men aged 20–64, England and Wales, 1982–87 and 1991–96
PMRs which are significantly high [1]

Occupation [2]	*PMR*	*Confidence interval Lower/Upper*	*Number of suicides*
1982–87			
Veterinarians	349	(203–559)	17
Farmers, horticulturists, farm managers	202	(180–226)	311
Librarians, Information officers	226	(140–345)	21
Pharmacists	214	(140–313)	26
Medical practitioners	175	(138–218)	78
Dental practitioners	192	(117–296)	20
Deck, engine-room hands, bargemen, lightermen, boatmen	144	(117–176)	95
Teachers (not elsewhere classified)	132	(116–150)	233
Gardeners, groundsmen	134	(116–154)	197
Hotel porters	171	(113–249)	27
Other domestic and school helpers	175	(111–262)	23
Forestry workers	173	(107–264)	21
Shop salesmen and assistants	123	(106–141)	196
Driving instructors (not HGV)	152	(106–213)	34
Chemical scientists	153	(105–215)	33
Sales representatives	116	(101–134)	203
Farm workers	120	(101–141)	142
1991–96			
Dental practitioners	249	(161–367)	25
Veterinarians	324	(148–615)	9
Farmers, horticulturists, farm managers	144	(124–166)	190
Sales representatives—property and services	151	(122–184)	97
Medical practitioners	147	(115–185)	71
Garage proprietors	155	(112–208)	43
Pharmacists	171	(111–252)	25
Other motor drivers	124	(108–141)	221
Painters and decorators, french polishers	119	(108–132)	389
Publicans	128	(107–152)	129
Builders	119	(106–132)	332
Cleaners, window cleaners, road sweepers	122	(105–139)	204
Shop salesmen and assistants	118	(105–133)	296
Carpenters and joiners	115	(103–127)	384
Gardeners, groundsmen	117	(102–133)	234

[1] 95 per cent. confidence interval does not include 100
[2] Occupations listed in descending order of lower confidence interval
Source:
Office for National Statistics—series, Population Trends, Number 92, Summer 1998.

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112139]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary gave on 29 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 233W.

Fishing Quotas

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from the European Commission on further action against discrimination in the awarding of fishing quotas, with reference to OJ C354/67, vol 42, 7.12.99; and if he will make a statement. [112648]

Mr. Morley: As OJ 354/67 states on 14 January 1998 the United Kingdom received a reasoned opinion in respect of the procedures adopted in the UK for allocating quotas. We have responded to that opinion. No further representations have been received from the Commission.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112658]

Mr. Morley: The following public bodies have been established by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food since May 1997:

Bodies listed in the Cabinet Office publication 'Public Bodies 1999'.

British Potato Council

Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals.

Bodies recently classified as Non-Departmental Public Bodies and yet to be published in the Cabinet Office publication.

Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs

Beef Assurance Scheme Panel.

Salmon Fishing

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what will be the *(a)* starting date, *(b)* finishing date and *(c)* the duration of this year's drift net salmon fishing season for the sea area from the River Tyne to the River Tweed. [113177]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Under current byelaws the drift net salmon fishing season in the sea area from the River Tyne to the River Tweed will for this year, *(a)* start on 1 June; *(b)* finish on 31 August and *(c)* be for a period of 92 days.

Tree Felling Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many tree felling licences have been granted by the Forestry Commission to the RSPB in each of the last five years; and how many trees have been felled as a result. [113115]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The number of licences issued to the RSPB in each of the last five years and the number of trees licensed for felling are given in the table. The Forestry Commission does not keep records of the number of trees actually felled after licences have been issued.

Year ending 31 March	*Number of licences granted*	*Number of trees licensed for felling*
1996	1	390
1997	0	0
1998	4	3,860
1999	2	86,015
2000 (to date)	1	210

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

MOX Shipments

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the countries to which plutonium MOX fuel made at Sellafield's MDF Plant has been exported and the dates of export; and in which cases and on what dates the recipient countries have requested the return of a fuel pin or rod on grounds of safety or inadequate quality control. [112351]

Mrs. Liddell: I understand from BNFL that MOX fuel was exported from Sellafield to Germany in October 1996. Similar transports to Switzerland were undertaken in November 1995 and August 1997. As regards requests for any fuel to be returned to the UK, the position in respect of Switzerland was set out in my Answer to my hon. Friend of 25 January 2000, *Official Report,* columns 194–95W. As regards Japan, the shipment departed Europe in July 1999. Earlier this year the Ministry of International Trade and Industry asked that fuel delivered by BNFL to Kansai Electric's Takahama reactor should be returned to the UK. The Japanese and UK Governments are to discuss this further, along with other options for the fuel.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reports he has received regarding the falsification and manipulation of fuel quality control data in respect of BNFL MOX fuel supplied to Switzerland; and if he will make a statement. [106711]

Mrs. Liddell *[pursuant to her reply, 14 February 2000, c. 366W]:* My Answer referred to certain BNFL fuel pellets supplied to Switzerland in February 1997. This was incorrect. The pellets were in fact manufactured at that time and supplied in August 1997. The rest of the Answer remains correct.

End of Life Vehicles Directive

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on the decision by the European Parliament to amend the proposed Directive on End of Life Vehicles to require car manufacturers to pay for the recycling of used cars when they reach the end of their lives; [113541]

(2) what representations he has made to the European Parliament regarding their decision to amend the proposed Directive on End of Life Vehicles to require car manufacturers to pay for the recycling of used cars. [113542]

Ms Hewitt: In its Second Reading on this Directive, the European Parliament has put forward a number of amendments, none of which have the effect described by the hon. Member. The Commission's proposal of

December 1997 required manufacturers to pay for the recycling of used cars. Following pressure from the UK and some other member states, the Council Common Position provides member states with greater flexibility, simply requiring them to ensure that producers make at least a significant contribution to the costs of free take-back of end of life vehicles. The European Parliament has not proposed a change to this wording, although it has proposed a change to the dates from which it will apply, and the vehicles to which it will apply. Conciliation between the Council and Parliament now seems likely. On this particular issue, the UK will aim to secure flexibility for member states in deciding how best to organise free take-back and recycling.

New Cars

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the findings of the Competition Commission's inquiry into the supply of new cars. [113362]

Mr. Byers: I will publish the Competition Commission report on the supply of new cars as quickly as is consistent with my legal obligations.

Ilisu Dam

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received concerning alternative developments to the Ilisu Dam to provide energy for Turkey; and if he will make a statement. [112829]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have received a great deal of correspondence regarding the Ilisu project, and this correspondence has included many assertions that various alternatives to the project should be considered.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) on 3 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 423W.

It is for the project sponsor to consider the comparative risks, costs and benefits of alternatives to a particular project. Turkey needs to expand its generating capacity considerably. We know that they are looking at coal, gas and oil fired stations elsewhere in Turkey and also at nuclear power. It is natural that they should see hydro power—a clean, renewable energy source which does not involve imports—as having a place in meeting this need.

Social Enterprise Sector

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he has initiated since the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit Policy Action Team 3 report on Enterprise and Social Exclusion (A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal) to improve support for, and to promote, the social enterprise sector; and if he will make a statement. [113451]

Mr. Byers: Since the publication of the Policy Action Team's report on Enterprise and Social Exclusion, my Department has taken a number of steps to improve the support for start-ups and existing small businesses, including social enterprises.

The SBS is currently exploring ways of encouraging Business Links to provide support to social enterprises, for example through:

The development of a webpage jointly with the British Bankers Association for business advisers and bankers to widen their understanding of social enterprises and their business needs. This will be linked to BBA website and SBS Gateway. It will be available from the autumn and will be updated regularly.

The SBS will be involved in a study trip to Valencia in Spain in April, led by Social Enterprise London, to look at co-operatives and other forms of social enterprises. The SBS will be disseminating the outcome of this work widely.

In January this year, I published "The Small Business Service: Summary of Consultation Replies and the Government's Response". One of the overarching aims this set out for the SBS was that it would help promote enterprise across society and particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Entrepreneurs and social enterprises in deprived areas can find it difficult to obtain finance to get their ideas off the ground. We therefore launched the Phoenix Fund in November last year with a key objective to support the provision of community finance. In this context we are working closely with the UK Social Investment Forum and Community Finance Initiatives to design ways in which we can support lending to entrepreneurs and social enterprises in the deprived areas. We hope to be able to announce the form that support will take later in the spring. We will continue to work with banks to highlight social exclusion as an issue and agree new ways forward.

We have contracted with the National Federation of Enterprise Agencies to run a pilot Business Volunteer Mentoring Association scheme until March 2001. This aims to recruit 1,000 volunteers from all sections of the business community, and from a diversity of backgrounds, to provide free mentoring advice to pre and early start up businesses, including from deprived communities. If the pilot is successful, it will be incorporated within the services provided by the Small Business Service.

My Department is also supporting the National Enterprise Campaign, to be launched this spring, which will encourage enterprise and help develop entrepreneurial skills throughout the UK, including the social enterprise sector.

Finally I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has agreed that the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs will take on additional responsibilities on corporate social responsibility, as recommended by the Policy Action Team. As Minister for Corporate Social Responsibility, he will be seeking to promote the business case for corporate social responsibility and to develop stronger links between different Government Departments' work in this area.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the contribution of tidal barrages to meeting the Government's 10 per cent. target for renewable energy; and if he will make a statement. [113135]

Mrs. Liddell: Under the Government's policy on renewables the choice of technology to meet future targets will be left largely to the industry. The assessment undertaken for the Government's consultation document on renewables "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21 Century—Supporting Analysis" did not lead us to expect a significant contribution from tidal barrages in meeting current targets.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to encourage the promotion of renewable energy; and if he will make a statement. [113056]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government published their new policy on renewables in February in their report "New and Renewable Energy, Prospects for the 21 Century: Conclusions in response to the Public Consultation". The Government will promote renewables in a number of ways. For example:

we have recently announced our intention to take powers in the Utilities Bill to place an Obligation on licensed suppliers of electricity to provide a specified proportion of electricity from renewable energy sources. This will provide a very substantial boost to the provision of renewable energy.

we have exempted electricity and heat from renewable sources from the Climate Change Levy, giving industry a financial incentive to use more renewable energy.

we are developing a regional approach to renewable energy planning and targets to facilitate renewables developments while continuing to protect the countryside.

we are developing a growing supporting programme of research, development, demonstration and dissemination in renewables which is expected to include a marketing campaign to raise public awareness of renewable energy.

Austria

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 50W, on Austria, what is the intended effect of the agreed bilateral measures to which he referred. [113022]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The effect of the agreed bilateral measures is that there will be no bilateral ministerial visits to or from Austria. Along with our other EU partners, the UK will not support Austrian candidates for positions at international organisations.

End-user Certificates (Africa)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the dates on which end-user certification of exports were granted in 1998 and the scope of the certificates to countries involved in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo relating to *(a)* four-wheel drive and armoured vehicles sold to Angola, *(b)* military cargo vehicles to Uganda and (c)(i) military vehicles, (ii) combat aircraft and (iii) their components sold to Zimbabwe. [112701]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* As part of the process of assessing all applications for a licence to export arms or other goods on the Military List (Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994), including the goods referred to, exporters are required to supply information on the intended end-use and appropriate undertakings by the end-user concerned. Moreover, end-use certificates are not "granted" as part of the export licensing process. There is no process of "certification" as such but additional assurances are sought if this is considered necessary.

All such applications are of course considered against the criteria announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns 26–29W and, since June 1998, the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Mineworkers Pension Schemes

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many beneficiaries were drawing pensions from the mineworkers pension schemes BC SSS and the MPS in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995, (c)1996, (d) 1997, (e) 1998 and (f) 1999. [112986]

Mrs. Liddell: These are matters for the Trustees of the coal pension schemes. I have asked them to write to you direct.

Funding Schemes

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the funding schemes administered by his Department, indicating the total funds of each scheme and the administration costs of each scheme as a percentage of the total funds. [112496]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* A detailed breakdown of the Department's activities is given in the annual Expenditure Plans Reports Trade and Industry: "The Government's Expenditure Plans (Cm 3905, Cm 3605, Cm 4211), published by the Stationery Office Limited". Information relating administration costs to programme expenditure is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, using information drawn from the 1998–99 Shadow Resource Accounts for the Department, the total cost of departmental objectives and the percentage that relates to administration costs are as follows:

Objective	*Total (£000)*	*Administration costs (£000)*	*Percentage*
Promote enterprise, innovation and increased productivity	795,886	168,642	21
Make the most of the UK's science, engineering and technology	1,332,486	29,403	2
Create strong and competitive markets	2,231,674	32,637	1
Develop a fair and effective legal and regulatory framework	366,173	149,136	41
Total	4,726,219	379,818	8

RDX Exports

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what decisions have been taken on the applications that were pending in November 1999 for the export of RDX in its raw form to Oman, Spain, Turkey and the USA. [112938]

Dr. Howells: Licences were issued in respect of the applications covering the export of RDX in its raw form to Spain and the United States of America on 9 December 1999 and 23 December 1999 respectively. A decision has not yet been taken on the other applications concerned.

All applications for licences to export arms and other goods entered in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List, are assessed against the criteria announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns 26–29W, and, since June 1998 the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Kensington Mortgage Company

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with the relevant local trading standards offices concerning the activities of the Kensington Mortgage Company. [112783]

Dr. Howells: I have had no such discussions.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will order an inquiry into the lending practices of the Kensington Mortgage Company; [112782]

(2) if he will make it his policy to investigate the activities of non-status lenders in the mortgage lending sector. [112781]

Dr. Howells: Most non-status lenders hold consumer credit licences issued by the Director General of Fair Trading. The Director monitors the continuing fitness of licence holders. He also monitors lenders' and brokers' compliance with his guidelines on non-status lending.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with the Council of Mortgage Lenders concerning the *(a)* commissions, *(b)* penalties and *(c)* other charges made by the Kensington Mortgage Company. [112779]

Dr. Howells: None.

Mortgage Sector

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to protect vulnerable consumers from high levels of commission rates charged by non-status lenders in the mortgage sector. [112778]

Dr. Howells: The Office of Fair Trading published guidelines for lenders and brokers in the non-status market in 1997 include guidance on lenders commission structure and disclosure of brokerage and other fees payable by the borrower. The Director General of Fair Trading has indicated that lenders and brokers who do not comply with the guidelines risk licensing action under the Consumer Credit Act 1974.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what protection his Department provides to mortgagees in respect of the penal rates charged to consumers by mortgage lenders who fall behind in their payments. [112777]

Dr. Howells: If a mortgage loan is a regulated agreement under the Consumer Credit Act 1974, the lender cannot charge interest on arrears, when the borrower defaults, at a rate which exceeds the contractual rate of interest. The Act also contains provisions, not restricted to regulated agreements, which enable consumers to apply to the courts to have their credit bargains re-opened if they are extortionate. One of the factors the courts can take into account when considering whether a credit bargain is extortionate is prevailing interest rates at the time the agreement was made. Among other remedies, the court is able to alter the terms of the credit agreement or order the creditor to repay sums paid under the agreement to the borrower.

The Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999 provide that terms in standard form consumer contracts (other than terms about price or the subject matter of the contract) are not binding if they are unfair, and enable the Director General of Fair Trading and others to bring injunction proceedings before the courts.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what guidance his Department gives to mortgage lenders on appropriate levels of charges to their customers. [112780]

Dr. Howells: None. However, the Director General of Fair Trading's guidelines for non-status lenders and brokers require charges on default to be reasonable and do no more than cover the lender's administrative costs. The Director General has also issued guidelines under the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999 which say that it is unacceptable for lenders to vary interest rates at will unless consumers can end the contract immediately and without penalty.

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the total payments made to date to each firm of solicitors in South Wales involved in the compensation claims for *(a)* chest disease and *(b)* vibration white finger. [112480]

Mrs. Liddell: Payments to firms in South Wales to date are as follows:

	£
(a) Chest diseases	
Hugh James Ford Simey	5,393,222
Randell Saunders Phillips & Lloyd	45,237
Thompsons (Cardiff)	195,834
Morgan Cole	10,426
Gabb & Co.	1,366
Osborne Jones & Co	940
David W. Harris & Co	353
Leo Abse & Cohen	294
T. S. Edwards	1,058
Thomas & Co	4,230

	£
(b) Vibration white finger	
Hugh James Ford Simey	[2]933,988
Randell Saunders Phillips & Lloyd	5,409
Thompsons (Cardiff)	69,697
Gabb & Co	15,843
Osborne Jones & Co	705
Leo Abse & Cohen	14,532
T. S. Edwards	284,310
Thomas & Co	457,839
Robertsons	2,907
Edwards Geldard	1,406
Fonseca & Partners	12,338
Macquillan	1,472
Everett & Tomlin	1,581

[1] This includes some £5 million in respect of trial costs
[2] This includes some £290,000 in respect of trial costs

Cashpoint Machines

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what powers he has *(a)* to stop and *(b)* to regulate the application of charges for the use of ATM cash points in the LINK system. [113181]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Under the new Competition Act the Director General of Fair Trading can investigate whether the LINK agreement on surcharges is in any way anti-competitive and he now has powers to impose severe penalties for infringements of the prohibitions of the Act.

Section 4 of the Prices Act 1974 gives me powers to make an Order requiring that charges are indicated for goods and services. If the banking industry does not reach a satisfactory voluntary agreement on the display of charges I will use my powers to require them to display prices transparently before the transaction takes place.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground

18. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last travelled on official business on the London Underground. [112190]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend travels by public transport on a regular basis on official visits and on journeys to his office.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will call for a report from London Underground on *(a)* the reasons for the work on the second escalator at St. John's Wood Station taking longer than originally assumed, *(b)* when Baker Street Station will be re-opened for Jubilee Line passengers and *(c)* the reasons why at Westminster Station debris obstructs the walkway to the House, certain exits have not opened and the previously opened exit to Victoria Embankment has been boarded shut. [113126]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* These are operational matters for London Underground who have informed me that:

(a) The escalator at St. John's Wood is being refurbished and this work was originally due to be completed by May 2000. However, during the process of removing parts of the escalator, a problem with water ingress was discovered. Work on the refurbishment had to be suspended while this was investigated and dealt with, but is now progressing again and the escalator is scheduled to return to service in late June 2000.

(b) Baker Street Station re-opened for Jubilee Line passengers on 3 March 2000 but closed to Jubilee passengers over the weekend of the 4–5 March due to a failed speed governor (a device which ensures that the escalator travels at a steady speed, controls the braking system and ensures that it comes to a controlled stop in an emergency). It re-opened this morning to the Jubilee Line passengers; and

(c) Part of the Bridge subway at Westminster Station remains fenced off to allow contractors to complete installation of permanent lighting there; the final subway exit, linking the station to Victoria Embankment, adjacent to Westminster Pier, opened on 6 March 2000, although the staircase at the pier end of the Subway is not due to open until 31 March 2000; those exits previously opened and now shut have been closed to facilitate construction works at street level by the New Parliamentary Building team.

Council Tenants

19. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress made in giving council tenants a greater role in running their own estates. [112191]

Mr. Raynsford: The introduction of best value and tenant participation compacts from 1 April 2000 will ensure that tenants can influence the way their homes are managed. Tenants can choose how and in what they are involved and this will be set out in the compact with their authority. Our new tenant empowerment grant programme, which I will launch on 31 March also helps tenants to get independent advice on options for involvement, including tenant management if they wish.

Council Housing (Inner London)

20. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to encourage the building of council-owned homes in inner London. [112192]

Mr. Mullin: We are keen to encourage the building of the maximum number of affordable homes in Inner London by whatever means secures the best value for money. However, in most cases housing associations are able to build twice as many units than local authorities would have been able to do for the same amount of grant.

Regional Development Agencies

21. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the cost to public funds of regional development agencies. [112193]

Ms Armstrong: The eight RDAs in England have a total budget of £900 million for 1999–2000. This comprises grant-in-aid of £737 million and retention of receipts from programmes.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the names and addresses of the members of the boards of each of the regional development agencies who have rural expertise. [112819]

Ms Armstrong: Members are not appointed to represent a particular sector, but in a personal capacity. Members typically have experiences and skills across a range of sectors and interests. The table shows both the names of those board members taking the lead on rural issues and the names of other members who also have some expertise in this area. The address of the RDA where board members can be contacted is also given.

Agency	*Members appointed primarily for rural expertise*	*Other members with rural expertise*
One North East, Great North House, Sandyford Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ND	Phillip Hughes	Miles Middleton
North West Development Agency, King's Court, Scotland Road, Warrington WA1 2FR	John Dunning	—
Yorkshire Forward, Westgate House, 100 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4LT	Pamela Warhurst	Lord Haskins Michael Johnston
Advantage West Midlands, 2 Priestley Wharf, Holt Street, Aston Science Park, Birmingham B7 4BZ	Antony Harris	—
East Midlands Development Agency, Apex Court, City Link, Nottingham NG2 4LA	Bob Middleton	Jane Bradford Martin Doughty
East of England Development Agency, Compass House, Chivers Way, Histon, Cambridge CB4 9ZR	Marie Skinner	Vincent Watts
South West of England Development Agency, Sterling House, Dix's Field, Exeter EX1 1QA	Jonathon Porritt	Jeremy Pope
South East of England Development Agency, SEEDA Headquarters, Cross Lanes, Guildford GU1 1YA	Sarah Ward	Allan Willett

EU Structural Funds

22. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of his Department's contribution to the future programmes of European Union objective 1 regions. [112194]

Ms Armstrong: My Department will continue to provide significant financial support to the new objective 1 regions through a wide variety of routes. These include the funds made available to the Regional Development Agencies; regeneration programmes such as the New Deal for Communities, as well as the resources provided to local authorities.

Integrated Transport Commission

23. **Dr. Whitehead:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Commission for Integrated Transport. [112195]

Mr. Hill: We are very grateful to the Commission for Integrated Transport for all the valuable work it has been doing, which continues to make a real contribution to the transport debate.

Regeneration

24. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to regenerate disadvantaged communities. [112196]

Ms Armstrong: A framework version of our national strategy for the regeneration of deprived communities will be published in the spring, with a final version emerging later in the year. Meantime, new ideas, new approaches and existing best practice are already being identified with our New Deal for Communities and other regeneration partnerships across the country.

26. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to regenerate the economy in the north-west. [112198]

Ms Armstrong: This Government are taking many steps to regenerate the economy of the north west, including the establishment of the North West development agency to deliver the regional strategy. This includes the single regeneration budget which in round five alone is worth over £800 million.

Best Value

25. **Mr. Neil Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the steps taken by local authorities to provide best value in their services. [112197]

Ms Armstrong: An interim evaluation of the 40 best value pilot authorities, carried out by the Warwick University Business School, was published on 22 November 1999. All the authorities found the best value framework worked, but was more challenging than they had expected. However, after only 12 months work, there were real examples of improved services and cost savings and real engagement with local people.

33. **Mrs. Fiona Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the Best Value pilot schemes in the east midlands. [112205]

Ms Armstrong: An interim evaluation of all the best value pilot authorities, including those in the east midlands, was carried out by Warwick University Business School and published on 22 November 1999. All the authorities found the best value framework worked, but was more challenging than they had expected.

However, after only 12 months of work, there were real examples of improved services and cost savings and real engagement with local people.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

27. **Mr. Ennis:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many foreign HGVs his Department inspected in each of the last three years. [112199]

Mr. Hill: Inspections of vehicles are carried out by the Vehicle Inspectorate in accordance with targets set for them by the Secretary of State.

The Vehicle Inspectorate undertook roadworthiness checks on 3,498 foreign vehicles in 1998–99 and 5,343 checks in 1997–98. Roadworthiness check statistics for 1996–97 are not available.

In addition the Vehicle Inspectorate completed traffic enforcement checks on 13,037 foreign vehicles in 1998–99 and in the preceding two years 13,288 and 12,821 checks respectively.

Urban Renewal

28. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's actions to promote urban renewal. [112200]

Ms Armstrong: The Government are committed to a comprehensive programme of urban renewal. We are currently preparing the first White Paper on urban policy for 20 years, which we aim to publish later this year. This will set out a comprehensive set of policies to achieve an urban renaissance.

Disabled People (Transport Access)

29. **Mr. Pollard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps the Government are taking to improve access for disabled people to transport services. [112201]

Mr. Hill: The Government are committed to comprehensive civil rights for disabled people. Accessible public transport, within the framework of an integrated transport policy, is fundamentally important to delivering that commitment.

We have already brought forward regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act setting detailed technical access standards for all new trains. This year we will be bringing forward similar regulations applying to buses and coaches and we will be consulting on proposed regulations applying to buses and coaches and we will be consulting on proposed regulations for taxis. These regulations cover facilities for wheelchair users and for people with a wide range of other disabilities.

Through the Local Transport Plans we are also ensuring that local authorities give due weight to the needs of disabled people across the whole spectrum of their responsibilities, including pedestrian facilities, transport infrastructure and voluntary and community transport services.

Light Rail Services

30. **Mr. Ian Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on light rail services. [112202]

Mr. Hill: Light rail, and similar rapid transit systems, can have an important role to play in delivering integrated transport in major conurbations. Experience from existing light rail schemes has shown that they can be effective in providing a high quality public transport option in densely used transport corridors and in encouraging motorists to switch from their cars. However, the capital costs of light rail schemes are high compared with bus priority measures and guided bus schemes, which may offer a more cost-effective alternative. Central Government support can be provided to local authorities to fund light rail systems where these bring net benefits which are greater than those offered by the available alternatives; cannot be entirely funded from local sources or by the private sector; provide good value for money and are essential to the achievement of the objectives of the relevant authority's local transport plan.

Standard Spending Assessment

31. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's review of the local government standard spending assessment system. [112203]

Ms Armstrong: Central and local Government officials have been discussing a wide range of options for improving the method of revenue grant distribution. Their joint report of the issues raised in the review will be put to the Central Local Partnership later this month and published on the internet.

Decisions about the merits of the various options for reform will be made when we have responses to a consultation paper that we expect to publish in the summer.

Emissions Trading

32. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the role of emissions trading in limiting global carbon dioxide emissions. [112204]

Mr. Meacher: The Kyoto agreement was an historic achievement—setting legally binding emission targets for developed countries for the first time. The agreement also provides for international emissions trading to help countries meet these challenging targets. I believe that this system will help countries meet their commitments cost-effectively, with real environmental benefits. Since June last year, the Government have been working with business to develop a trading scheme in the UK, as part of our strategy for meeting our climate change commitments.

Rail Safety

34. **Mr. Salter:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on measures taken to improve rail safety following the Paddington rail crash in October 1999. [112206]

Mr. Hill: I refer my hon. Friend to the Deputy Prime Minister's statement in the House on 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1373–84.

39. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last had a meeting with Railtrack to discuss safety on the railways. [112211]

Mr. Hill: Ministers and officials meet Railtrack regularly to discuss a number of railway issues including railway safety.

Recycling

35. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress in his policies to encourage recycling. [112207]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are committed to increasing recycling substantially from the current low levels. We set ambitious goals in the draft waste strategy, "A Way with Waste", including to recycle 25 per cent. of household waste by 2005. The final version of the strategy, to be published soon, will put in place a range of instruments for delivering these goals.

In Wales and Scotland recycling policy is a matter for the National Assembly or Scottish Parliament respectively.

Quango Accountability

36. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the accountability of quangos based in Yorkshire and Humberside to the people of that region. [112208]

Ms Armstrong: The Government regularly review the accountability of Non-Departmental Public Bodies to the Public through the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office.

Business Rates

37. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received regarding the level of business rates for small businesses. [112209]

Ms Armstrong: I have received representations from small businesses welcoming the transitional relief scheme announced on 25 November and calling for a rate relief scheme for small businesses.

The transitional relief scheme, which favours small businesses, will phase in significant changes in rate bills resulting from the revaluation on 1 April. In addition many small businesses will benefit from the revaluation itself and the reduction in the multiplier to 41.6p for every £1 of rateable value.

We set out a possible rate relief scheme for small businesses in our White Paper, "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People" (1998). We have discussed this scheme with representatives of small businesses, and we aim next to hold a public consultation exercise on the details of the scheme.

Rail Investment

38. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the railway industry about investment in the railway infrastructure and in train services in Worcestershire; and if he will make a statement. [112210]

Mr. Hill: A report was commissioned to consider improvements in rail routes radiating from Worcester and the shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA) will be discussing this report with interested stakeholders this month. The sSRA has discussed a number of improvements in the railway infrastructure in Worcestershire with Railtrack and details of these will be included in Railtrack's Network Management Statement which is to be published at the end of the month.

Train Reliability

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last met representatives of the Association of Train Operating Companies to discuss train reliability and punctuality. [112177]

Mr. Prescott: I met ATOC in November 1998 and agreed an action plan for short-term improvements in performance across the railway network. At the National Rail Summit in February 1999, I announced a number of longer-term initiatives based on the establishment of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority. I will be discussing progress on the industry 10-point plan, which covered train safety, reliability and punctuality, with ATOC and Railtrack at the next National Rail Summit in May.

Pymmes Park

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in resolving the outstanding claims for compensation relating to the compulsory purchase of land at Pymmes Park as part of the A406 widening at Edmonton; what parts of the claim by the local authority have been accepted in principle by the Highways Agency; what issues remain outstanding; and if he will make a statement. [111981]

Mr. Hill: Compensation negotiations between the District Valuer, acting for the Highways Agency and the London Borough of Enfield are continuing. The Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, will write to my hon. Friend with further details.

Letter from Mr. Peter Nutt to Mr. Andrew Love, dated 7 March 2000:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked me to write in response to your recent written Parliamentary Question about compensation being claimed by the London Borough of Enfield for land acquired under compulsory purchase at Pymmes Parks as part of the widening of the A406 North Circular Road.

I explained in my letter of 8 December to you, that negotiations between the District Valuer, acting for the Highways Agency, and the London Borough of Enfield were continuing. Exchange land has already been provided to offset the loss of open space at Pymmes Park. The remaining heads of claim include the value of land as well as reasonable compensation for the loss of amenity and other damages to Pymmes Park.

The District Valuer wrote to the Council on 3 February, on our instruction, setting out the Agency's position but unfortunately was unable to offer unconditional settlement on any of the nine heads of claim. I appreciate that this does not represent the progress the Council wishes to see, and I too would be pleased to see all these matters brought to speedy, equitable and amicable conclusion. May I suggest that the best way forward is for officials from Highways Agency, supported by the District Valuer, to meet Council officials at Enfield? If you would like to take up this suggestion, your secretary could discuss arrangements by contacting Andrew Gallagher, the Highways Agency's Director for London on 0171–921–4306.

Lorries

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what appraisals his Department has undertaken of the time that lorries are delayed on congested motorways and trunk roads; if he intends to take action to reduce delays by lorries and other heavy vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [112705]

Mr. Hill: In preparation for our report, "Tackling Congestion and Pollution", published in January, we estimated the total amount of extra journey time (total vehicle hours spent travelling less those which would have been incurred at free flow speeds) resulting from congestion on English roads in 1996. By drawing on this analysis it is possible to estimate the proportion of the total amount of time lost by different kinds of vehicle on a range of road types. Although these techniques are not yet sufficiently well developed to allow a separate estimate to be produced for the trunk road network, estimates can be produced for motorways and A roads as a whole. These estimates suggest that, taken together, motorways and A roads outside urban areas accounted for some 12 per cent. of the total amount of time lost by heavy goods vehicles on English roads in 1996. This estimate includes only time lost due to general congestion and does not allow for time lost due to incidents or road works.

Our integrated transport White Paper set out a package of measures to tackle congestion and pollution, based on concerted action by local authorities, businesses, Government and the general public. We will continue to take this forward, including through the Transport Bill, and our 10-year plan to modernise Britain's transport system (to be published in the summer).

M25

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates he has made of the cost of resurfacing the M25 in porous asphalt between junctions 8 and 9. [112542]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mr. Peter Nutt to Mr. Crispin Blunt, dated 7 March 2000]:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your question about the estimated cost of resurfacing the M25 between junctions 8 and 9 in porous asphalt, a distance of approximately 11km.

When I wrote to you on 28 February in response to your question about resurfacing the M25 between junctions 8 and 10 in porous asphalt our Agents initial estimate was given as £14m. That estimate was based on the assumption that no other work beyond a simple overlay of porous asphalt would be necessary. I regret that this assumption has proved incorrect in the light of further work.

A more detailed survey and analysis has ow been completed and has identified the need for additional works if an overlay is to be successfully applied. The existing concrete carriageway, consisting of a series of individual concrete slabs, would need additional work to stabilise it so that small movements in the joints between the slabs did not cause the overlay immediately above the joints to crack. Once cracks form in porous asphalt, the road surface disintegrates very quickly. The overlay would also have to be thicker for the same reason. The extra thickness of the overlay would also make it necessary to raise long lengths of safety fencing to maintain its effectiveness. All this would increase the time taken to complete the work and the costs of the associated traffic management.

Based upon this more detailed work, our estimate for the cost of resurfacing the M25 between junctions 8 and 9 with porous asphalt is around £18 million, with our estimate for applying it between junctions 8 and 10 now being £34 million. I am sorry for supplying information previously which was so misleading.

Should you require further information, please contact the Highways Agency's Area 3 Team Leader, John Rylett, in our Dorking office on 01306 878251.

Housing Stock

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities which have given notice that they intend to transfer *(a)* their entire housing stock and *(b)* part of their housing stock. [112992]

Mr. Mullin: The following local authorities are due to transfer all or part of their stock by the end of this month:

Burnley BC
Elmbridge BC
Huntingdonshire DC
Manchester CC'
Tameside MBC
Test Valley BC
Weymouth and Portland BC
Wyre Forest DC
LB Hackney'

' Denotes a partial transfer.

The following local authorities have sought approval to transfer all or part of their stock:

Barnsley MBC'
Blackburn with Darwen BC
Birmingham CC
Calderdale MBC
Chester CC
Chichester DC
Coventry CC
East Northamptonshire DC
East Staffordshire BC
Fylde BC
Horsham DC
LB Lewisham'
Manchester CC'
Mendip DC
LB Richmond
South Bedfordshire DC
Staffordshire Moorlands DC

Sunderland CC
Torbay Council
Walsall MBC
Waverley BC
West Lancashire DC
West Oxfordshire DC
West Wiltshire DC
Wycombe DC

[1] Denotes a partial transfer.

Lead Water Pipes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to replace lead water pipes; and if he will make a statement. [112815]

Mr. Mullin: The new Drinking Water Directive (98/83/EC) tightens the standard for lead in drinking water from its current 50µg/to 25µg/1 by 25 December 2003 and to 10µg/1 by 25 December 2013. Where action is necessary to meet these standards, water companies will first treat water to reduce its ability to dissolve lead from pipes, or will optimise that treatment where it is already in place. Replacement of company lead pipes will be needed where water treatment fails to achieve the standards—mainly soft-water areas. This will become fully apparent only after optimised treatment has been in place for some months. Pipework within the property boundary will remain the responsibility of the property owner. Local authorities have discretionary powers to pay grants to help homeowners to replace lead piping in their properties.

Residential Leasehold Property

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans has he to introduce legislation on residential leasehold property; and if he will make a statement. [113428]

Mr. Mullin: As was announced in the Gracious Speech on 17 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 04–07, we intend to publish a draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill for consultation during this session. My hon. Friend the Minister of State for Housing, Planning and Construction announced on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 345W, the publication of a summary of the main leasehold measures we intend to include in the draft Bill. Copies were placed in the Library. Following consultation on the draft Bill, we intend to bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Solar Radiation

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he has made for the monitoring of the effects of increase solar radiation on satellite and mobile communications systems that are required for the safety of airlines and ships at sea; and if he will make a statement. [113109]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The Rutherford Appleton Laboratory is conducting research into the effects of solar radiation on satellite and other communications equipment. It also issues warnings when it is predicted that solar flares and other solar events are likely to affect communications equipment.

Neither the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) nor the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is specifically monitoring the effects of increases in solar radiation on radio communications. However, any incidents which affect the safety of any aircraft in UK airspace or a UK registered aircraft will be reported to the CAA. This would include incidents caused by solar radiation interfering with radio communications.

Special Advisers

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many special advisers are employed in his Department; and how many were employed on 1 May 1997. [113107]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The Department currently employs five special advisers; three are full-time and two part-time. On 1 February 1997 the Department of the Environment employed four special advisers, two full-time and two part-time. The Department of Transport employed one full-time special adviser on this date.

By 1 May 1997 two special advisers had resigned leaving the Department of the Environment with three special advisers, one full-time and two part-time and none in the Department of Transport.

Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 282W, concerning MTBE, what contribution has been made by oil companies to the Environment Agency's research project on the incidence of MTBE in England and Wales; if he will publish the results when available; and what assessment he has made of the possible carcinogenicity of MTBE. [113543]

Mr. Mullin: The current Environment Agency project on MTBE incidence in England and Wales has received valuable financial and other assistance from major oil companies through the Institute of Petroleum. The results of the research, which forms part of a wider investigation into the fate and transport of chemicals in the sub-surface, will be made available by the Environment Agency. US work suggests that the carcinogenicity risk of MTBE is very small at the levels currently found. The toxicity and carcinogenicity of fuel ethers is, however, currently the subject of a major review by the Finnish Environment Agency on behalf of the European Environment Agency. A draft report is expected this spring.

Wandsworth (Planning)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the result of the review of the London Borough of Wandsworth's planning application approval for the

development of the site of the Old Wandsworth Secondary School, Sutherland Grove, London SW15, for educational and residential purposes. [113450]

Mr. Raynsford: The conservation area consent decision will be announced very soon.

Vehicle Registration

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what claims there have been for compensation from motor dealers as a result of difficulties in issuing registration documents for new motor vehicles at DVLA. [113525]

Mr. Hill: There have been no claims for compensation from motor dealers related to the issuing of registration documents for the DVLA.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what difficulties were experienced with DVLA systems in relation to the registration of V registration vehicles; what the *(a)* cause and *(b)* effects were of such problems; what measures were taken to rectify them; and at what cost. [113524]

Mr. Hill: 'V' registration marks were introduced on 1 September 1999 and were superseded by 'W' marks on 1 March 2000.

Over 50 per cent. of vehicles are now registered through the Automated First Registration and the Licensing facility (AFRL) which allows motor dealers to register and first license vehicles electronically. All other vehicles are registered through the established network of Vehicle Registration Offices (VROs).

In recent years the DVLA has consistently met or bettered its published target of issuing registration documents to customers within 12 working days. No significant difficulties have been experienced.

Driver Safety

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he will take to improve the safety of drivers who make journeys by motor vehicles on behalf of their employers. [113528]

Mr. Hill: Measures to improve work-related road safety are set out in the Government's road safety strategy—"Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone", published on 1 March.

We want to ensure that worker/drivers and vulnerable road users are not exposed to unnecessary risks. An inter-agency task group is therefore being established under an independent chair—Richard Dykes, Group Managing Director of the Post Office. The group will make recommendations for action on strategies for improving the management of work-related road safety.

Road Safety

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for prime time advertising on television to support the objective of his road safety strategy. [113521]

Mr. Hill: Well researched advertising on television will play a key role in supporting the objectives of our road safety strategy. The Department is currently considering options for a high profile campaign led by television advertising to be launched soon with the aim of bringing home to all the importance of safer road behaviour and the part that everyone can play in reducing deaths and injuries.

The Department has a long history of using television advertising as the focus of powerful and effective campaigns, well founded on research into what will work and thoroughly and independently monitored as to effectiveness.

Television will provide us in the coming year with the opportunity to raise the profile of road safety as an issue and to get across specific messages about child road safety, speed, drink driving, seat belt wearing and the range of other issues outlined in the indicative programme published in the strategy paper, "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone".

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to set casualty reduction targets for *(a)* pedestrians, *(b)* cyclists and *(c)* motorcyclists; [113519]

(2) what special measures he proposes to reduce accidents among *(a)* pedestrians, *(b)* cyclists and *(c)* motorcyclists. [113520]

Mr. Hill: The Government's new Road Safety Strategy, "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone", was launched by the Prime Minister on 1 March. It sets a new target to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on the roads by 40 per cent. by the year 2010, a separate target of 50 per cent. for children, and a 10 per cent. reduction in the slight casualty rate. No targets have been set for specific groups but paragraph 9.13 commits us to considering with the Road Safety Advisory Board, rate based targets for cyclists and walkers.

Special measures for these groups are detailed in chapters eight and nine of the strategy, but measures described elsewhere, particularly our driver training, will be to their benefit.

Copies of "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone" are in the Library and the Vote Office.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total cost was of the launch event for the Government's road safety strategy; and what was the breakdown of the costs, including the cost of the (i) videos and films, (ii) stage backdrop, (iii) hire of the premises, (iv) expenses provided for the schoolchildren who participated in the event, (v) sound systems, (vi) issue of invitations, (vii) hospitality and (viii) other costs. [113526]

Mr. Hill: The total cost of the event to launch the road safety strategy on 1 March is estimated at £16,800 including VAT where applicable (some minor costs are not yet known).

A breakdown of costs by category is given in the table.

Category	£	Detail
Videos and films	4,300	We plan to use both videos and films on at least three other occasions
Stage backdrop	6,800	Some of the stage set will be re-used at other events
Hire of premises	2,100	—
Expenses for school children; issue of invitations; hospitality	600	Of the 15 school children, nine came from a local school and were issued by DETR staff; hospitality for about 120 delegates
Sound system	1,200	The sound system was provided by the venue
Other costs	1,800	Photographer delegate expenses items for the children and minor work on site

Drink-drive Limit

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the EU Council of Ministers to decide on a proposal to harmonise the drink-drive limit in the EU. [113527]

Mr. Hill: The Government expect the European Commission to publish its proposals in respect of blood alcohol limits for drivers shortly, as indicated in its road safety strategy "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone", published on 1 March.

Hull Road Scheme

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason the case for the road scheme in Hull is included in his Department's appraisal tables in the category of jobs and prosperity rather than that of safety and healthier communities; and if he will make a statement. [113522]

Mr. Hill: The main reasons we included the A1033 Hedon Road Improvement in our programme were to relieve congestion and delays on the main access route to the port of Hull and to assist regeneration. Hence the jobs and prosperity classification for the scheme in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England. The New Approach to Appraisal" assessment shows that time savings are the scheme's main benefit, but it will also enhance road safety through improving junction layouts and create a safer environment for pedestrian and cyclists, including provision of a dedicated cycleway.

Rail Summit

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he next intends to hold a rail summit. [113518]

Mr. Hill: It is currently planned to hold the next Rail Summit in May this year.

Coal Fields (Regeneration)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps are being taken to regenerate former coal field areas. [112179]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 112–13W.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the *(a)* amount of money raised from the sale of lottery tickets, and *(b)* the amount of lottery money spent, in each constituency, ranked in descending order of lottery money spent. [113276]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* I have placed in the Libraries of the House a table to show the amount of money raised from lottery ticket sales per UK constituency in descending order since the beginning of the lottery (correct to 13 November 1999), and a table to show the award amount to each UK constituency in descending order since the beginning of the lottery (correct to 3 March 2000). This information is taken from the National Lottery Awards database which uses information supplied by the lottery distributing bodies. The tables include lottery awards not attributed to the distributing bodies to a particular constituency. The constituency information relates to the address to which the lottery award was sent.

Television Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what will be the cost of administering the free television licence scheme in 2000–01; and how the cost is to be funded. [113130]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Estimates of the cost of administering free television licences for people aged 75 or over have still to be finalised. The cost will be met from public funds, via a payment from the Department of Social Security to the BBC.

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of families in Barnsley East and Mexborough who will benefit from the introduction of free TV licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [112980]

Janet Anderson: This information is not available. 1991 Census information is out of date and no household survey has a sample size sufficient to make reliable estimates of qualifying households at a constituency or local authority level.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his estimate of the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of households in (i) Northern Ireland, (ii) Wales (iii) Scotland and (iv) England that are evading payment of the television licence fee. [113024]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The BBC, as Licensing Authority, estimates evasion principally on a UK-wide basis and estimates of evasion by country cannot be produced on the same basis or to the same level of accuracy. All estimates relate to licensable

premises rather than households. As at 31 March 1999, the latest date for which figures are available, the estimated evasion figures were:

	(a) Estimated evasion (number of licensable premises) [1]	*(b) Estimated evasion (percentage)*
Northern Ireland	148,000	24.2
Wales	93,000	7.7
England	957,000	4.9

[1] Estimates calculated by applying the estimated percentage evasion rate to the estimated number of licensable premises

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if a household exempt from having to pay for a television licence from November by virtue of including a pensioner aged 75 years or over will be required to hold a licence document. [113020]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* Yes. The provision of free television licences for people aged 75 or over will be a concession, not an exemption from the television licensing requirements. This will preserve the traditional structure of the television licensing system which is one of the safeguards of the BBC's independence.

UK Sport and UK Sports Institute

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received concerning the future location of the headquarters of UK Sport and the UK Sports Institute. [112762]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* DCMS has received a number of representations from interested parties, including local Sheffield Members of Parliament, Phoenix Sports Ltd., University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University and the Institute of Directors (South Yorkshire Branch), about the UK Sports Institute headquarters. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I discussed the location of the UK Sports Institute's headquarters with my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn) and other representatives from Sheffield on 23 November.

My Department has not received any specific representations regarding the relocation of UK Sport.

British Library

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made on the British Library review. [113638]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have today published the report on prior options, the first stage of the Review of the British Library.

The report examines the role and functions of the British Library, and how these functions contribute to the delivery of wider DCMS and Government objectives. It confirms that at the present time the library's status as a non-departmental public body is the best option for delivering its services and considers how the delivery of its services might be improved in the future.

The publication of the prior options report marks the end of the first stage of the Review. The second stage will take forward the recommendations of the prior options stage and consider how the library's services and functions could be provided more efficiently and effectively in the future.

A copy of the prior options report has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the cash value of each of the six short-listed bids to take over the Millennium Dome site. [111417]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The six short-listed bids, announced on 17 January, were selected on their ability to deliver a world class, sustainable future use for the Dome at Greenwich. Detailed financial appraisals of the bids were not required for this stage of the competition. The six bidders are required to submit indicative financial offers, with further details of their proposals, by 31 March 2000.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what sum of additional interest payments and other expenses has been incurred on a result of the late payment of sponsorship money to the Millennium Dome; and what the cost to the Millennium Commission has been. [109969]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has not to date incurred interest as a result of delays in the payment of sponsorship money. There have therefore been no additional costs to the Millennium Commission.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 237W, on the Millennium Dome, for what reason he did not list the foods sold in relation to standards of food produced in the United Kingdom as opposed to standards required of catering and food outlets. [112314]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* All catering and food outlets in the Millennium Dome are subject to the same strict controls and checks that apply to all commercial catering and food outlets in the UK. This applies to all aspects of their operation including the food that they serve. In all instances there is a clear chain from food source, via suppliers, to the specific outlet at the Dome. All NMEC's suppliers endeavour to meet all current Health, Hygiene and Safety regulations.

Broadcasting

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 545W, on broadcasting, if he will make a statement on the views expressed by the European Commission in respect of *(a)* News 24 and *(b)* future funding options for the BBC. [111900]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The views of the European Commission on BBC News 24 were set out in the Commission's decision on the

complaint by BSkyB. The Government welcomed the Commission's decision that licence fee funding dedicated to BBC News 24 is compatible with the Treaty rules. The Government did not, however, agree with the finding that the licence fee funding of BBC News 24 ought to have been notified to the Commission and noted that the finding in relation to notification was not determinative to the decision and was not the subject of argument.

The Commission has not expressed a view on funding options for the BBC, though it has requested information on the digital licence fee proposed by the independent review panel chaired by Gavyn Davies.

Sport Employment Statistics

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his basis for estimating the number of people who are employed in sport; and if he will make a statement. [112639]

Kate Hoey: Research conducted by the Leisure Industries Research Centre at Sheffield/Sheffield Hallam Universities into the economic impact of sport in England and on behalf of Sport England, was published last month. It shows that employment in sport, including the commercial sector and central and local government, was 368,587 in 1998, an increase of over 20,000 on the 1995 figure, although the expanding employment market generally meant that the sports sector proportion of total employment fell from 1.64 per cent. to 1.59 per cent. These, and other figures contained within the report, provide further evidence of sport's existing and growing economic importance.

Internet

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department is taking to use the Internet to promote sporting opportunities. [112954]

Kate Hoey: Our new site (www.culture.gov.uk) went live on Monday 28 February. It responds to public demands for a site which both outlines the role of Government within our areas of responsibility and guides browsers in the direction of a wide range of other sites, including Sport England and the United Kingdom Sports Council, to answer their many questions on cultural and sporting issues. The development of this portal site should encourage visitors to become regular users.

Digital Television

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of when it will be possible to receive digital terrestrial transmissions in all parts of Pendle; and if he will make a statement. [113029]

Janet Anderson: Maps showing the predicted digital terrestrial television (DTT) coverage from each of the 81 UK DTT transmitter sites have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses on CD-ROM. These show that most of Pendle is covered by transmissions from the Pendle Forest DTT transmitter. These transmissions reach between 204,000 and 220,000 people. There are no current plans for additional DTT transmitters but the BBC and ITC, who are responsible for the transmission network, are now considering, in consultation with digital broadcasters, manufacturers, consumer groups and Government, how to improve the coverage of digital television across the UK.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list the post code areas of Worcestershire in which digital terrestrial television services are not currently available; [113067]

(2) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the percentage of households in Worcestershire that live in an area covered by digital terrestrial television signals and *(b)* when the signals will be available in all parts of the country. [113066]

Janet Anderson: The information is not available in the form requested. However, maps showing the predicted digital terrestrial television (DTT) coverage from each of the 81 individual transmitter sites in the UK have been placed in Libraries of both Houses on CD-ROM. The BBC and ITC, who are responsible for the DTT transmission network, are now considering, in consultation with digital broadcasters, manufacturers, consumer groups and Government, how to improve the coverage of digital television across the UK.

CABINET OFFICE

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the Executive Non Departmental Public Bodies 1999 report and the Executive Agencies 1999 report. [113591]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have today published the Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies 1999 Report, Cm 4657 and the Executive Agencies 1999 Report, CM 4658 which have been laid in both Houses. The Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies Report brings together performance and trend data on 89 bodies, and the Executive Agencies Report brings together performance and trend data on 104 agencies and two departments operating on agency lines.

The NDPBs Report shows that overall 69 per cent. of targets were achieved and that the number of measurable targets has increased substantially to 82 per cent., a 17 per cent. increase on last year. The Executive Agencies Report shows that overall 75 per cent. of targets were achieved and that the number of measurable targets has increased to 80 per cent., a 2 per cent. increase on last year.

Last March, the Government published the "Modernising Government" White Paper which made a commitment to bring the standard of all public services up to the level of the best so that they deliver what users want in an effective and responsible way. The performance of Executive Agencies and Executive NDPBs, as the main delivery arm of Central Government, is central to achieving this goal.

In raising standards throughout the public sector, the Government aim to build on existing achievements and seek further gains by ensuring the right mechanisms are in place to monitor and report the progress of all Agencies and NDPBs.

In order to achieve sustained improvement, it is essential that these bodies should have measurable targets which are strategic, achievable, relevant to the business and timed; adopt robust customer satisfaction targets; have no more than eight key performance targets that focus on the main objectives of the business and set out more stretching targets that build on previous achievements.

We will be working to achieve this sustained improvement over the coming year.

Press Officers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many press officers were employed in her Department at *(a)* May 1997, *(b)* January 1998, *(c)* January 1999 and *(d)* January 2000; and what was the total expenditure on press officers by her Department in each of the years concerned. [112363]

Marjorie Mowlam: The total expenditure on press officers in the Cabinet Office Press Office in the financial year 1997–98 was £453,646; 1998–99 was £512,255—the total to date for 1999–2000 (until the end of January) is £590,394.

The number of press officers in post in Cabinet Office Press Office at May 1997 was 12, January 1998 was 11, January 1999 was 14, and January 2000 was 20.

In addition, a dedicated press office was set up in March 1999, to co-ordinate Government media activity on the Year 2000 Millennium Bug problem. The Unit was set up by the President of the Council. The total expenditure on press officers in the Unit in 1998–99 was nil. The total expenditure on press officers this financial year, for 1999–2000 is £156,961.

No press officers were employed in the Unit in January 1999. Five press officers were employed in January 2000.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what percentage of documentation used by her Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111610]

Mr. Stringer: Documentation used by my Department is procured using criteria which include environmental considerations, value for money and performance in use in office machinery. The option of using recycled paper is under review. No statistics are available for the proportion of paper that is recycled. Arrangements are in place for the collection and recycling of much of the waste paper produced in the Department. No statistics are available of the proportion that is so treated.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Passes (Former Members)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee how many House of Commons current passes were held by former hon. Members on 31 December 1999. [113081]

Mrs. Roe: As at 31 December 1999, out of a total of 134 photopasses which had been issued to former hon. Members, 101 were current.

A further five former hon. Members had applied for photopasses, but had not collected them.

Road Safety Strategy

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what measures will be taken in pursuance of the Government's road safety strategy to improve the driving of *(a)* employees of the House who drive vehicles on House of Commons business and *(b)* hon. Members. [113530]

Mrs. Roe: *(a)* There are very few instances of House employees having to drive vehicles on House of Commons business; in any event, this would be a matter for the Heads of the individual House departments, not for the Committee; *(b)* this is a matter for individual hon. Members.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Retirement Pension Forecasts

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many people were awarded a penalty payment for the late processing of retirement pension forecasts in each of the last five years for which figures are available; what were the total sums awarded in each year; and if he will make a statement; [112644]

(2) how many people were waiting for a decision on their retirement pension forecast at the last date for which figures are available; how many had been waiting for *(a)* in excess of three months, *(b)* six months and *(c)* a year; and if he will make a statement; [112645]

(3) what plans he has to improve the time taken to issue retirement pension forecasts; and if he will make a statement. [112643]

Mr. Rooker: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Bob Russell, dated 6 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your Parliamentary Questions about Retirement Pension forecasts.

There are no provisions for payment of a penalty payment for the late processing of a retirement pension forecast.

The Benefits Agency receives approximately 600,000 applications for a pension forecast each year. The current target for issuing the reply to applicant's is 95% within 40 working days of their receipt. Actual achievement has been affected by problems we have experienced with NIRS2, however last month we actually achieved 90.3%.

There are no plans to change this target.

The table attached shows the number of outstanding pension forecasts as at 1 March.

I hope this is helpful.

Outstanding pension forecasts as at 1 March 2000

Forecasts	*Number of forecasts involved*	*Reason for delay*
Forecasts waiting to be processed	49,965	This amount of available work is the norm for this time of year. 96 per cent. of this work is still within target date
3 months	773	Retirement Pension Forecasting and Advice Unit are waiting for information to be supplied by different areas of Inland Revenue
6 months	15	Retirement Pension Forecasting and Advice Unit are waiting for information to be supplied by different areas of Inland Revenue
1 year	0	—

Poverty

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* families and *(b)* ethnic minority families are living on below half-average income. [113467]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of families and ethnic minority families below half average income 1997–98

Millions

	BHC	*AHC*
Including the self-employed		
Families	5.2	7.1
Ethnic minority families	0.5	0.8
Excluding the self-employed		
Families	4.3	6.1
Ethnic minority families	0.4	0.7

Notes:

1. The latest information available is for 1997–98 derived from Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data. The 1979–96/7 HBAI publication presents estimates of the income distribution of individuals by ethnic group. A copy of this is in the Library.
2. The definition used of a family is a single adult or a couple, together with any dependent children. A family is defined as ethnic minority if the head of the family is non-White.
3. The HBAI estimates for 1997–98 are taken from the Family Resources Survey and relate to Great Britain. All estimates are subject to sampling error.
4. The figures are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs (BHC) and After Housing Costs (AHC) in line with HBAI conventions. Figures are also provided including and excluding the self-employed reflecting concerns over the accuracy of income information for the self-employed at the bottom of the income distribution.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for the Benefit Agency's study of family credit accuracy (i) the number, (ii) the percentage and (iii) the monetary value, of cases found to be *(a)* erroneous, *(b)* actually fraudulent, *(c)* having a high suspicion of fraud and *(d)* having a low suspicion of fraud. [113462]

Mr. Rooker: The Social Security Select Committee published the results of the Benefits Agency study in February 1999, a copy of which is available in the Library. The figures it contains are not a reliable guide because the study was not based on a statistically valid sample. This was due to the small sample size in a pilot study.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's zero tolerance approach to benefit fraud by *(a)* individuals and *(b)* organised criminal groups. [111570]

Mr. Rooker: We set out our strategy for combating fraud and reducing error in "Safeguarding Social Security", published on 23 March 1999. We are putting this strategy into practice with strong and sensible safeguards to ensure the right money goes to the right people. Among the new initiatives that carry this forward are the following:

New more robust powers for fraud inspectors in The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill published on 1 December. These provisions give greater clarity and allow all benefit fraud investigations to proceed on the basis of common powers.

All payments will move to automated credit transfer (ACT) from 2003 as a modern, more secure and efficient method of paying benefits. This will virtually eliminate "instrument of payment" fraud and enhance security over the life of a claim. This is expected to yield fraud savings in the region of £140 million—£240 million.

National Fraud Intelligence Unit—announced 24 January 2000—to combine the expertise of our organised fraud investigators with that of other agencies nationwide, including the police and LAs.

From the spring, we will launch a hard hitting TV campaign, aimed at getting the public onside in the fight against fraud. This will aim to shift public attitudes and promote intolerance of those who defraud the system.

Strengthened gateway to Income Support—When we came into office, two out of five Income Support claims were paid without enough evidence. We have halved that. We are insisting on claimants producing more evidence before Income Support is paid. This will save over a £1 billion during the course of this Parliament.

Verification Framework

Sets rigorous standards for Local Authorities (LAs) in verifying HB/CTB claims, including targeted visiting. Key measure to promote fraud prevention and consistent standards of administration across LAs. £15 million funding distributed between the first wave of 84 LAs implementing in 1998–99.

Extra funding of £100 million to enable all local authorities to implement the Framework from 1999–2000. The number of LAs starting to implement is constantly increasing and 234 LAs have so far received funding. Strategy in place to encourage remaining LAs to implement the Framework.

Section 19 of Fraud Act took effect in September 1999. This requires all Housing Benefit claimants to provide detailed personal information that is sufficient for a National Insurance number to be traced and confirmed or issued.

Royal Mail "do not redirect"

Powers introduced under Sections 20 and 21 of the Fraud Act 1997 to prevent fraudulent claimants using the Royal Mail's postal redirection arrangements to submit benefit claims from false addresses; also to provide access to Royal Mail redirection

database allowing the Department to cross-match against data held by Royal Mail. Available to all LAs from 1 February 1999. Over 250 LAs now signed up.

Remote Access Terminals

Remote Access (computer) Terminals (RAT) provide LAs with direct access to some benefit information held by the Benefits Agency. These terminals have contributed towards reducing the time it takes to process claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

To date, 364 LAs have at least one RAT installed. By the end of March 2000 this figure is expected to increase to 393. Additional terminals are being made available to those LAs using them to capacity.

Benefits Payments (Post Office)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy that, after 2003, pensioners will continue to be able to draw their pension in cash from a post office without having to pay a charge for doing so. [113137]

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the impact of the decision by banks to charge for the use of automated telling machines owned by other banks on the ability of benefit recipients to obtain benefits in cash from post offices. [113516]

Mr. Rooker: Starting in 2003 we will be moving to a more modern, secure and efficient method of paying benefits through automated credit transfer (ACT). Payment by ACT will become the norm for paying benefits.

We have given an assurance that benefit recipients, whether paid by ACT or otherwise, will continue to have a choice of where they access their cash, with those who wish to collect at post offices still being able to do so. The recent statement about bank charges has no effect on this commitment.

However, we recognise that people will expect to be able to collect the exact amount of their benefits and without incurring charges. Arrangements will be put in place to ensure this happens.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was the average weekly level of Housing Benefit paid to *(a)* tenants of registered social landlords and *(b)* tenants of private landlords affected by the four weeks in arrears rule in the last 12 months for which figures are available; [112653]

(2) what proportion of Housing Benefit claimants are *(a)* tenants of registered social landlords and *(b)* tenants of private landlords affected by the four weeks in arrears rule. [112621]

Angela Eagle: The answer is in the table.

Housing Benefit recipients, tenants of registered social landlords and private landlords, Great Britain—May 1998

Type	*All recipients*	*Paid four weeks in arrears*	*Proportion paid four weeks in arrears (Percentage)*	*Average weekly amount of HB (£)*
Tenants of registered social landlords	840,000	242,000	29	54.50
Tenants of private landlords	971,000	352,000	36	61.10

Notes:
1. Figures are the latest available.
2. The number of recipients are rounded to the nearest thousand, proportions to the nearest whole per cent. and average amounts of benefit to the nearest ten pence.
3. Recipients refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.

Source:
Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiries taken on the second Thursday in May 1998.

Social Security Act 1992

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what reports he has requested under section 139A of the Social Security Act 1992; and if he will make a statement. [112704]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has, to date, asked the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate to inspect and provide 103 reports to him under section 139A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, on the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit by local authorities.

Stakeholder Pension Scheme

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the implication of delays in resolving the problems associated with the NIRS2 computer system for the date of implementation of the stakeholder pension scheme. [112949]

Mr. Rooker: Detailed proposals are being developed for the implementation of stakeholder pensions and we do not expect the intended implementation date of April 2001 to be affected by the NIRS2 computer system.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress his Department has made towards the procurement of new information and communication technology for the Child Support Agency. [111776]

Angela Eagle: The Department is continuing to work closely with Affinity (the Department's private sector partner) to finalise the Information Technology support to be provided for the Child Support Agency, and to develop and agree the contractual arrangements.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Russia

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he discussed plutonium policy during his recent visit to Moscow; and if he will make a statement. [112358]

Mr. Vaz: FCO Ministers and officials hold regular discussions with the Russians on proliferation issues. The latest round of talks is taking place at official level on 3 March in Moscow.

Her Majesty's Government announced in December that it would be undertaking a Cross-cutting Review on Nuclear Safety in the Former Soviet Union. Plutonium disposition is one of the issues under discussion within the review.

Stability Pact

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to him by the United States Secretary of State, about the progress made in implementing the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. [112483]

Mr. Vaz: We have worked closely with the United States Government on the Stability Pact since its launch in June 1999. The Foreign Secretary regularly discusses the full range of issues relating to the Balkans with Mrs. Albright.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the head of UNMIK, about the rate at which contributions are being made to the resources of UNMIK. [112487]

Mr. Vaz: The UK, along with its EU and G8 partners, has been discussing regularly with UNMIK the need for timely international support. The UK has already given $2 million this year and is in discussion with UNMIK about the allocation of a further $8 million. The EU has earmarked 45 meuros this year in budgetary support to UNMIK of which a first tranche of 10 meuros is scheduled to be made on 1 March.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to him by Kosovo Police Commissioner Sven Fredriksen about resources needed to train local police in Kosovo. [112484]

Mr. Vaz: The UK is in regular contact with the Head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, Daan Everts, about all aspects of the OSCE's efforts in Kosovo, including police training. We are not aware of any representations made by Commissioner Fredriksen to the UK for additional resources needed to train local police in Kosovo.

We have recently increased our contribution of international police trainers to the OSCE Police School to 40 officers (25 per cent. of the international training staff currently in post).

So far 349 recruits have graduated from the Police School. A further 250 recruits started their training on 22 February 2000.

We have also offered to pay £50,000 towards the cost of providing an independent water supply to the OSCE Police Training School.

Sanctions Policy

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 841–42W, on sanctions policy, if he will list the friends of the Iraqi regime to whom he referred. [112917]

Mr. Hain: The reference covers all those who in one way or another lend their weight to the Iraqi government's attempts to have sanctions lifted without fulfilling in their entirety the obligations laid on it by the international community through the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Punjab

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's study of the potential for establishing consulate facilities within the Punjab. [113002]

Mr. Hain: Feasibility studies into the possibility of improving our services to visa applicants in Chandigarh, Ahmedabad, Sylhet and Lahore have been initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz). These studies are being carried out now by our Posts in the region. We expect the exercise to be completed by mid-year and the results assessed before the summer recess.

The exercise does not include a review of the consular services offered to British Citizens by existing offices in the region.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the items or subjects proposed by each member Government and institution of the European Union for discussion at the IGC, relating to *(a)* unanimity qualified majority voting, *(b)* the scope of co-decision with the European Parliament, *(c)* the absorption of the European Convention of Human Rights into the European Union and Community Treaties and *(d)* other proposals. [113016]

Mr. Vaz: The European Parliament and Commission gave their formal Opinions earlier this year. Member states have not made formal proposals. Negotiations have been proceeding on the basis of Presidency discussion papers, which the Presidency has promised to make available on the internet. The Government's position on the range of IGC issues is set out in the White Paper which was presented to the House on 15 February.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the date and location of meetings and scheduled meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference for a New European Treaty, the names of Ministers attending each meeting and

the topics *(a)* discussed and *(b)* to be discussed; and if a report of the IGC's proceedings will be made prior to the next meeting of the European Council on 23 and 24 March. [113017]

Mr. Vaz: There has been one meeting at Ministerial level and two meetings of the Government Representatives' Group. The full provisional timetable for meetings, including topics to be discussed, is available on the internet at www.portugal.ue-2000.pt. A list of member states' personal representatives will be placed in the Library of the House.

The Presidency is expected to issue a preliminary IGC report to the Lisbon European Council on 23–24 March.

EU Documents

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which EU documents are expected to be placed before the European Council at its meeting on 23 and 24 March; what parliamentary *(a)* debate and *(b)* scrutiny each such document has been or will be given; and what will be the status of such documents following the meeting. [112998]

Mr. Vaz: The European Council in Lisbon on 23–24 March is an extraordinary European Council meeting. We do not expect any proposals for Community legislation to be presented to Lisbon.

We have received a paper for Lisbon on "Employment, economic reforms and social cohesion—towards a Europe based on innovation and knowledge" from the Presidency, which we have already presented to the European Scrutiny Committee for information. We will also be sending the European Scrutiny Committee the Government's position on the Lisbon European Council and a paper by the Commission in advance of the meeting.

We expect that there will be a parliamentary statement on the outcome of Lisbon after the meeting.

Iraq

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the decisions under the Iraq oil for food scheme to allocate money from the relevant United Nations escrow account for items other than food and medicine for the Iraqi people; what was the amount in each case; and what position the UK representative at the UN took on each matter. [113064]

Mr. Hain: The Office of the Iraq Programme has received over 17,500 applications under the Oil for Food programme. The total value of these contracts, including the cost of shipping comes to about US$ 14.5 billion.

As my hon. Friend will appreciate, the volume of applications received under the Oil for Food programme make it impractical to provide the information requested in full.

The United Kingdom has no objection to the vast majority of Oil for Food applications. Over 96 per cent. of all contracts submitted under the Oil for Food programme have been approved by the Office of the Iraq Programme. Of the 17,500 Oil for Food applications received by the Office of the Iraq programme the United Kingdom has, of today's date, only 166 contracts on hold. The majority of holds are placed on contracts while a request is made for additional information so that we can ensure that the terms of the contract are consistent with the relevant Security Council resolutions on Iraq.

British Citizenship

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will introduce a Bill offering British citizenship to the people of the British Overseas Territories. [113270]

Mr. Battle: As soon as practicable, given the need for preparatory work before the introduction of a bill, and the Government's priorities in the Legislative Programme.

Visas

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the charge in *(a)* the relevant local currency and *(b)* pounds sterling equivalent for an application for a visitor's visa in (i) India, (ii) Pakistan and (iii) Bangladesh in each of the last five years for which information is available. [113140]

Mr. Vaz: The current charges in pounds sterling for the various categories of non-settlement visas are as follows:

	£
Single entry	33
Multiple entry (6 months)	45
Multiple entry (1 year)	55
Multiple entry (2 years)	65
Multiple entry (5 years)	80
Long term non-settlement	50

Visa fees are set at a standard sterling rate globally and are converted into local currency according to the commercial rate of exchange. Fees expressed in local currency may therefore, vary from week to week.

The charges for non-settlement visas have remained unchanged since August 1995, apart from the fee for the 5-year multiple entry visa. This was reduced from £130 to £80 in June 1997.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the current arrangements for assessing sponsors' particulars in respect of applications for visitors' visas from *(a)* India, *(b)* Pakistan and *(c)* Bangladesh; when they were last amended; and for what reason. [113139]

Mr. Vaz: The precise documentation required by sponsors of visa applicants varies according to the type of visa applied for and the circumstances of the individual case. Guidance on the type of documentation required is available to applicants and their sponsors in leaflets available from the FCO and from Visa Sections overseas. This information is also available on the FCO website www.fco.gov.uk.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications for visitors' visas were received from

(a) India, *(b)* Pakistan and *(c)* Bangladesh; and what percentage of these were refused in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [113141]

Mr. Vaz: The statistics for non-settlement applications over the last five years in the countries requested are as follows:

	1999		*1998*		*1997*		*1996*		*1995*	
	Received	*Refused %*	*Received*	*Refused %*	*Received*	*Refused %*	*Received*	*Refused %*	*Received*	*Refused %*
India										
Bombay	69,455	7.8	61,450	7.4	54,028	7.9	50,980	7.7	47,148	6.7
Calcutta	9,545	1.7	8,678	1.0	9,149	1.2	8,259	1.5	7,652	1.8
Madras	26,621	3.5	23,544	3.6	18,720	3.4	16,382	1.7	15,196	1.6
New Delhi	64,430	16.4	57,804	13.3	52,078	12.7	51,187	16.6	45,280	15.6
Pakistan										
Islamabad	40,537	21.4	38,250	14.7	23,828	20.3	31,354	26.0	35,597	25.7
Karachi	29,725	13.1	27,536	11.3	26,243	7.0	27,873	10.5	28,342	10.8
Bangladesh										
Dhaka	14,983	22.4	12,822	21.7	13,115	27.2	13,808	26.7	14,425	30.1

Further details of statistics on non-settlement visa applications can be found in the Global Entry Clearance Statistics, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library for the years 1994–98. Statistics for 1999 are currently being compiled and will be placed in the Library in due course.

China

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he made of the human rights record of the People's Republic of China before his Department became involved in the exchange arrangements between the Scottish Police College and the State Police of the People's Republic of China; [112800]

(2) if he will make a statement about the role of his Department in the exchange arrangements between the Scottish Police College and the State Police of the People's Republic of China. [112799]

Mr. Battle: The promotion of human rights, including the principle of the rule of law, is an integral part of our relationship with China. We have a critical dialogue with the Chinese Government which enables us both to express our concern about their human rights record and work with them to improve Chinese practices in specific areas, particularly through training schemes and other cooperative projects.

The need to ensure that respect for human rights is a central feature of police reform in China lay behind our positive response to the Chinese request for training in the UK for some senior police officers. The Scottish Police College training was funded in part by the FCO's ASSIST programme budget, and stresses the values of democratic policing and the application of human rights practices in police work.

Iran

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations the Government have made to the Government of Iran about the repression, persecution and imprisonment of members of the Baha'i community in Iran. [112964]

Mr. Hain: We remain concerned at reports of the death sentences passed on three members of the Baha'i community, Mr. Najafabadi, Mr. Moghaddam and Mr. Khulusi in Mashad on 3 February. The picture has been somewhat confused by the recent statement by Mr. Sabeqi, spokesman for the Iranian Judiciary, that no such sentences had been passed. The Portuguese Presidency, on behalf of EU partners, presented a demarche to the Iranian authorities expressing our concern and seeking clarification as to the current status of these three gentlemen on 17 February. We took similar bilateral action with the Iranian Ambassador on 21 February.

We regularly raise with the Iranian authorities our serious concern about treatment of the Baha'is. Persecution of individuals on religious grounds is totally unacceptable.

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to the Iranian authorities following the death sentences imposed on three Iranian Baha'is on 3 February; what is the policy of the Government towards Iran's treatment of the Baha'i community; if the Government will support the resolution condemning Iran at the UN Commission on Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [112771]

Mr. Hain: We remain concerned at reports of the death sentences passed on Mr. Najafabadi, Mr. Moghaddam and Mr. Khulusi in Mashad on 3 February. The picture has been somewhat confused by the recent statement by Mr. Sabeqi, spokesman for the Iranian Judiciary, that no such sentences had been passed. The Portuguese Presidency, on behalf of EU partners, presented a demarche to the Iranian authorities expressing our concern and seeking clarification as to the current status of these three gentlemen on 17 February. We took similar bilateral action with the Iranian Ambassador on 21 February.

We regularly raise with the Iranian authorities our serious concern about treatment of the Baha'is. Persecution of individuals on religious grounds is totally unacceptable. The EU Sponsored United Nations General Assembly resolution on Human Rights in Iran adopted on 18 December 1999 reaffirmed international concern about their situation. We and our EU partners will again be tabling the United Nations Commission on Human Rights resolution on Human Rights in Iran for the Commission in Geneva in April.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he received reports of the death sentences passed on three Iranian Bahai's; what representations he has made relating to this; and if he will make a statement. [113273]

Mr. Hain: We first learnt of death sentences being passed on three members of the Baha'i community, Mr. Najafabadi, Mr. Moghaddam and Mr. Khulusi in Mashad shortly after the sentences were announced on 3 February. The picture has been somewhat confused by the recent statement by Mr. Sadeqi, spokesman for the Iranian Judiciary, that no such sentences had been passed. The Portuguese Presidency, on behalf of EU partners, presented a demarche to the Iranian authorities expressing our concern and seeking clarification as to the current status of these three gentlemen on 17 February. We took similar bilateral action with the Iranian Ambassador on 21 February.

We regularly raise with the Iranian authorities our serious concern about treatment of the Baha'is. Persecution of individuals on religious grounds is totally unacceptable.

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Government of Iran about the treatment and planned execution of members of the Baha'i community. [112801]

Mr. Hain: We remain concerned at reports of the death sentences passed on Mr. Najafabadi, Mr. Moghaddam and Mr. Khulusi in Mashad on 3 February. The picture has been somewhat confused by the recent statement by Mr. Sadeqi, spokesman for the Iranian Judiciary, that no such sentences had been passed. The Portuguese Presidency, on behalf of EU partners, presented a demarche to the Iranian authorities expressing our concern and seeking clarification as to the current status of these three gentlemen on 17 February. This was followed up with a further demarche in Tehran on 19 February. We took similar bilateral action with the Iranian Ambassador on 21 February.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mozambique

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of difficulties relating to customs controls being encountered by those taking goods into Mozambique by *(a)* air and *(b)* road. [113455]

Clare Short: There have been some difficulties in clearing relief items through Mozambican customs as officials were initially overwhelmed by the influx of goods. To increase the flow of items through customs, an additional three customs officials were positioned in Maputo airport by the Mozambican authorities. Staff in the British High Commission have also been working tirelessly to assist these efforts.

Since 1996, DFID and its predecessor the ODA has also been providing substantial support to the Mozambican government for their programme to reform and modernise its Customs Department. We have provided some £10 million in support for this project thus far.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department first asked the Ministry of Defence to provide helicopters to help in the Mozambique crisis. [113457]

Clare Short: We first asked the Ministry of Defence what military assets were available in the region on Saturday 26 February. At that point we were informed that no military assets were available within 3,000 miles of Mozambique.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department first sought helicopters to assist in the Mozambique crisis. [113458]

Clare Short: We provided the World Food Programme with US$1 million for helicopter operations on Saturday 26 February. This support allowed the South African Defence Force to continue their essential rescue and relief operations. Commercial helicopters were sought simultaneously.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if her Department has hired helicopters from Captain McKenzie of Nairobi to help in the Mozambique crisis. [113459]

Clare Short: We have received many offers for the hire of helicopters both from the region and also further afield. My officials were grateful for Captain McKenzie's offer of assistance, but following advice from our air operations experts DFID contracted helicopters through alternative regional sources.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department was first informed of an impending flood crisis in Mozambique; and what action she took at that stage. [113456]

Clare Short: My Department has permanent staff based in Maputo who have been monitoring the floods since mid January. In collaboration with our field based staff, specialists from my Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department began detailed surveillance of the floods on 24 January. We deployed two humanitarian specialists to the region on 11 February. They conducted rapid assessments and liaised with the Mozambican authorities and humanitarian organisations over priority needs. We despatched a consignment of over 400 tents on 12 February from the UK to Maputo for the Red Cross to distribute for emergency shelter to those made homeless. We also supported the early deployment of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination Team. Between 11 and 16 February, my Department channelled some £1.1 million for immediate relief through the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF, International Federation of the Red Cross, World Vision, Oxfam and ActionAid.

Following a sudden deterioration in the situation overnight on 25 February, staff from the field contacted DFID London on Saturday 26 February. We immediately contacted the United Nations at a high level to facilitate a quick response by the UN humanitarian organisations. On the same afternoon, recognising the seriousness of the situation, DFID provided the World Food Programme

with US$1 million for helicopter operations. This support allowed the South African Defence Force to continue their essential rescue and relief operations.

We have also mobilised an additional nine helicopters, including four from the RAF, to assist with the rescue and relief effort. To assist with the effective tasking of all helicopters, we have seconded a logistics expert into the World Food Programme. But helicopters are not the total answer. We also deployed 70 boats and specialist trained crews, together with a number of large capacity self-inflating life rafts.

We have also arranged through the Ministry of Defence for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Fort George to be deployed off Mozambique. The ship will arrive at the end of this week and will provide a further five helicopters to assist in the air relief operations. DFID has already contributed over £7.2 million for rescue and immediate relief including the provision of shelter, water, sanitation and health support. This funding has been channelled through the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF, World Food Programme, Red Cross, ActionAid, Oxfam, Save the Children Fund and World Vision. These activities are being co-ordinated with the Mozambican authorities. We stand ready to provide further assistance.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make it her policy to procure the services of all available lifting helicopters in the armed services for deployment in relief operations in Mozambique; and if she will make a statement. [112745]

Clare Short: We will continue to base our decisions during humanitarian emergencies on the needs on the ground; resources available locally and regionally, details of assets available from the Ministry of Defence, their speed of response and operational viability and how they compare to available alternatives. We will always seek to use the UK development assistance budget as effectively as possible in order to maximise the benefit of the budget for people affected by humanitarian emergencies.

In addition to providing US$1 million to the World Food Programme for the continued operation of the South African Defence Force helicopters on 26 February. A further five helicopters and support crew were sourced from the region on February 29.

On 1 March we provided resources for the Ministry of Defence to deploy four Royal Air Force Puma helicopters to Mozambique to assist with the rescue and relief efforts. On 2 March we also provided resources to the MOD to deploy the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship Fort George to the coast of Mozambique so that its five Sea King helicopters can assist with the relief operation.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment her Department has made of the problems of soil erosion and deforestation in the hinterland of the Mozambique river system; and if she will make a statement. [112699]

Mr. Foulkes: DFID has programmes that address soil conservation in both countries that form the hinterland of Mozambique's main river systems. In South Africa we support water resource management and forest conservation programmes within the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. In Zimbabwe, DFID is helping communities in the head waters of the Save and Runde rivers to reduce erosion and siltation while working to form user-led catchment councils to manage better the water resources in their areas.

United States

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what meetings *(a)* she and *(b)* other Ministers in her Department held with members and officials of the United States Government during the visit to the United States between 25 and 29 September 1999; what was the date and location of each meeting; and who was present from the United States Government at each meeting. [113091]

Mr. Foulkes: The Secretary of State for International Development met with Brady Anderson, Administrator, USAID, on 26 September at the offices of the World bank in Washington while attending the 1999 Annual Meetings of the Board of Governors of the IMF/World bank.

Albania

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the nature of the assistance provided by the European Union in exchange for the collection of weapons in Albania, with reference to the Council Decision of 17 December 1999 (1999/846/CFSP). [112347]

Mr. Foulkes: The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the lead organisation in the Weapons in Exchange for Development pilot programme in Gramsh, Albania, which has recently been extended to the Elbasan and Peshkpja regions. The Council Decision of 17 December 1999 enabled the European Commission's earlier pledge of 500,000 euros to be applied across the extended pilot programme.

The UK has contributed bilaterally to this programme since early 1999 by providing two ammunition technical officers to UNDP to oversee the collection process. We are also funding a feasibility study on the long-term safe disposal of ammunition and ordnance in Albania, the recommendations of which will be passed to NATO, OSCE and other donors.

China

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received concerning conditions in state orphanages in China; and if she will make a statement. [112831]

Mr. Foulkes: We have received no recent representations concerning conditions in state orphanages in China. Our Department support efforts to reform and improve the conditions for children in care. We are currently supporting a British NGO to work with the Chinese authorities to improve the conditions of children who are institutionalised, many of whom are orphans.

Romania

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will publish the results of the review, conducted by her Department in 1998–99, of the activities of the European Children's Trust in

Romania supported by the Know-how Fund; what action was taken by her Department as a result of that review; and if she will make a statement. [113127]

Mr. Foulkes: I assume the review to which the hon. Member refers concerns a report that DFID commissioned by the National Institute of Social Work in 1998. This report evaluated a programme of child welfare activities in Romania that we supported between 1995 and 1998, undertaken by the European Children's Trust. I will place a copy of the report, which was passed to the Romanian authorities, in the Library of the House. No specific action was necessary as a result of the report, but relevant lessons identified by the report's authors have been taken into account in discussions on further assistance in this field, currently under way with the Romanian Government.

HEALTH

Retinitis Pigmentosa and Usher Syndrome

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the number of people in the UK suffering from *(a)* retinitis pigmentosa and *(b)* Usher syndrome. [111994]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, the British Retinitis Pigmentosa Society estimates that there are 25,000 people with the condition in the United Kingdom; figures for the incidence of Usher syndrome in Britain are incomplete.

Indemnity Cover (GPs)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how he will assess whether a provider of approved indemnity cover for GPs has sufficient reserves to meet its liabilities; [112413]

(2) what criteria will be used to approve providers of indemnity cover for GPs under the Health Act 1999; and what steps he is taking to ensure that the approval procedure does not discriminate between classes of indemnifier; [112412]

(3) if the procedure for approving provision of indemnity cover for GPs will ensure that indemnifiers comply with requirements on insolvency margins equivalent to those made under the Insurance Companies Act 1982; and if he will make a statement. [112414]

Mr. Denham: Section 9 of the Health Act 1999 gives the Secretary of State power to require Part II practitioners to hold approved indemnity cover with an approved body. The Secretary of State has power in Regulations to prescribe the circumstances in which such cover shall be required, and the terms for the cover.

This enables the Secretary of State to ensure that cover will be approved only if it is adequate to meet the anticipated level of claims. This will apply both to cover provided by the medical protection organisations and commercial insurers. It is intended that the regulations will ensure through the approval mechanism that cover will still meet claims that arise from events when the clinician was covered but only come to light later, even if this is after the period of cover has ceased. Other criteria are currently the subject of consultation with interested organisations.

The purpose of section 9 is to provide greater protection to patients awarded damages following negligence claims. The approval process will be open and transparent, the intention will be to ensure the highest level of protection reasonably achievable in the current climate.

NHS Funding

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which regional development agencies have to date submitted representations to his Department regarding the level of NHS funding. [112359]

Mr. Denham: I am not aware of any representations from regional development agencies to the Department regarding the level of National Health Service funding.

Health Authority Budgets

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the budget per head of population for each health authority area in England for 1999–2000. [112747]

Mr. Denham: The table shows the health authority allocations per weighted head of population for 1999–2000.

Health authority	*1999–2000 allocation*[1] *£000*	*Allocation per weighted head of population £*
Avon	582,510	622
Barking and Havering	256,500	623
Barnet	209,057	644
Barnsley	156,588	612
Bedfordshire	312,909	606
Berkshire	431,001	606
Bexley and Greenwich	289,039	662
Birmingham	681,946	632
Bradford	312,844	621
Brent and Harrow	310,879	649
Bromley	183,609	626
Buckinghamshire	368,084	613
Bury and Rochdale	249,286	622
Calderdale and Kirklees	369,064	631
Cambridge and Huntingdon	233,706	621
Camden and Islington	320,971	651
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	317,079	643
County Durham	411,001	613
Coventry	200,882	607
Croydon	202,682	621
Doncaster	198,465	629
Dorset	446,631	643
Dudley	183,018	622
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	475,900	625
East and North Hertfordshire	290,037	624
East Kent	395,915	640
East Lancashire	349,892	624
East London and The City	491,634	603
East Norfolk	380,037	633
East Riding	360,233	626
East Surrey	244,052	641
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	505,366	642
Enfield and Haringey	323,495	633
Gateshead and South Tyneside	255,537	625
Gloucestershire	334,591	652
Herefordshire	98,713	628
Hillingdon	154,353	631
Isle of Wight	92,390	674
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	286,339	576

Health authority	1999–2000 allocation [1] £000	Allocation per weighted head of population £
Kingston and Richmond	208,380	644
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	573,116	628
Leeds	469,356	632
Leicestershire	517,887	613
Lincolnshire	394,990	632
Liverpool	350,296	644
Manchester	349,914	645
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	422,995	643
Morecambe Bay	205,730	656
Newcastle and North Tyneside	333,829	634
North and East Devon	300,720	640
North and Mid Hampshire	291,934	638
North Cheshire	201,585	639
North Cumbria	198,917	630
North Derbyshire	228,364	626
North Essex	503,561	624
North Nottinghamshire	236,475	621
North Staffordshire	304,458	614
North West Anglia	250,526	616
North West Lancashire	321,635	626
North Yorkshire	434,879	626
Northamptonshire	326,245	638
Northumberland	196,638	629
Nottingham	391,712	614
Oxfordshire	327,812	610
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	330,353	627
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	296,944	658
Rotherham	159,696	626
Salford and Trafford	310,166	644
Sandwell	205,838	622
Sefton	192,610	637
Sheffield	367,283	640
Shropshire	247,650	626
Solihull	122,698	636
Somerset	290,097	634
South and West Devon	383,565	641
South Cheshire	405,696	631
South Derbyshire	340,745	615
South Essex	417,802	607
South Humber	199,138	650
South Lancashire	185,797	643
South Staffordshire	322,868	633
Southampton and South West Hamptonshire	327,774	629
St. Helens and Knowsley	237,210	627
Stockport	176,374	631
Suffolk	397,601	638
Sunderland	201,223	625
Tees	370,553	624
Wakefield	211,891	632
Walsall	163,794	623
Warwickshire	293,422	645
West Hertfordshire	317,538	638
West Kent	562,935	632
West Pennine	297,286	618
West Surrey	371,000	643
West Sussex	467,090	624
Wigan and Bolton	373,322	608
Wiltshire	345,684	639
Wirral	226,913	642
Wolverhampton	160,766	622
Worcestershire	303,405	639

[1] Includes targeted funding for health authorities with HAZs

London Hospital Trusts

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the actions being taken by the Government with the London health authorities to reduce the deficits of the London hospital health trusts. [112684]

Mr. Denham: The London Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive is working closely with health authorities and HNS trusts managing difficult financial positions. Health authorities and NHS trusts are expected to agree plans to achieve financial balance over the shortest possible period.

NHS Staff (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each year from 1992 to date the number of *(a)* nurses, *(b)* doctors and *(c)* consultants, employed by NHS trusts in Worcestershire; and if he will make a statement. [112809]

Mr. Denham: The table illustrates that the number of nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, together with hospital medical staff employed in Worcestershire, has increased during the period 1992 to 1998. While the figures are not directly comparable due to hospital reconfigurations throughout the period, the figures for 1997 and 1998 clearly demonstrate the Government's commitment to continue to increase the number of doctors and nurses working in the National Health Service.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services: Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff and hospital medical staff, employed within North Worcestershire HA and Worcester and District HA [1,2] as at 30 September each year

	Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff [3,4]		Hospital medical doctors [5]	
	Whole time equivalents	Numbers (headcount)	Numbers (headcount)	Of which medical Consultants
1992	1,500	1,820	120	—
1993	3,420	4,300	120	—
1994	3,340	4,240	200	70
1995	2,940	3,850	220	80
1996	2,790	3,610	490	160
1997	2,760	3,740	520	180
1998	2,890	3,960	540	180

[1] Staff from the health authorities and other trusts within both HAs are included in these figures.

[2] In 1993, 1994 and 1995 there was also North Worcestershire HA in the Worcestershire Region.

[3] 1992 figures exclude agency staff and include learners.

[4] 1993 to 1998 figures exclude agency staff and learners.

[5] Before 1996, some hospital medical staff were employed directly by West Midlands Regional Authority, and so are not included in these figures.

[6] Five or less and greater than zero.

Notes:

A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995.

Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years.

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10:—zero.

Source:

Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census.

Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census.

Health Visitors (London)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the reasons for the disparity in the allocation of whole-time equivalent health visitors employed by Parkside Community Health Trust between the health authority in Brent and Harrow and the Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority. [112811]

Mr. Denham: Decisions about the level of investment in health visiting services are made by health authorities, in discussion with Primary Care Groups and/or Primary Care Trusts and National Health Service trusts, and take account of the identified health needs of the local population. It would, therefore, be misleading to compare the service provided by Parkside Community Health Trust to these two health authorities on the basis of whole time equivalents only. The three Primary Care Groups in Brent are currently developing integrated nursing strategies which will take a broader view of population need and review the current deployment of all nursing and therapy provision, including health visiting.

Lynton Cottage Hospital

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the suitability of Lynton Cottage Hospital, North Devon, for the provision of the new intermediate care he has announced. [112945]

Mr. Denham: It is the responsibility of local health authorities, National Health Service trusts, and Primary Care Groups to devise local plans to meet the intermediate care needs of the people of North Devon is a matter for the North and East Devon Health Authority, North Devon PCG and Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust to assess.

NHS Direct

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many callers to NHS Direct in November 1999, December 1999, January 2000 and February 2000 were advised *(a)* to visit an accident and emergency unit, *(b)* to contact a general practitioner and *(c)* to call on the emergency services. [112734]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Between November and January, on average 36 per cent. of callers were directed to self-care. During this period, NHS Direct helped to take pressure from other busy NHS services, and directed people to the most appropriate level of care.

The table shows the number of callers from NHS Direct who were advised (i) to visit and accident and emergency unit, (ii) to contact a general practitioner, (iii) to call on the emergency services during November, December and January. The information for February is not available.

Month	*Total callers*	*999 emergency services*	*Accident and emergency*	*General practitioner*
November	120,000	2,200	8,500	35,000
December[1]	213,000	4,600	13,400	72,800
January	262,000	4,500	15,000	85,000

[1] December data do not include information from South West London or East Midlands

Health Authorities

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in rank order the allocations per head of population to each health authority in England in each year for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000. [113313]

Mr. Denham: *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Allocations for 1999–2000 are not comparable with those for 1996–97 to 1998–99 which cover hospital and community health services (HCHS) only. 1999–2000 was the first year of unified allocations which cover HCHS, prescribing and discretionary general medical services.

1999–2000 allocations include increases for targeted funding for health authorities with health action zones.

Committee on Safety of Medicines

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the members of the Committee on Safety of Medicines who have, in each year from 1987 to date, declared outside interests in *(a)* SmithKline Beecham, *(b)* SmithKline and French laboratories, *(c)* Merck Sharpe and Dohme, *(d)* Pasteur Merieux and *(e)* the Wellcome Foundation. [112835]

Ms Stuart: This information is published annually in the "Medicines Act 1968 Advisory Bodies—Annual Reports" copies of which, dating back to 1987, are available in the Library, The reports include lists of interests in the pharmaceutical industry declared by each committee member. The 1999 report, which is due to be published in July this year, will include the entries in the table relating to members of the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) (this information is correct as at 6 March 2000). In addition, Professor J. H. Scarffe is Head of Programmes (Career Development) at the Wellcome Trust.

CMS member	*Name of company*	*Nature of interest*
Professor J. Chipman	SmithKline Beecham	Non-personal—research grants
Professor J. Darbyshire	SmithKline Beecham	Non-personal—support for clinical trials
Professor H. Dargie	SmithKline Beecham	Personal—consultancy and non-personal—clinical trial
Dr. M. Donaghy	SmithKline Beecham	Personal—shareholder
Dr. B. Evans	SmithKline Beecham	Personal—fees and shares
Professor E. Gordon-Smith	Pasteur-Merieux	Non-personal—research grants
Professor M. Langman	Merck Sharpe and Dohme	Non-personal—support/research collaborations
Dr. A. MacGowan	SmithKline Beecham	Personal—consultancy and non-personal—fellowship
Professor B. Park	SmithKline Beecham	Non-personal—lectureship
Professor J. F. Smyth	SmithKline Beecham	Personal—occasional meetings and non-personal—clinical trials support
Professor I. Weller	SmithKline Beecham	Non-personal—trials and study
Professor K. Woodhouse	SmithKline Beecham	Non-personal—clinical research trials
	Merck Sharpe and Dohme	Non-personal—clinical research trials

Hospital Complaints (London)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many formal complaints were made by *(a)* patients and *(b)* their families against each of the London hospitals for the years (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999. [112683]

Ms Stuart: Figures on National Health Service complaints are not collected in the format requested. Data are collected for written complaints and by financial year. These figures are published annually in a statistical report, "Handling complaints: monitoring the NHS complaints procedures—England" and copies of the reports for 1996–97 and 1997–98 have been placed in the statistical section of the Library.

Data for these years was collected for NHS trusts and health authorities on the basis of the old NHS Executive Regional Office boundaries for North and South Thames. Figures for 1998–99 will be published later this month and will be based on the NHS Executive London Regional Office boundaries.

Hospitals

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which community hospitals have closed since May 1996; how many hospital beds have been lost as a result; and if he will make a statement. [111424]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Retirement

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* health visitors *(b)* district nurses, and *(c)* school nurses will become eligible to retire at age 55 years within the next five years; and what proportion of the current workforce in each case this represents. [112453]

Mr. Denham: The available information is in the table. Numbers of school nurses are not collected centrally.

National Health Service Hospital and Community Health Services Staff (HCHS) nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff working in the health visitor and district nurse area of work by specific age in England as at 30 September 1998

whole-time equivalent

	Age				
	50	*51*	*52*	*53*	*54*
Health Visitors	420	450	410	360	360
Percentage of total health visitors	4.2	4.4	4.1	3.6	3.6
District Nurses	440	480	380	340	330
Percentage of total district nurses	3.9	4.2	3.3	3.0	2.9

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
2. Figures exclude agency staff

Source:
Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Agency Staff

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the NHS spent on employing agency staff in *(a)* pathology and *(b)* technical support in the last financial year. [112448]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not centrally available.

DEFENCE

Weapons Contracts

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many AN/PRC-138 have to be supplied to his Department within the £5 million contract awarded by his Department to the Harris Corporation. [111011]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John F. Howe to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about how many data radios (AN/PRC-138) are due to be supplied to the Department within the £5 million contract awarded to the Harris Corporation. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency (DPA).

The DPA placed a prime contract for the provision of sixty-nine of these radios (including ancillaries, spares, training and three years' support) with SERCO Technology Ltd., Waterlooville, Hampshire on 14 June 1999. The contract provides a secure data messaging capability in support of operations in the Balkans. The first deliveries were made during August 1999 and were completed by the end of November 1999.

To satisfy the requirements of this contract SERCO Technology Ltd. placed a sub-contract with the Harris Corporation.

Porton Down

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many animal experiments were carried out at Porton Down in the last year for which figures are available. [111940]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Executive Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir John Chisholm to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 7 March 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the number of animal experiments carried out at Porton Down in the last year for which figures are available.

In 1999, the number of procedures undertaken using animals at DERA's Chemical and Biological Defence Sector at Porton Down was 11501 (1 animal = 1 procedure; but note that individual animals may take part in several procedures). This figure reflects the information provided to the Home Office.

I hope this is helpful.

Duke of York's Royal Military School

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Duke of York's Royal Military School for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111771]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Duke of York's Royal Military School Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from J. A. Cummings to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to Secretary of State for Defence about (a) those targets of the Duke of York's Royal Military School for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and (b) action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of this Agency. A copy of the 98–99 Corporate and Management Plan which contains these targets is held in the House Library.

(a) (i) *The Key Targets that were achieved in 1998/99 are as follows:*

Key Target 2

To achieve 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C to 78% of candidates. Achievement was 90.1% exceeding target by 12.1%.

Key Target 3

To achieve 88% of A levels passes at grades A to E. Achievement was 95.2% exceeding target by 7.2%.

Key Target 4

To achieve 3 or more A level passes at grade A to E for 80% of candidates. Achievement was 81.8% exceeding target by 1.8%.

Key Target 6

To achieve 100% GNVQ Advanced BTEC National Diploma passes. Achievement was 100%.

Key Target 7

To achieve places in higher education for 70% of sixth form leavers. Achievement was 85% exceeding target by 15%.

Key Target 8

To achieve a pupil per capita cost of no more than £13,151. Achievement was £11,020, £2.131 less than target.

Key Target 9

To generate income of at least £452,000. Achievement £492,000, £40,000 in excess of the target.

Key Target 10

To achieve at least 260 applications for September 1999 intake. Achievement was 294.

(ii) *Key Targets that were not achieved in 1998/99 are as follows:*

Key Target 1

To Achieve 100% of GCSE passes at A* to G target was 100%. Achievement was 99.86%. This reflected one candidate who did not complete all of the assessment requirements for one subject being upgraded in that subject. 737 other subject entries were graded in the range A* to G with a total of 89.30% being graded in the range A-C.

Key Target 5

To achieve 34% of A Level passes at grades A to B. Achievement was 31.9%. The percentage of A and B grades achieved reflected credit on that cohort of students. Unfortunately, the cohort as a whole was less able than in 97–98, nevertheless this was an improvement on 96–97.

(b) The Agency's Key Targets (KTs) are reviewed annually by the Board of HM Commissioners for the school and the Adjutant General's staff, to ensure targets are taut, realistic and demanding. The annual targets set for the School's academic performance (KT1–6) show an increase each year. As part of the exercise to seek

BEST COPY

better performance targets are cascaded to Heads of Department allowing them to take more ownership. However, academic performance is dependant on pupil ability. Recognising this we will be considering alternative ways of measuring performance on the basis of the 'value added' by the school to the pupil. In line with the continuing drive for efficiency, the School's per capita rate and the income generation target is kept constantly under review.

Defence Sales Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Sales Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111770]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Disposal Sales Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Mr. A. J. S. Taylor to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Disposal Sales Agency's (DSA) targets for 1998/99 and 1999/2000 as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the DSA.

The key targets for the financial year 1998/99 and the percentage achieved are listed as follows:

Key Target 1

To achieve disposal sales income of £30M from Government to Government sales of surplus capital equipment and stores—73% achieved.

Key Target 2

To achieve disposal sales income of £30M from commercial sales of MOD's surplus items—93% achieved.

Key Target 3

To extend the Agency's disposal services to other public sector organisations and to secure an additional £1M of sales income as a result—Achieved.

Key Target 4

To develop, contract for, and introduced new IT systems by 31 March 1999, taking account of the Year 2000 requirements for equipment and software—Achieved.

Key Target 5

To put in place the mechanisms fully to test the level of customer satisfaction for the Agency's services, and those services provided by its appointed contractors—Achieved.

Key Target 6

To reduce the unit cost of generating £1M of sales to £65,000 from a baseline figure of £90,500 achieved in 1994/95—Achieved.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, which was subjected to shrinking national defence budgets, only a relatively few nations have a real interest in large second-hand capital equipment and therefore demand was not widespread.

In 1998/99 the DSA operated in a depressed market particularly for major platform sales—this was not only in economic terms as sales opportunities had also been lost because of political events, changing operational requirements and security considerations outside the Agency's control or sphere of influence. Sales targets have traditionally been the major Key Targets of the Agency over the last 5 years. In that time the Agency has surpassed its targets by a 10% margin (£370M as compared to cumulative 5-year target of £335M). In year variances, however, do occur. Estimating sales receipts, based inevitably on limited and shifting information from the three Services, together with the sometimes incomplete conditional state of the surplus equipment when it is declared for sale and set against unknown market conditions is far from an exact science.

The Key Targets for 1999/2000 are listed below:

Key Target 1

To achieve disposal sales income of £66M from sales of surplus Government owned equipment and stores.

Key Target 2

To reduce the unit cost of generating £1M of sales to £62,500 from a baseline of £90,500 achieved in 1994–95.

Key Target 3

To undertake customer satisfaction surveys designed to identify key issues and priorities, measure perceptions and expectations, and to communicate results and benefits of actions taken to the Agency's customer base.

Further information on the DSA can be found in the DSA Annual Report and Accounts 1998/99, a copy of which was laid before the Houses on 22nd July 1999. Targets for performance for 1999/2000 were printed on 26th October 1999 (Official Report, columns 767/768).

Specialist Procurement Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Specialist Procurement Services for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111736]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from J. W. Howe to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the targets of the Specialist Procurement Services (SPS) for 1998–99. You asked (a) which targets (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and (b) action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

(a) (i) The SPS targets for 1998–99, that were met or exceeded are as follows:

%

Description	*1998–99 target*	*1998–99 performance*
Percentage improvement in SPS services identified by customers (baseline 1997)	20	20
Percentage of SPS reports delivered within agreed date	90	92.1
Percentage of Asset Accounting Centre (AAC) core accounts audited	96	97.6
Percentage of AAC major accounts audited	66	73.8
Percentage of Category A and B equipment projects for which cost forecasting advice will be available	93	96

VAILABLE

(a) (ii) There were no SPS Targets that were not met in the year 1998–99.

As to part (b) of the question, SPS ceased to be an agency in its own right on the 31 March 1999 and was absorbed into the new Defence Procurement Agency (DPA) that was formed on 1 April 1999. It has nevertheless been working to targets which require continuous improvement and which it is on course to meet.

Naval Bases and Supply Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Naval Bases and Supply Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111751]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Naval Bases and Supply Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from M. A. Westgate to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

Thank you for your Parliamentary Question Reference 1157K addressed to the Secretary of State for Defence, seeking information on the Naval Bases and Supply Agency's (NBSA) Key Targets (KTs). As this falls within my responsibility as Deputy Chief Executive of the NBSA I have been asked to reply.

The NBSA had eight KTs for 1998/99, five of which were achieved or were on track, and three which were not. Details are below, including the factors affecting performance, and the actions taken to achieve improvement in the future:

Achieved Targets

KT1:

Complete 95% of the Fleet Time Maintenance Loading Programme (FTMLP) to time, budget and standard—achieved 98%

KT2:

Complete 95% of the Maintenance Requirement agreed at Assisted Maintenance Period (AMP) start date to time, budget and standard—achieved 96%

KT3:

Utilise the Fleet Time Maintenance Loading Programme to establish the baseline for the NBSA Shipwork element of the overall cost per Materially Available Vessel Day *(a Ships Support Agency target)*, and then set targets for reduction—achieved/on track

KT4:

Supply 95% of available material to rectify high priority (A1-B1) Operational Defects within Required Delivery Dates—achieved 97.5%

KT5:

Establish the Agency Account via the CAPITAL Project, including the provision of an Executive Information System to meet business requirements, by March 2000—on track

Targets not achieved

KT6:

To move towards Year 2000 IS compliance by completing 100% of Y2K compliance plans by 30 June 1998—not achieved

The ambitious start date of 30 June 1998 was not met. By end September 1999, NBSA had achieved 100% of systems prepared and ready. The Agency survived Y2K without problems.

KT7:

Achieve year on year Efficiency improvement of 2.2%—not achieved

This target equated to an expected cash saving of £11M at 1998/99 prices. The actual saving achieved was £10M (2%). The main factors for the shortfall were delays in staff savings due to building and IT projects not completing on time, and delays in signing NBSA supplier sub-contracts with industry, which will provide income in future.

KT8:

Achieve full accreditation of Investor in People by December 1999—not achieved

At the end of 1998/99 the Agency was on target to achieve IiP by December 1999. This KT was carried forward to 1999/00. At December 1999 76% of NBSA personnel were working in IiP accredited units, but five units had still not achieved IiP accreditation. The new Departmental target for deferred units is 31 March 2000.

The NBSA produced an Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for 1998/99 and copies were lodged with the House of Commons Library.

I trust this fully explains the situation to you.

Kosovo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Temporary Field Accommodation has been fully deployed in Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [113190]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Temporary Field Accommodation has not yet been fully deployed in Kosovo. The main causes of the delay were set out in my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces' answer of 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 397W. Camps are, however, now starting to be occupied. In the meantime, improved tented camps have been made available which provide a good interim enhancement to accommodation standards.

Alma Dettigen Barracks Site

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contract or memorandum of agreement his Department has signed with Barratts or another developer in relation to Alma Dettigen Barracks site, Deepcut, Surrey; when this was signed; for what reason no information about this was given to locally elected representatives or the hon. Member; if he will place a copy in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [113515]

Dr. Moonie: The contracts for the sale of the former Alma Dettigen Barracks, Deepcut near Camberley, Surrey to Barratt Homes were exchanged on 3 March 2000. Completion is expected on 17 March 2000. The purchaser requested, on commercial grounds, that details of the negotiations and the contractual agreements remain confidential. Accordingly, I am withholding this information under Exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Radiation Monitoring

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel were involved in staff safety monitoring at *(a)* Rosyth and *(b)* Faslane in each of the last five years. [112845]

Dr. Moonie: At HM Naval Base Clyde (Faslane), the Health Physics Group is complemented with 16 staff who have direct responsibility for undertaking safety

monitoring. Health Physics Group resources are supplemented by trained monitoring staff on-board submarines. Numbers have remained fairly constant over the last five years.

All nuclear safety matters relating to Rosyth Royal Dockyard are a matter for Babcock Rosyth Defence Ltd., the owners of the Dockyard. It is a condition of their contract with the MOD that they must comply with all nuclear safety regulations.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what radioactive monitoring processes exist at *(a)* Rosyth and *(b)* Faslane for staff at work and for checking staff on completion of their duties; what equipment is used to carry out these checks; if he will list the safety equipment which is more than (i) one year old, (ii) three years old, (iii) five years old and (iv) 10 years old; which organisation is responsible for safety checks for staff and for monitoring equipment used; and what role he has in reviewing and overseeing staff safety at the sites. [112848]

Dr. Moonie: All nuclear safety matters relating to Rosyth Royal Dockyard are a matter for Babcock Rosyth Defence Limited, the owners of the Dockyard. It is a condition of their contract with the MOD that they must comply with all nuclear safety regulations.

All personnel working in designated areas onboard submarines, in the Active Processing Facility and the Nuclear Repair Workshop at HM Naval Base Clyde (Faslane) are monitored for radioactive contamination on completion of their work with Electra ratemeters and BP7 probes. Additionally, those working in the Active Processing Facility and the Nuclear Repair Workshop are monitored using the IPM-7 type radiation detector.

The Electra ratemeters and BP7 probes are more than one-year-old. The IPM-7 type radiation detectors are more than five-years-old. No radiation monitoring equipment is more than 10-years-old.

The monitoring of personnel and the calibration of instruments are carried out by Health Physics staff from Faslane's Department of Engineering. The Director of Safety and Quality audits these safety procedures. The Chairman of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Programme also audits nuclear safety under his programme of site authorisation, which mirrors nuclear licensing carried out by the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII). The NII also reviews nuclear-related health and safety under the Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the safety of Mk 10 radiation monitors with BP 3 Geiger Muller glass probes; if he will list the areas where their use is authorised; and if he will state his policy on the replacement of Mk 10 with BP 3 probes, by a more modern replacement system. [112846]

Dr. Moonie: The Mk 10 Radiation Monitor and BP10 probe are approved instruments for use by the Royal Navy. The BP10 probe is a military version of the commercially available BP3 probe. I am not aware of any written safety assessment for the Mk 10 Radiation Monitor used with the BP10 probe but their use is subject to full calibration procedures in accordance with statutory requirements.

While the Mk 10 Radiation Monitor and BP10 probe are still approved instruments for use on-board HM submarines, they are not routinely used for contamination monitoring of personnel in HM Naval Bases. The preferred instrument for personal contamination monitoring in Naval Bases Clyde and Devonport is the Electra ratemeter and BP7 probe.

A specialist section within MOD is actively seeking a suitable replacement for the Mk 10 Radiation Monitor and BP10 probe for use on-board HM submarines.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many IPM-7 radiation detectors are in use in *(a)* Rosyth and *(b)* Faslane; what is his policy on the use of IPM-7 radiation detectors for safety checks on staff at Rosyth and Faslane; and if he will make a statement on differences in the safety procedures for monitoring staff between Rosyth and Faslane. [112847]

Dr. Moonie: At Faslane the 2 IPM-7 type radiation detectors are used for secondary monitoring for personnel working in the Active Processing Facility and the Nuclear Repair Workshop. For work in reactor compartments on submarines the routine is for personnel to be monitored with the Electra ratemeter and BP7 probe. Should any contamination be found by the Electra ratemeter, personnel are then re-checked with the IPM-7 radiation detectors.

All nuclear safety matters relating to Rosyth Royal Dockyard are a matter for Babcock Rosyth Defence Limited, the owners of the Dockyard. It is a condition of their contract with the MOD that they must comply with all nuclear safety regulations.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to introduce secondary monitoring of staff at Faslane; what secondary monitoring procedures are in place at *(a)* Rosyth and *(b)* Devonport; and if he will make a statement. [112843]

Mr. Spellar: At HM Naval Base Clyde (Faslane) staff working in the Active Processing Facility and the Nuclear Repair Workshop are already protected through routine secondary monitoring.

All nuclear safety matters relating to the Royal Dockyards at Rosyth and Devonport are a responsibility of the owners of the Dockyards: Babcock Rosyth Defence Limited and Devonport Management Limited respectively. It is a condition of their contracts with the MOD that they must comply with all nuclear safety regulations.

Container Ships

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's plans to procure four new roll-on roll-off container ships. [110652]

Dr. Moonie: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 207–08W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, West, (Ms Squire).

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will reassess the decision to award the management contract for the Atomic Weapons Establishment to the British Nuclear Fuels-led consortium from 1 April. [112356]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given by the Secretary of State for Defence on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1223–24, to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendle).

Military Establishments

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the military establishments within *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* Yeovil constituency, showing in each case the personnel complement; if he will set out the plans to change the (i) number and (ii) manning of such establishments; and if he will make a statement. [110793]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence (MOD) establishments within *(a)* the county of Somerset and *(b)* Yeovil constituency are as listed. The personnel complement at each establishment is also given.

Establishment	*Town*	*Personnel complement*
(a) County of Somerset		
Army Careers Information Office	Taunton	4
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, Royal Ordnance Factory	Bridgwater	42
Royal Naval Air Station, Yeovilton	Yeovil	3,829
Hydrographic Department	Taunton	855
Somerset South Avon Wing Air Training Corps	Taunton	3
Light Infantry Office (Somerset)	Taunton	3
40 Royal Marine Commando and Norton Manor Camp	Taunton	610
Territorial Army Centre	Taunton	9
Territorial Army Centre	Bridgwater	8
Territorial Army Centre	Yeovil	1
Defence Procurement Agency, Westland Helicoptor Ltd. Team	Yeovil	8
Defence Procurement Agency, Special Procurement Services Office	Yeovil	23
Civilian Personnel Management	Taunton	10
(b) Yeovil constituency:		
Defence Procurement Agency, Westland Helicoptor Ltd. Team	Yeovil	8
Defence Procurement Agency, Special Procurement Services Office	Yeovil	23
Territorial Army	Yeovil	1

(i) The Civilian Personnel Management Taunton is due to close on 31 March 2000 and the Territorial Army centre Bridgwater is due to close on 30 June 2000.

(ii) Current plans to change the manning of establishments in Yeovil constituency and the County of Somerset are set out as follows:

With effect from 2003, 513 military posts, 16 civilian posts and 60 contractors will transfer from RNAS Yeovilton to RAF Wittering and Cottesmore, as a result of the creation of Joint Force 2000;

With effect from 30 June 2000, 30 civilian staff will transfer from DERA Bridgwater to DERA Porton Down as part of DERA's programme to integrate capabilities.

With effect from April 2000 there will be a requirement for 16 military personnel at RNAS Yeovilton, due to a switch from Army to Navy maintenance regulations.

RMPA Programme

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the recovery of liquidated damages for late delivery in the renegotiation of replacement maritime patrol aircraft contracts; [112472]

(2) what penalty clauses were included in contracts placed as part of the Replacement Maritime Patrol Aircraft programme since 1995; and if he will make a statement; [112471]

(3) what were the conclusions of the Critical Design Review of the Replacement Maritime Patrol Aircraft programme; what action has been taken as a result of each recommendation; and if he will make a statement; [112470]

(4) if he will list the terms and conditions of the renegotiated contract with British Aerospace for the RMPA programme, indicating which ones, and for what reason, differ from those in the 1996 contract; and if he will make a statement; [112469]

(5) what technical and programme factors led to the in-service date slippage of the RMPA project to 2005; and if he will make a statement; [112468]

(6) if he will provide a summary of the costs of the Replacement Maritime Patrol Aircraft Programme including development and production costs, in particular *(a)* costs arising as a result of delays to the planned in-service date of the RMPA and *(b)* the reasons for cost variation since the original RMPA contract was placed; and if he will make a statement. [112467]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. W. Howe to Mr. Paul Keetch, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your six questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Nimrod MRA4 programme (previously known as the Replacement Maritime Patrol Aircraft). This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

You asked about the cost of the Nimrod MRA4 programme. Overall project costs are estimated at £2317M (at 1999/00 prices), a reduction of £92M (on the same price base) on the estimated costs at MoD Approval in August 1996, prior to contract placement in December that year. The reduction is due primarily to the renegotiation of the contract in early 1999, which included changes

in risk assessment and recovery of Liquidated Damages (LD). The additional run-on costs on the existing Nimrod MR2 (up to its currently planned out of service date) consequent on the slippage in delivery of Nimrod MRA4 are offset by the reduction in the cost of operating Nimrod MRA4 over the same period.

You asked also about the nature of technical and programme factors which led to the slippage of the ISD to 2005. As the Minister made clear when he announced the slippage BAe Operations Ltd. (now known as BAE SYSTEMS) experienced technical difficulties with the development of new information technology toolsets, particularly in the area of design and concurrent engineering, and difficulty in resourcing this complex aircraft project. Additionally, the acquisition of the necessary software tools took longer than anticipated and the company faced particular difficulties in applying new information to the design of the aircraft.

In three of your questions you asked about contract terms and conditions and the differences in the renegotiated contract, in particular penalty clauses and the recovery of Liquidated Damages. It is not practical or meaningful to list all the terms and conditions of the renegotiated contract here. But the main features related to programme timescales which resulted in the slippage of the in-service date (ISD) from April 2003 to March 2005, changes to the contract specification to clear up ambiguities, operationally acceptable reductions in specification and benefits in through life support. The MoD also secured a revised Variation of Price (VOP) formula whereby our commitment to pay inflation over nine years of the contract period is greatly reduced. In addition, we secured BAE SYSTEMS' commitment to integrate the Active Search Sonobuoy System during the main aircraft programme and so deliver an active search capability at ISD. Liquidated Damages will also be recovered from BAE SYSTEMS for delayed contract deliverables and a new Liquidated Damages provision was negotiated to protect against further delays.

Your final question related to the recent Critical Design Review (CDR). The Air Vehicle Critical Design Review for the Nimrod MRA4 was held at the end of September 1999. There were 34 time-bound actions placed at the review which have all now been completed, signifying that a major engineering design milestone for the Nimrod MRA4 Air Vehicle is complete: thus far the aircraft has met the revised programme milestones.

Defence Exports Services Organisation

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the budget of the Defence Exports Services Organisation for *(a)* the past two years, *(b)* the current year and *(c)* the next two years. [112548]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Actual cash expenditure on the DESO budget for the last two years has been:

£ million

	Expenditure	*Receipts*	*Net operating costs*
1997–98	55.810	41.430	14.380
1998–99	45.290	29.280	16.010

Forecast cash expenditure on the DESO budget this year is:

£ million

	Expenditure	*Receipts*	*Net operating costs*
1999–2000	45.225	32.807	12.418

The DESO budget has not yet been set for later years.

These net operating costs are more than offset by benefits to the Defence budget, estimated at over £400 million a year, arising from DESO's activities. These benefits include an overall reduction in overhead costs for UK Procurement as a result of export orders, and receipts from Commercial Exploitation Levy and disposal of surplus MOD equipment.

Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111731]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from M. J. Roycroft to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

You asked the Secretary of State for Defence to list the targets for the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency (DCTA) for 1998–99 which were and were not achieved, together with the factors affecting the outcome and the action taken by the Agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000. As Chief Executive of DCTA, I have been asked by the Secretary of State to furnish a reply.

The 1998/99 Key Targets were announced in the House of Commons on 8 April 1998. A summary of the Agency's achievement against these appears in the DCTA Annual Report and Accounts 1998/99 that was published in July 1999. Copies are available in the House of Commons Library.

All Key Targets were met, apart from Key Target 3 which was "to exceed 90% of customers' perceived satisfaction of requirements." In a Customer Survey in December 1998 by the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA) on DCTA's behalf, the Agency scored 87%—missing the target by 3%. Notwithstanding that the target was missed and that we continued to try to improve, 87% is an extremely high achievement by industry standards. Further details are in Annex A.

Measures taken during 1999–2000 to attempt to improve performance against Key Targets include the further development of DCTA's helpdesk, shorter pipeline times, enhanced availability, and continued improved communications with our customers, to ensure we are providing the quality and quantity of items which they require.

I trust this response will answer your questions satisfactorily.

Serial	*Description of key target*	*Performance*
KT3	To exceed 90% of customers' perceived satisfaction of requirements	Not Achieved. The Agency achieved a score of 87% overall customer satisfaction in an independent survey, missing the testing target by only 3%. There were many positive comments, all indicating a customer perception that DCTA had improved availability, fitness for purpose and communication during the period. Further development of the helpdesk, communication, shorter pipeline times and maintained improvement of product availability were the major lessons learned, from which several business initiatives have been implemented by FY 99/00. A more detailed Customer survey is being conducted in the present year (FY 99/00) to assess the impact of these initiatives.

Defence Dental Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Dental Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111733]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Dental Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from I. G. McIntyre to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning the 1998–99 achievement against targets as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive for the Defence Dental Agency.

The Key Targets published for 1998–99 are listed below.

Key Target 1:

From within available personnel resources, achieve 100% of required professional and military trained personnel, at the specified readiness for deployment in support of the National Contingency Force.

Key Target 2:

To achieve an overall increase in dental fitness to 75% for Service personnel.

Key Target 3:

Measures are to be implemented to target dental treatment towards clinical priority groups leading to a zero increase in the Treatment Needs performance indicator.

Key Target 4:

To reduce the percentage of failed appointments with Dental Officers and the time wasted by such failures by 10%. To reduce the percentage of failed appointments with Dental Hygienists and the time wasted by such failures by 25%.

Key Target 5:

To limit the number of personnel in dental fitness category D4 (not inspected for 12 months or more) to 15% of the total service population.

Key Target 6:

To achieve a success rate for Dental Support Specialists training of 95% of the requirement which is determined by single Service manning supply.

Of these targets 4 were achieved but Key Targets 2 and 4 were not met.

For Key Target 2 the overall level of dental fitness achieved at the end of the reporting year was 72%. When the target was set, as had been previously recognised for 1997/99, we were not resourced to meet this target for the Army. It was therefore set as a purely "aspirational target". In 1999–2000 the aim is to maintain an agreed level of fitness as may be decided by mutual agreement with each of the Agency's three single Service customers.

For Key Target 4 it was recognised that this parameter was not wholly or even primarily within the control of the Defence Dental Agency and this target does not therefore feature in the 1999–2000 targets set for the Agency.

Logistics Information Services Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Logistics Information Services agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111768]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Logistic Information Systems Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from P. A. Flanagan to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000]:

1. I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about Key Targets in 1998/99 and 1999/00 as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Logistic Information Systems Agency (LISA).

2. Much of the information requested is contained in the Annual Report and Accounts 1998/99 (HC688), a copy of which is in the Library of the House. However, for clarity, it is repeated below.

3. Your first question asked about those targets for 1998–99 which were, and were not, achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case. The details for this are as follows;

a. The first Key Target was, "To deliver the agreed levels of service within budget levels defined by the customer". This target was achieved.

b. The second Key Target was, "To achieve a reduction in unit cost of 3% by April 1999". This target was also achieved.

c. The third Key Target was in three parts, that is, "To improve delivery performance to customer requirements such that".

i. "95% of Requests For Change are assessed within 7 days". This target was not achieved. Measures taken to reduce assessment intervals included an increase in the number of Personal Computers with access to RED BOX (the Service Management tool-set) and associated training programme to educate LISA Customer Service Managers in the effective use of the package in the progression of RFCs. These measures, together with the identification and elimination of bottlenecks in the process, secured a very substantial improvement in performance from 67.21% in the previous year achieving 92.6% by the end of March 1999. Actions taken to improve target achievement performance in 1999/00 include exploitation of new features offered by the latest release of RED BOX, and a continuation of the RED BOX training programme. The latter has the objective of improving use and perception of the package and increasing its acceptance throughout the Agency as a significant means of improving performance.

ii. The average period required for Request for Change authorisation is reduced by 10%. This target was achieved.

iii. "85% of Requests For Change are moved from the Tasking Phase to the Implementation Phase within 90 days". This target was achieved.

4. In addition, a new, and significant, means to improve performance is the implementation of Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB). As a result of this, Customer-Supplier Agreements are being used to enable the customers themselves to define the outputs required from the Agency. For example, this has enabled LISA to develop one of the targets from one of unit cost to one that now commit the Agency to delivering requirements defined by the customers, but at 97% of the cost of the Agreement to which the customer has agreed and contracted.

Defence Analytical Services Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111727]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from C. Youngson to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 7 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Under Secretary of State for Defence asking for the target performances of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for 1998–99 and improved target achievement performance in 1999–2000. As Chief Executive this falls within my area of responsibility.

The 1998–1999 Key Targets for the Defence Analytical Services Agency were announced to Parliament by the then Minister for the Armed Forces on 19 May 1998 (Official Report, Column 330). As reported in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–1999, which were laid before Parliament and placed in the House of Commons Library on 26 July 1999 (Ref HC 700), all these Key Targets were met. For your information, I attach copies of the relevant pages of the Report. The Agency's Key Targets for 1999–2000 were also set out in the Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–1999 and announced to Parliament by the then Minister for the Armed Forces on 9 June 1999 (Official Report, Columns 322–333). The Agency's Owner, the Principal Finance Officer for the Ministry of Defence, sets these targets each year with the help of his Advisory Board, made up of all the Agency's major customers and members from outside the Ministry of Defence with a thorough understanding of the Agency's business. The Advisory Board agreed that the targets for 1999–2000 were an extremely challenging measure of business success. The Agency uses the Business Excellence Model to help ensure continuous improvement in all aspects of its business.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Biological and Chemical Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what measures have been put in place since July 1999 to protect British forces deployed overseas from attack by biological and chemical weapons; [112972]

(2) what new equipment for detecting, identifying and monitoring biological and chemical hazards has been procured since the publication of his Department's paper, Defending against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons. [112969]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The Joint NBC Regiment, created as a result of the Strategic Defence Review, achieved an Interim Operational Capability last December. It provides, at very high readiness, a capability for biological detection, nuclear and chemical survey and decontamination. The Regiment has elements deployed to Kuwait manning the Prototype Biological Detection System protecting the airbase at Ali Al Salem.

With regard to new equipment, since last summer three Interim Naval Biological Detection Systems have been accepted into service. We have also placed a manufacturing contract for chemical agent monitors which are designed to work inside a collective protection environment. User trials are due to take place this month and this equipment will be brought into service later this year. In addition, a contract has also been let for the manufacture of Man-portable Chemical Agent Detectors. Lastly, I refer the hon. Member to the answer which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence gave him on 29 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 1005W.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the military units involved in biological and chemical defence tasks; and what are the operating costs he is meeting in each case in the *(a)* current and *(b)* next financial year. [112971]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The units dedicated to chemical and biological defence tasks are the Defence NBC Centre (comprising the Defence NBC Headquarters and the NBC School), the Joint NBC Regiment and the Royal Yeomanry.

The provision made for the operating costs of these units in this financial years is:

	£ million
Defence NBC Centre	3.2
Joint NBC Regiment	5.0
Royal Yeomanry	1.9

The budgets for financial year 2000–01 have not yet been finalised.

Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what factors underlay the decision not to authorise road use of the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD within the UK. [111772]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The MK1 version of the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD was developed in 1995–96 to meet an urgent operational requirement in the Balkans. It is essentially a fuel tanker with a number of design features to improve its manoeuvrability in difficult terrain. The vehicle was exempted from full compliance with the Construction and Use Regulations under Schedule 1, Article 6 of The Motor Vehicles (Authorisation of Special Types) General Order 1979. This Order authorises the Secretary of State for Defence to use specified vehicles, notwithstanding that such vehicles do not comply in all respects with the requirements of the Construction and Use Regulations. The principal areas on non-compliance related to the absence of both a speed limiter and an anti-lock braking system (ABS). While these factors did not make the vehicle unsafe, the vehicles' lack of full compliance with UK legislation led to the decision not to authorise road use within the UK. A modification programme to bring all 34 MK1 vehicles up to full compliance has begun. All MK2 vehicles are fully compliant.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the arrangements for driver training for the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD. [111828]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Prior to 1998 the vehicle was deployed in the Balkans without any formal vehicle-specific driver training having taken place in the UK. Nominated drivers were, however, required to hold the necessary civilian licences and a Hazardous Materials qualification before being trained on the vehicle in the Balkans under the guidance of a qualified driving instructor and an experienced driver from an outgoing Unit. Since 1998, pre-deployment training on the MK1 vehicle has been carried out by qualified military driving instructors at the Army School of Petroleum at Westmoor

in Dorset. Training on the MK2 is provided through a contract with Multidrive, the manufacturers of the vehicle. Further training and instruction continues to be given in-theatre in the Balkans by operators experienced in the vehicles' use in the local environment.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the accidents involving the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD attributable to *(a)* mechanical failure, *(b)* driver error and *(c)* defective maintenance. [111774]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* No accidents involving the Foden Thompson Carmichael Multi Wheel Drive vehicle have been attributed to either mechanical failure or defective maintenance. Driver error has been assessed as a contributory factor in eleven accidents.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* fatalities and *(b)* other injuries have occurred in accidents involving the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD. [111827]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* There have been three accidents involving the Foden Thompson Carmichael Multi Wheel Drive vehicle that have resulted in fatalities or injuries. The first, on 12 April 1996, resulted in serious injuries to two soldiers. The second, on 7 July 1997, resulted in the deaths of two soldiers. In the third accident, on 22 June 1998, a soldier suffered a slight injury. All three accidents occurred in Bosnia.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement regarding the mechanical problems experienced by units using the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD. [111826]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* No significant mechanical problems have been experienced.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what problems have been identified with the *(a)* gearbox and *(b)* braking systems of the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD. [111775]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* There is no evidence of any technical or mechanical problems with either the gearbox or the braking systems across the Foden Thompson Carmichael Multi Wheel Drive vehicle fleet. An inquiry following a fatal road traffic accident in 1997 raised a concern that there was a possibility for a clip within the vehicle's gearbox to become dislodged as a result of excessive wear. This might cause the gearbox to slip into neutral despite a gear being selected. A check was made across the fleet but no problems were discovered and no such occurrences have been reported. The accident inquiry concluded that there was no evidence that this was a contributory factor and concluded that there was insufficient evidence to establish conclusively the cause of the accident.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the safety record of the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD. [111825]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The vehicle has coped well in operations in arduous terrain and harsh weather conditions over the past three years. While the two serious accidents are extremely regrettable, the accident rate for this vehicle is not considered excessive. The vehicle continues to perform well and is considered safe in all regards.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the theatres where the Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD is deployed for operational use. [111773]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The MWD is currently deployed to both Balkan theatres, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Civilian Personnel (Scotland)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's civilian personnel are employed in Scotland; where they are employed; how many are at each location; and which agencies employ them. [112857]

Dr. Moonie: There are 9,098 civilian personnel employed in Scotland. Details of where they are employed, how many are at each location and which agencies employ them are set out in the tables:

Location	*Personnel compliment*
All Scotland	9,098
Aberdeen	104
Angus	120
Annandale	11
Argyll	5
Badenoch	4
Banff	71
Caithness	5
Clydebank	35
Cunninghame	594
Dumbarton	3,001
Dundee	63
Dunfermline	703
East Kilbride	6
East Lothian	158
Edinburgh	324
Ettrick	1
Falkirk	2
Glasgow	1,745
Hamilton	1
Inverclyde	56
Inverness	55
Kirkaldy	1
Kyle	67
Merrick	20
Midlothian	95
Monklands	2
Moray	703
Motherwell	1
North East Fife	323
Nithsdale	3
Orkney	5
Perth	439
Renfrew	5
Ross	1
Skye	15
Stewartry	18
Stirling	273
West Lothian	3
Western Is.	14
Zetland	47

Agency	Personnel compliment
Non-Agency personnel (less Royal Fleet Auxiliary	2,352
UK Hydrographic Office	3
Meteorological Office	157
Service Childrens Education	2
Queen Victoria School	68
Defence Postal and Courier Service	8
Army Base Repair Organisation	110
Ministry of Defence Police	870
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	13
RAF Training Group Defence Agency	41
Army Training and Recruiting Agency	116
Defence Communications Service Agency	21
Defence Estates	79
Naval Bases and Supplies Agency	3,080
Logistics Support Services	83
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment	77
Defence Clothing and Textile Agency	1
Defence Dental Agency	11
Medical Supply Agency	6
Army Personnel Centre	1,130
Ships Support Agency	151
Defence Vetting Agency	6
Defence Aviation Repair Agency	350
Defence Storage and Distribution Agency	36
Defence Housing Executive	99
Defence Procurement Agency	227

Notes:
1. The data covers UK based permanent civilian personnel counted in the official Ministry of Defence civil service figures. It excludes UK based casual civilian personnel and permanent civilian personnel whose salaries are paid for, or reimbursed by, other non Ministry of Defence organisations such as NATO and USAF.
2. The data excludes all Defence Evaluation and Research Agency staff on whom reliable location data is not available.
3. Numbers will not always add up to the total MOD personnel in Scotland.

Married Quarters (Scotland)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many married quarters are available to forces families in Scotland; where they are; and what are their occupancy levels. [112837]

Dr. Moonie: 800 properties are in the course of disposal leaving a working stock of 5,033 properties, 88.5 per cent. of which are occupied. The main locations are:

Rosyth (152), Edinburgh (614), Helensburgh (464), Leuchars (621), Kinloss (810), Lossiemouth (761), Glasgow area (272) and other minor locations (760) giving 4,454 currently in occupation.

HMS Spartan

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when HMS Spartan's refit will be completed; and when the vessel will be operational. [112838]

Dr. Moonie: HMS Spartan is planned to complete her refit in the summer of 2001 and to be operational, following trials, in early 2002.

Clyde Naval Base

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's civilian personnel are employed *(a)* at HMNB Clyde, *(b)* at HMNB Clyde exclusively on maintaining and servicing nuclear propelled submarines, *(c)* at HMNB Clyde exclusively on maintaining conventional surface vessels and *(d)* on work on both submarines and surface vessels. [112855]

Mr. Spellar: As at 29 February 2000, HMNB Clyde employed a total of 3,277 civilian personnel.

The Department of Engineering within HMNB Clyde has 198 civilian staff who would be considered to be employed solely on maintaining and servicing both submarines and surface vessels. Due to the re-structuring of the Department in recent years and the flexibility of the workforce that now exists, all would be expected to maintain and service both submarines and surface vessels, to some extent, as might be required.

For the reasons stated above it is not possible to give a definitive answer to the split of tasks between surface vessels and submarines.

Faslane

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the maximum number of surface vessels that were accommodated at Faslane at any one time in the past five years; what were the types and numbers of vessels accommodated on that occasion; and when that was. [112856]

Dr. Moonie: On 6 June 1999, there were 30 surface ships accommodated at HM Naval Base Clyde (Faslane). They were:

Two in number Invincible class aircraft carriers

Two in number Destroyers/Frigates

12 in Minor War vessels

Six Fast patrol craft

One Castle class offshore patrol vessel

Four P2000 class patrol boats

Three Support vessels.

Costs

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what are the costs of salaries for all his Department's civilians in Scotland, by agency and in total; [112853]

(2) what were the total costs of each of the defence installations, including operating costs, maintenance and civilian and services salaries, in the last year for which figures are available. [112934]

Dr. Moonie: The information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many veterans he expects to be tested for depleted uranium; what will be the cost; and if he will make a statement. [112968]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* To address Gulf veterans' concerns, on 8 September 1999, the Ministry of Defence offered to arrange independent testing for Depleted Uranium to those Gulf veterans who had their urine tested for Depleted Uranium in Canada. This offer must not be taken as an indication that the Ministry of Defence believes veterans do have high levels of Depleted Uranium in their bodies. Rather it is

something the Ministry of Defence would like to do so that we can move forward from a firm scientific basis. A draft protocol under which this testing will take place is with veterans' representatives for comment. If it is agreed, we believe that approximately 30 veterans would be eligible for testing. My Department estimates that the cost of obtaining and testing a sample of veteran's urine will be approximately £3,500 per person, excluding Ministry of Defence overheads.

RAF Yearbook

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what editorial control the MoD Publications Clearance Branch exercises over the Royal Air Force Yearbook. [112451]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The Publications Clearance Branch (Air) does not exercise direct editorial control over the RAF Yearbook. However, contributions to the Yearbook from serving personnel are subject to the normal publications clearance procedure laid down in Queen's Regulations. This requires them to submit potential articles for clearance to the Publications Clearance Branch (Air) in advance of publication.

The Director of Corporate Communications (RAF) also co-operates very closely with the RAF Benevolent Fund during the production of the Yearbook and will see all the text before publication.

ASRAAM

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the integration of ASRAAM missiles into Jaguar GR3A to be completed; and if he will make a statement. [112436]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* Following an assessment of the cost effectiveness and operational benefits of this project, we have decided not to proceed with integration of the ASRAAM onto Jaguar GR3A.

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total number of service personnel diagnosed to be suffering with asbestosis or asbestos-related diseases in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and how many deaths occurred in each service branch from asbestos-related diseases over the same period. [113327]

Mr. Spellar: Since 1 January 1995 there have been no serving service personnel who died or have been reported as having been diagnosed with asbestosis or asbestos-related disease in the last five years.

HMS Cambridge

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will set out his proposals for the future of HMS Cambridge, near Plymouth. [111254]

Mr. Spellar: Following the cessation of shore-based live firing training from HMS Cambridge due to increased use of computer simulation, my Department has been undertaking a detailed study into the future of the establishment. I have not yet received advice on the findings of the study and have taken no decisions about the future of HMS Cambridge, but hope to be in a position to do so in the next few months. Any decision will be subject to formal consultation in the usual way.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many questions to his Department tabled for written answer on a named day during the session 1998–99 were answered *(a)* on the named day, *(b)* within one week of a named day, *(c)* within one month of a named day, *(d)* within three months of a named day and *(e)* after three months of a named day. [106480]

Dr. Moonie: During the Session 1998–99, 1,004 questions were tabled to my Department for written answer on a named day. Of this total, 552 were answered on the named day, 834 were answered within one week of a named day, 983 were answered within one month of a named day and 994 were answered within three months of a named day. All 1,004 were answered after three months.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Court Closures and Amalgamations

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many, and which *(a)* county courts and *(b)* magistrates courts in England and Wales have been closed since 1 February 1994, indicating the date of each closure; how many and which justices benches in England and Wales have been amalgamated since 1 February 1994, indicating the date of each amalgamation; what were the financial savings achieved by the above closures and amalgamations, identifying the effect in financial terms for the relevant police force, legal representation costs and witness expenses. [112772]

Jane Kennedy: Lists of *(a)* county court and *(b)* magistrates court closures, and (c) justices bench amalgamations are as set out.

(a) The list of county court closures and the following paragraph have been supplied by the Chief Executive of the Court Service. Fifty-five county courts in England and Wales have been closed or amalgamated since 1 February 1994. The financial savings to the Court Service are in terms of rent and accommodation charges, running costs such as staff salaries, telephone, postage, maintenance of buildings and judicial expense. There have been no savings in financial terms in respect of police forces as this is not relevant to the county courts. The Lord Chancellor does not keep statistics on what representation costs or witness expenses may have been saved through county court closures. Precise figures on all the savings accruing from county court closures since 1994 are not specifically kept by the Court Service. However, a broad conservative estimate of accommodation charges saved and general running costs would indicate a minimum saving of £6,000,000 over the six year period.

(b) Eighty-one magistrates courts have been closed in England and Wales since September 1995.

Magistrates courthouses are owned or leased by the paying authority on behalf of the magistrates courts service. They are not Crown property. The Lord Chancellor's

Department has conducted an annual survey of magistrates courthouses since 1995, but holds no records prior to that date.

(c) Since 1 February 1994, in England and Wales, 181 justices benches (or petty sessions areas) have been amalgamated to form 78 new justices benches.

Under the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, Magistrates Courts Committees are responsible for the provision of an efficient and effective service to court users. When determining the future of its courthouses, it is for each Committee to identify the scope of its own criteria for the number and location of magistrates courts within its area and the possible financial savings. The financial saving achieved by the closures and amalgamations is not collected centrally and could be obtained only from each Magistrates Courts Committee at a disproportionate cost.

(a) County Courts closed since April 1994

County Court	*Date of closure*
Devizes	1 April 1994
Frome	1 April 1994
Clacton	5 April 1994
Sevenoaks	5 April 1994
Sheerness	5 April 1994
Sudbury	5 April 1994
Bangor	4 July 1994
Portmadog	4 July 1994
Stroud	4 July 1994
Stockton-on-Tees	2 November 1994
Lampeter	5 December 1994
Launceston	5 December 1994
Liskeard	5 December 1994
Ellesmere Port	5 December 1994
Axminster and Chard	5 December 1994
Shaftesbury	5 December 1994
Amersham	9 January 1995
Wisbech	29 September 1995
Market Drayton	27 October 1995
Brentwood	29 December 1995
Bargoed	29 December 1995
Barry	29 December 1995
Cardigan	29 December 1995
Llandrindod Wells	29 December 1995
Otley	2 January 1996
Alfreton	16 February 1996
Ilkeston	16 February 1996
Matlock	16 February 1996
Sleaford	16 February 1996
Spalding	16 February 1996
Dover	29 March 1996
Folkestone	29 March 1996
Newton Abbot	29 March 1996
Sittingbourne	29 March 1996
St. Austell	29 March 1996
Chippenham	30 april 1996
Goole	4 November 1996
Ammanford	27 March 1997
Andover	30 June 1997
Braintree	1 December 1997
Bishop's Stortford	1 December 1997
Alnwick	15 December 1997
Blyth	15 December 1997
Berwick upon Tweed	15 December 1997
Bridlington	24 December 1997
Rochdale	7 September 1998
Holywell	7 September 1998
Camborne and Redruth	24 December 1998
Hemel Hempstead	24 December 1998
West Bromwich	24 December 1998
Loughborough	31 December 1998

(a) County Courts closed since April 1994

County Court	*Date of closure*
Corby	1 March 1999
Bridgwater	20 December 1999
Great Yarmouth	31 January 2000
Grays Thurrock	31 January 2000

(b) Magistrates Courthouses closed since September 1995

Magistrates Courthouse	*Closure date*
Nottingham (Guildhall)	30 November 1995
Nottingham (Sand Field House)	30 November 1995
Bala	31 December 1995
Hunstanton	31 December 1995
Pembroke	31 December 1995
Tywyn	31 December 1995
Whitminster	31 December 1995
Bromley (South Street)	28 February 1996
Mansfield (Commercial Street)	28 February 1996
Hornsea	31 March 1996
Howden	31 March 1996
Market Weighton	31 March 1996
Old Street	12 July 1996
Halstead	31 August 1996
Biddulph	30 September 1996
Cheadle	30 September 1996
Kidsgrove	30 September 1996
Tonbridge	31 October 1996
Amlwch	31 December 1996
Bedale	31 December 1996
Blaenau Festiniog	31 December 1996
Easingwold	31 December 1996
East Dereham	31 December 1996
Ingleton	31 December 1996
Leyburn	31 December 1996
Llangollen	31 December 1996
Thirsk	31 December 1996
Pontardawe	23 March 1997
Ellesmere Port	31 March 1997
Hampstead	31 March 1997
Marylebone (185 Marylebone Road)	31 March 1997
Otley	31 March 1997
Seaham	31 March 1997
Bromsgrove	31 May 1997
Ledbury	31 May 1997
Hebburn	5 June 1997
South Shields (Kepple Street)	5 June 1997
Bargoed	30 June 1997
Chippenham (Market Place)	30 June 1997
Monmouth	30 June 1997
Pontlottyn	30 June 1997
Pontypool	30 June 1997
Ashton under Lyne (Manchester Road)	31 August 1997
Duckinsfield	31 August 1997
Thorne	31 August 1997
Braintree	31 December 1997
Clacton on Sea	31 December 1997
Saffron Walden	31 December 1997
Stokesley	31 December 1997
Malton	6 February 1998
Appleby	31 March 1998
Bishop's Stortford	31 March 1998
Chertsey	31 March 1998
Farnham	31 March 1998
Hatfield	31 March 1998
Hitchin	31 March 1998
Market Rasen	31 March 1998
Marlborough Street	31 March 1998
Oxted	31 March 1998
Lutterworth	31 July 1998
Ripon	1 August 1998
Barnard Castle	31 December 1998
Clerkenwell	31 December 1998

(b) Magistrates Courthouses closed since September 1995

Magistrates Courthouse	*Closure date*
Corwen	31 December 1998
Diss	31 December 1998
Felixstowe	31 December 1998
Haverhill	31 December 1998
Lytham	31 December 1998
Newmarket	31 December 1998
Saxmundham	31 December 1998
Sheerness	31 December 1998
Stowmarket	31 December 1998
West Malling	31 December 1998
Abingdon	31 March 1999
Christchurch	31 March 1999
Henley on Thames	31 March 1999
Morley	31 March 1999
Pudsey	31 March 1999
Windsor	31 March 1999
Stow on the Wold	30 June 1999
March	31 December 1999

(c) Amalgamated Justices Benches in England and Wales since 1 February 1994

Amalgamated Benches-Old benches forming the new benches	*Date*
Bedford and Mid Bedfordshire—Ampthill, Bedford, part Biggleswade Luton and South Bedfordshire—Luton, Dunstable, part Leighton Buzzard	1 January 2000
Northern Oxfordshire—Banbury, Bicester, Witney Oxford—Oxford and Thame and Henley East Berkshire—Forest, Maidenhead, Slough and Windsor	1 April 1999
Central Buckinghamshire—Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chiltern Wycombe and Beaconsfield—Wycombe and Burnham	1 April 1994
Carlisle and District—Carlisle and Wigton South Lakeland—South Lakes and Kendal and Lonsdale Eden—Appleby and Penrith and Alston and part of Keswick West Allerdale and Keswick—West Allerdale and Keswick	With effect from 1 April 2000
Stourbridge and Halesowen—Halesowen and Stourbridge	1 April 1997
Ceredigion—Gogledd Ceredigion, Ceredigion Ganol and De Ceredigion North Pembrokeshire—Gogledd Preseli and Cleddau Carmarthen—Carmethen North and Carmarthen South	1 January 1999
Dunmow and Saffron Walden—Dunmow and Saffron Walden	1 January 1996
South West Essex—Brentwood, Thurrock North West Essex—Dunmow and Saffron Walden, Epping and Ongar and Harlow Mid North Essex—Chelmsford, Malden and Witham and part Braintree and Halstead North East Essex—Colchester, Harwich and Tendring and remainder of Braintree and Halstead	1 January 2000
North Gloucestershire—Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and North Cotswold	1 July 1994
Ynys Mon—North Anglesey and South Anglesey	1 October 1995
North Hertfordshire—North Hertfordshire and Stevenage	1 January 1995
East Hertfordshire—Bishop's Stortford, Cheshunt and Hertford and Ware	1 April 1998
North Lincolnshire—Scunthorpe, Brigg and Barton, and part Epworth and Goole Goole and Howdenshire—remainder of Epworth and Goole, Hodwenshire, part of South Hunsley Beacon and Howdenshire) South Hunsley Beacon (remainder of South Hunsley Beacon and Howdenshire)	1 June 1999
East Central—West Central and East Central	31 December 1998
Channel—Ashford and Tenterden, Dover and East Kent, Fokestone and Hythe Mid Kent—Maidstone, part Tonbridge and Malling West Kent—remainder of Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells and Cranbrook, Sevenoaks, part Dartford)	1 January 1999
Dartford and Gravesham—Dartford and Gravesham	1 January 2000
Blackburn, Darwen and Ribble Valley—Blackburn, Darwen and part Ribble Valley Burnley and Pendle—Burnley, Pendle and remainder of Ribble Valley Lancaster—Lancaster and part Wyre Preston—Preston and part Ribble Valley	1 April 1994
Blackpool and Fylde—Blackpool and Fylde	1 January 1999
Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale—Burnley and Pendle, and Rossendale	With effect from 1 April 2000
Melton, Belvoir and Rutland—Melton and Belvoir, and Rutland	1 January 1999
Lincoln District—Caistor, Market Rasen and part Lincoln District Wolds—part Lincoln District and existing Wolds	1 July 1999
Arfon—Bangor and Caernarfon and Gwyrfai Flintshire—Flint, Hawarden, Mold and part Rhuddlan Rhuddlan—remainder of Rhuddlan	1 January 1998
Colwyn—part of Berwyn, part of Colwyn, part of Dyffryn Clwyd Denbighshire—part of Berwyn, part of Colwyn, part of Dyffryn Clwyd, Rhuddlan Wrexham Maelor—Wrexham Maelor and part of Berwyn	1 January 1999
Claro—part of original area York—part Claro, part Easingwold, part Selby and York Northallerton—part Easingwold and Northallerton Ryedale—part Easingwold, Ryedale Selby—remainder of Selby	1 January 1997
Harrogate—Claro, Ripon Liberty, part of Northallerton, part of Selby Scarborough—Scarborough, Whitby Strand and Ryedale and part of Northallerton Northallerton and Richmond—Richmond and Northallerton	1 August 1998

(c) Amalgamated Justices Benches in England and Wales since 1 February 1994

Amalgamated Benches-Old benches forming the new benches	*Date*
Abingdon, Didcot and Wantage—part Thame and Henley, part Abingdon, Didcot and Wantage Bicester—part Woodstock, Bicester Banbury—part Woodstock, North Oxfordshire, Chipping Norton Oxford—part Thames and Henley, Oxford and part Abingdon Thame and Henley—remainder of Thame and Henley Witney—Witney, remainder of Woodstock	1 July 1994
De Brycheiniog—Brecon and Ystradgynlais De Maldwyn—Machynlleth and Newtown	1 January 1999
Rochdale, Middleton and Heywood—Rochdale, Middleton and Heywood	1 January 1996
North Staffordshire—Staffordshire Moorlands and Newcastle under Lyme and Pirehill North Mid Staffordshire and Rugeley—Mid Staffordshire and Rugeley Cannock and Seisdon—Cannock and Seisdon Lichfield and Tamworth—Lichfield and Tamworth	1 January 2000
North East Suffolk—Beecles, Lowestoft and Saxmundham	1 January 1995
Haverhill and Sudbury—Haverhill and Sudbury St. Edmundsbury and Stowmarket—St. Edmundsbury and Stowmarket	1 January 1999
Tameside—Ashton-Under-Lyme and South Tameside	1 April 1994
Neath Port Talbot—Neath, Port Talbot Swansea—Swansea, Lliw Valley	1 April 1996
Horsham—Horsham and part Steyning Worthing and District—Worthing and remainder of Steyning	1 April 1996
North West Wiltshire—North Wiltshire, West Wiltshire South East Wiltshire—Kennet, Salisbury	1 January 2000

Magistrates (Training)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what training magistrates receive on sentencing; and if he will make a statement. [112806]

Mr. Lock: Training of magistrates is the responsibility of individual Magistrates Courts Committees within a framework set on behalf of the Lord Chancellor by the Judicial Studies Board, an independent, non-departmental public body. Magistrates are trained to approach sentencing in a structured way, taking into account a range of factors including the nature and seriousness of the offence. Sentencing is a matter for judicial discretion taking into account the statutory framework, any Court of Appeal sentencing guideline judgments and other relevant case law. Magistrates are encouraged to use the sentencing guidelines published by the Magistrates Association, with the approval of the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice, in reaching their decisions.

The Human Rights Act 1998 and the revised sentencing powers in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 create new challenges for the magistracy but the Government, which is committed to the lay magistracy continuing to play a significant role in our system of justice, is confident that magistrates will rise to those challenges.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 8 March 2000

HOME DEPARTMENT

Euro

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been spent to date by his Department and by bodies funded by his Department in connection with the National Changeover Plan; on what headings this money has been spent; and how much his Department plans to spend on implementing the plan over the next 12 months. [112140]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 29 February 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury on 29 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 233W.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many public employees have been involved in legal work relating to Senator Pinochet since October 1998. [113512]

Mr. Straw: At any one time two Home Office lawyers had significant involvement in the case. A Treasury Solicitor lawyer had conduct of the case for litigation purposes, and lawyers in the Crown Prosecution Service, the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were from time to time significantly involved. Lawyers from other Government Departments have also played a role.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total cost to the *(a)* central and *(b)* local government of the containment of Senator Pinochet broken down into *(a)* police, *(b)* legal and *(c)* accommodation costs. [113600]

Mr. Straw: For the information requested, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my noble Friend the Under-Secretary on 2 March 2000, *Official Report, House of Lords,* column WA87.

Senator Pinochet's accommodation costs were not met from public funds.

Vivisection Investigation

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the outcome of his investigation into allegations made by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection against Harlan-Hill Crest. [113893]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have today placed in the Library copies of the Home Office investigative report into allegations which were made available to the Home Office by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) on 29 June 1999. The BUAV's allegations were based on the evidence of a sympathiser working undercover at the establishment. The establishment is designated under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

I received the Chief Inspector's report on 17 December after a thorough investigation into a complex series of allegations. Generally, the establishment was found to be well run and the level of compliance generally good. I did, however, take action against one breach of a condition of certification—that two animal rooms were not identified in documentation as having been checked as required on two dates during the last two years. The Certificate holder received an admonition for this apparent lapse and I sought reassurances from management about staffing levels. These have been given.

Since Christmas 1999, officials have been arranging with the company, its customers and key staff, to lift confidentiality of material in the report whose disclosure would have been contrary to Section 24 of the 1986 Act, as being provided in confidence. A small number of areas remain censored because they represent commercially sensitive or personnel information which cannot be disclosed.

The greater number of blocked-out areas in the report stem from the BUAV not lifting the confidentiality of material stemming from the undercover investigator's videotapes, diary and interview with the Inspectorate in time for publication this week. When we indicated that we would publish the document in this form, BUAV then indicated late yesterday that they might be prepared to lift the confidentiality restrictions on some parts of the report. My officials will contact them again today to ask them to lift their restrictions.

The report was disclosed to the Animal Procedures Committee on 9 February for information. The Committee has not had opportunity to discuss the report, nor are Ministers expressly seeking advice on its content or the action taken since the investigation was completed.

Immigration and Asylum (Penalties)

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on the production of a code of practice in relation to the civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; and when implementation of those provisions will commence. [113951]

Mrs. Roche: Clandestine entry into the United Kingdom, particularly in road haulage vehicles, has become a major abuse of the immigration control in recent years. The number of clandestine entrants identified is currently running at about 2,000 each month and the Government are determined to take action to tackle this growing problem.

Part II of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provides for a penalty for each clandestine entrant carried to be levied on the person or persons responsible. It also provides for the detention in certain circumstances of the transporter or vehicle in which the clandestine arrived against payment of the penalty.

The civil penalty is an important measure to enable us to deal effectively with an escalating problem. It will be implemented on 3 April 2000 in relation to clandestine entrants arriving in road vehicles.

We have consulted widely with a number of representative bodies on a Code of Practice for vehicles to prevent the carriage of clandestine entrants. The draft Code of Practice for Vehicles, which has been amended to take account of comments expressed during the consultation process, was laid before Parliament on 3 March and will come into force on 3 April.

Drug Dealers

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of police local drugs units in bringing to court hard drugs dealers. [112259]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The police have a key role in the Government's anti-drugs strategy working with other enforcement agencies to stifle the availability of illegal drugs on our streets. The drug problem will not be the same in each force area, and it is an operational matter for each Chief Officer of Police to decide the most effective way to tackle drug dealing in his or her force area. It is for the Crown Prosecution Service to decide whether to prosecute those charged with an offence.

Tough targets have been set under the Government's drugs strategy, significantly to reduce access to all drugs among young people, and to reduce access to the drugs which cause the greatest harm—particularly heroin and cocaine—by 25 per cent. by 2005 and by 50 per cent. by 2008. A target for 1999–2000 is to increase by 10 per cent. the number of offenders dealt with for supply offences in respect of Class A drugs.

The latest available statistics show that the number of persons found guilty at court of "dealing" (possession with intent to supply unlawfully and unlawful supply) in heroin, cocaine and crack increased significantly between 1997 and 1998. Detailed information is given in the table.

Persons found guilty at court for offences of unlawful supply/possession with intent to supply unlawfully, involving cocaine/crack, heroin (Great Britain) [1]

Drug/offence	*1997*	*1998*
Cocaine		
Unlawful supply	218	354
Possession with intent to supply unlawfully	411	522
Crack		
Unlawful supply	88	137
Possession with intent to supply unlawfully	73	134
Heroin		
Unlawful supply	1,009	1,378
Possession with intent to supply unlawfully	1,006	1,311

[1] As the same person may be found guilty of more than one offence, rows cannot be added together to produce totals

Source:

Home Office Statistical Bulletins, RDS. Drug Seizure and Offender Statistics, United Kingdom 1997 and 1998

Afghan Hijacking

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current status of those passengers on the recently hijacked Afghan airliner who sought asylum. [113575]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) on 1 March 2000, *Official Report,* columns 289–91W, in which I provided details of my consideration of the 44 applications for asylum.

Racist Incidents

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the most recent statistics for reported racist incidents for each of England's police forces. [113549]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of racist incidents that were recorded by the police, by police force area, was published in December 1999 in "Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System", a copy of which is in the Library.

Racially Aggravated Offences

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what percentage of racially aggravated offences have resulted in acquittals since the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into force; and how many defendants this involved, broken down by ethnic group; [113367]

(2) how many charges relating to racially aggravated offences as defined by section 28 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 have been made since the Act came into force; and how many victims were alleged to be affected by the offences broken down by ethnic group. [113332]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information collected centrally indicates that 10,982 racially aggravated offences were recorded by the police in the period 1 April 1999 to 30 September 1999. No information is collected on the number of charges made for these offences, the number of victims involved or their ethnic group. 745 defendants were prosecuted in magistrates courts for racially aggravated offences in the period October 1998 to 30 June 1999 of which 261 (35 per cent.) had their prosecution terminated early and 31 (4 per cent.) had their charge dismissed. No information is available on the ethnicity of the defendants.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints of racially aggravated offences have been made against police officers since the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into force. [113335]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not routinely collected centrally on the occupations of people accused of crime. But there were 709 complaints of racial discrimination recorded against the police in 1998–99.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many racially aggravated offences (1) charged by the police have been discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service *(a)* before and *(b)* after the case reached a magistrates court; and how many victims, broken down by ethnic group, were alleged to be affected by the offences charged; [113333]

(2) have been added as further offences to other charges preferred against defendants by the Crown Prosecution Service since the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into effect; and how many victims were alleged to be affected by the offences charged, broken down by ethnic group. [113334]

The Solicitor-General: I have been asked to reply.

The information sought is not currently available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, the Crown Prosecution Service has been monitoring the prosecution of racist crime since 1995. The monitoring has been substantially revised in order to capture a wider range of information as a result of the new offences of racially aggravated crimes created by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The first full year of the revised scheme ends on 31 March 2000 and the Crown Prosecution Service aims to publish a report in the autumn. At that time the figures sought regarding charges for racially aggravated offences will, it is anticipated, be available. The monitoring scheme is solely offence based and does not record information about victims of racially aggravated crime either by number or ethnic group.

Prostitutes' Cards

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what responses he has received to the consultation paper, New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes; and if he will make a statement. [113331]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have received 60 responses to the consultation paper from local authorities, police staff associations, local residents' groups, telephone operators, organisations representing sex workers and members of the public.

We hope to make an announcement shortly on the outcome of the consultation exercise and our proposals for action.

Dorset and Hampshire Police

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers were serving in *(a)* the Dorset Constabulary and *(b)* the Hampshire Constabulary on 31 March 1997; and how many were serving on the latest date for which figures are available. [113037]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is set out in the table.

Dorset Police and Hampshire Constabulary

Year	Total police officer numbers	
	Dorset	Hampshire
31 March 1997	1,284	3,452
30 September 1999[1]	1,276	3,411

[1] Latest available

EU Justice and Home Affairs

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the domestic legislative implications of the individual reasons identified in the Portuguese Presidency's Programme of Work in the Field of Justice and Home Affairs. [113070]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None of the measures specified in the Portuguese Presidency Work Programme in the field of Justice and Home Affairs has been finalised, and most are in the early stages of discussion. It is not possible, until an individual proposal has been finally adopted, to identify the extent of any legislative implications in the United Kingdom.

However, in accordance with the terms of reference of the Scrutiny Committees of both Houses of Parliament, the Government deposit Explanatory Memoranda on all draft European Union proposals. Part of the Explanatory Memorandum covers the possible implications to United Kingdom Law should the proposal be adopted in its draft form.

Balloting Services

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what ways organisations offering balloting services are regulated; and if he will make a statement. [113032]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is responsible only for legislation affecting the conduct of elections for Westminster parliamentary, European parliamentary and local elections. He has no remit to legislate the way that balloting is conducted by outside organisations, such as trade unions and political parties. This is a matter for them to agree within their own organisation and subject to any existing legislation.

Leicestershire Police

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers Leicestershire Police Authority area has had in post in each year between 1992–93 and the last year for which figures are available. [113168]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is set out in the table.

Leicestershire Constabulary
Total police officer numbers from 1992–93 to 1999/2000

Year as at 31 March	Total
1992–93	1,805
1993–94	1,825
1994–95	1,839
1995–96	1,908
1996–97	1,949
1997–98	1,983
1998–99	1,993
1999–2000[1]	1,998

[1] As at 30 September

Asylum

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many appeals against refusal to grant political asylum were waiting to be heard on 1 February. [113084]

Jane Kennedy: I have been asked to reply.

There were a total of 3,825 asylum appeals outstanding before adjudicators as at 31 January 2000.

There were in addition 2,258 asylum appeals outstanding before the Tribunal as at 31 January 2000.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons genetically-modified winter oilseed rape planted, pursuant to his decision to vary consent reference 98/R19/18 was permitted to remain in the ground after the order of the High Court. [108005]

Mr. Meacher: The Consent Order issued by the High Court, which was agreed and signed by all parties, did not order the destruction of the crop. The Government and the consent holder (AgrEvo UK Ltd.) indicated to the Court that the crops, which had been sown in good faith, will be treated as if a valid consent was in place in respect of them. In accordance with the terms of the Consent Order, the Government will continue to regulate the crops on the same terms and subject to the same conditions as if a new consent had been lawfully granted.

Rural Transport

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the current three year spending programme on rural transport services. [112513]

Mr. Hill: The current three year spending programme on rural transport includes the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant, the Rural Bus Challenge Fund, the Rural Transport Partnership Scheme and the Rural Transport Development Fund.

We are monitoring on an annual basis the impact of the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant. This analysis has shown that in the first year over 1,800 new or improved services were introduced in England. Monitoring of Rural Bus Challenge projects is based on an analysis of annual progress and end of project reports.

The Rural Transport Partnership scheme and the Rural Transport Development Fund are administered by the Countryside Agency on the Department's behalf. The Countryside Agency will be evaluating these schemes during 2000–2001.

Social Security Act 1992

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has requested under section 139A of the Social Security Act 1992; and if he will make a statement. [112652]

Ms Armstrong: None. I refer to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 613W.

Abandoned Vehicles

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received calling for reform of the system for removing abandoned vehicles from public highways. [112994]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has received letters from a number of local authorities, members of the public and other interested bodies about the system for the removal of abandoned vehicles. Correspondents have expressed concern about the financial burden the removal of such vehicles places on local authorities, the period of notice authorities must give before removing vehicles, acts of vandalism associated with abandoned vehicles, and the difficulty of tracing the vehicles' owners. They have also suggested a variety of changes to the current system intended to address these concerns.

Playing Fields

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many times since May 1997 his Department has overruled the advice of Sport England not to grant permission for the sale of a playing field. [112953]

Mr. Raynsford: Sport England are consulted on planning applications for the development of playing fields but have no role in decisions about whether or not playing fields may be sold. Their role in the referral of planning applications to my Department came into effect on 23 December 1998 under the Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields)(England) Direction 1998. Since then, 18 applications have been referred to the Secretary of State. Of these, one has been called in by him for his own determination and 14 have been left to the local authority to determine. The remainder are under consideration. Of the 14 cases which were left to the local planning authority to determine, all but one involved the development of new or expanded educational or sporting facilities at existing schools or colleges. In each of these cases, the area of land which would be developed was a very minor part of the overall playing field provision.

Travelling Showpeople

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of local planning authorities' local plans or unitary development plans include provision for sites for travelling showpeople, of the type provided for in the guidance contained in paragraph 6 of Department of the Environment Planning Circular 22/91. [113267]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not available.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many applications for planning permission for living accommodation for travelling showpeople were received by local authorities in each year since 1985; and how many of the above applications were *(a)* granted by local planning authorities, *(b)* turned down by local planning authorities, *(c)* granted on appeal, *(d)* turned down on appeal and *(e)* called in by the Secretary of State, broken down into figures relating to the regions corresponding to each regional planning conference. [113266]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department does not hold statistics of planning applications or local planning authority decisions on the basis requested.

The regional breakdown of planning appeals (under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990) relating to living accommodation for travelling showpeople between 1990 and 1999 is set out in the table. In the 10 years for which records are available, our

records show a total of 62 appeals. Of these, 28 were allowed and 34 were dismissed. There are no records available for 1985 to 1990.

No applications relating to living accommodation for travelling showpeople were called in by the Secretary of State during the period for which records are available.

Regional breakdown of S.78 planning appeals relating to living accommodation for travelling showpeople (1990–99)

Year/Region	*Decision allowed*	*Dismissed*	*Total*
1990			
East	1	—	1
South East	2	1	3
West Midlands	1	1	2
Yorkshire and The Humber	—	1	1
Total			7
1991			
West Midlands	—	1	1
Yorkshire and The Humber	1	—	1
Total			2
1992			
East	1	—	1
South East	2	3	5
South West	—	1	1
West Midlands	—	2	2
Yorkshire and The Humber	1	—	1
Total			10
1993			
East Midlands	—	1	1
North West	—	1	1
South East	1	4	5
South West	—	1	1
West Midlands	1	1	2
Total			10
1994			
North West	—	1	1
South East	1	5	6
Total			7
1995			
East	1	—	1
North West	—	1	1
South East	2	2	4
South West	—	1	1
Yorkshire and The Humber	1	—	1
Total			8
1996			
North West	1	—	1
South East	1	1	2
West Midlands	1	—	1
Total			4
1997			
South East	2	1	3
South West	—	1	1
Total			4
1998			
North West	1	1	2
South East	2	1	3
South West	—	1	1
West Midlands	1	—	1
Yorkshire and The Humber	1	—	1
Total			8
1999			
South East	2	—	2
Total			2
Grand Total	28	34	62

Heathland Habitats (Dorset)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance his Department offers about resolving conflicts arising from the EU requirement to restore heathland habitats in Dorset and to retain trees as a habitat for woodland birds and as an amenity and landscape feature. [113036]

Mr. Mullin: None. However, English Nature, the Government's scientific advisers, and the Forestry Commission are working closely together to ensure delivery of obligations under the Habitats Directive and of the Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan. In September 1999, English Nature issued guidance to its local teams on how to resolve such issues. The Forestry Commission has similarly drawn up preliminary guidance as to how its staff should consider the potential conflicts when considering felling licences.

Asbestos Removal Companies

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many licensed asbestos removal companies are operating in the UK in the last year for which figures are available; and how many had their licence revoked. [113325]

Mr. Meacher: At 1 March 2000, there were 751 asbestos licence holders on the database maintained by HSE. Not all licensees are actively engaged in asbestos removal or associated work on a regular basis.

In the period 1 April 1999 to 1 March 2000, some 20 licensees have been warned that HSE has considered revocation of their licence and will take that step unless there is an improvement in performance. No licences were revoked.

Railtrack Land (Allotments)

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the status of land owned by Railtrack and Rail Property Ltd. in use as allotments. [113076]

Mr. Hill: Land in use as allotments and owned by Railtrack, a private company, and Rail Property Ltd. has no special status. Statutory protection of allotment land does not apply to privately owned land or land owned by a public body when that body—such as Rail Property Ltd.—is not a local authority.

Rail Property Ltd.

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the legal relationship between his Department and Rail Property Ltd. [113075]

Mr. Hill: Rail Property Ltd. is a wholly owned subsidiary of the British Railways Board (BRB) which is one of the nationalised industries sponsored by the Department. The British Railways Board now operates as part of the shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA). Subject to the passage of the Transport Bill currently before Parliament the SRA, when formally established, will incorporate the functions of the BRB.

Air Services

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent steps he has taken to ensure the aircraft flying over London into Heathrow have sufficient fuel on board. [113039]

Mr. Mullin: Responsibility for the safety regulation of airlines, including compliance with minimum fuel requirements, lies with the country in which the airline is based. The UK Civil Aviation Authority ensures that UK airlines have effective minimum fuel policies for all flights and checks fuel records when auditing airlines. Regulatory authorities for foreign airlines must ensure that their airlines meet at least the international standards for minimum fuel levels.

We have procedures in place to check that foreign operated aircraft flying to the UK are being maintained and operated in compliance with international standards. These include targeted inspections by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) of aircraft from countries where safety oversight has been questioned. Last summer, following an allegation that one airline had operated into Heathrow airport with low fuel levels on a number of occasions, we targeted a number of inspections on long haul operators from the Far East. We asked the particular operator concerned to provide us with weekly reports of fuel levels of their aircraft on arrival at Heathrow and this has continued as a condition of their operating permit; the reports have been satisfactory. We will investigate fully any reports of problems with other operators.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what requirements exist for non-departmental public bodies responsible to his Department to carry out an environmental impact statement for their respective activities. [113306]

Mr. Raynsford: Regulations require environmental impact assessment for certain public and private projects that are likely to have a significant effect on the environment. These apply to activities proposed by non-departmental public bodies responsible to my Department in the same way as those proposed by any other body.

Combined Heat and Power

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to encourage the expansion of combined heat and power generation capacity. [113057]

Mr. Meacher: The Government's action to exempt Good Quality Combined Heat and Power from the Climate Change Levy is the strongest evidence of this Government's commitment to the wider use of CHP. It is also intended to be one of the energy technologies eligible for the proposed Enhanced Capital Allowances scheme under the Climate Change Levy package. The announcement on 6 March that electricity generating plant and machinery in all Good Quality CHP schemes will be de-rated from 1 April 2001, further strengthens Government support for CHP.

We are implementing a CHP Quality Assurance programme to enhance the quality of CHP and determine eligibility to a range of benefits, and will shortly consult on a new strategy to achieve our target of at least 10,000 MWe of CHP by 2010.

We continue to work closely with industry to ensure the fullest support for CHP growth. On 17 May I will be launching the CHP Club, an integrated service under the Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme, to help new and potential CHP users exploit the positive environment which this Government have put in place.

Rat Infestations

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions further to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 130W, on rats, if he will commission a more detailed assessment of the conditions of drains and sewers near dwellings and their relationship to rat infestations as part of the 2001 English House Condition Survey. [113062]

Mr. Mullin: The 1996 English House Condition Survey (EHCS) included an assessment of observable faults to the drainage system around the dwelling, which surveyors can reasonably be asked to collect as part of a standard house condition survey. Development work is now under way for the 2001 survey and it is highly likely that this will be repeated. However, the EHCS is not an appropriate vehicle for carrying out more detailed investigative work on the overall condition of drains and sewers.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, further to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 130W, on rats, if cracked or defective drain covers would render a dwelling unfit. [113061]

Mr. Mullin: Under the current fitness standard a dwelling can be deemed unfit if it does not have an effective system for the draining of foul, waste and surface water. This tends to be based on an overall assessment of a number of features connected with the drainage system. In relation to the collection and analysis of the English House Condition Survey data, dwellings are not deemed unfit solely because of cracked or defective drain covers.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, further to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 130W, on rats, if dwellings that are unfit as the result of lack of effective drainage are more likely to have rat infestations than those that are unfit on other counts; and if he will make a statement. [113060]

Mr. Mullin: The English House Condition Survey questions related to rodent infestations are analysed in the recent MAFF report "Rodent Infestations in domestic properties in England". Page 11 of the report emphasises that properties with defective drainage systems also tend to be defective in many other aspects. It would not be appropriate to analyse the data to make a distinction between those that are unfit for drainage reasons and those that are unfit for other reasons. This is because the number of dwellings in the sample that are classed as unfit because of problems with drainage is very small, less than 1 per cent. of the total sample.

Ministerial Meetings

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what dates in the last year officials and Ministers of his Department have met representatives of the *(a)* British Road Federation, *(b)* Road Haulage Association, *(c)* Freight Transport Association, *(d)* RAC, *(e)* AA, *(f)* Cyclists Touring Club, *(g)* Pedestrians Association and *(h)* Transport 2000. [113051]

Mr. Hill: Ministers and officials have formal and informal meetings with representatives of these organisations as necessary; a detailed record could be kept only at disproportionate cost.

Connex

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many Connex train services have *(a)* run on time, *(b)* been delayed and *(c)* been cancelled in the last month. [113173]

Mr. Hill: The shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA) does not monitor the train operating companies' performance in these terms. The sSRA publishes quarterly statistics on punctuality and reliability, the next of which will be published shortly and placed in the Library of the House.

Trafalgar Square (Pedestrianisation)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action his Department has taken to identify potential sources of funding for proposals to partially pedestrianise Trafalgar Square. [113444]

Mr. Hill: The Government fully support the proposal to close the north side of Trafalgar Square to traffic which is included in phase 1 of the World Squares for All Masterplan. We are making up to £2 million available to Westminster City Council for the design of phase 1 of the Masterplan.

Implementation of phase 1 could begin in 2001 and further funding would be a matter for the Mayor of London. Contributions to the cost of implementation could also be sought from the Heritage Lottery Fund and private sector sponsorship.

Rural Poverty

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish his Department's consultation document concerning additional funds to deal with rural poverty. [113476]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* As part of the consultation for the forthcoming Rural White Paper, DETR published its discussion document "Rural England" in February 1999. This posed a series of questions on a wide range of rural issues. A summary of the themes arising from this consultation has been published on the DETR internet website.

Rural poverty is one of the issues being addressed in preparing for the Rural White Paper which we expect to publish later this year.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish his Department's research into the extent of rural poverty; and what definitions of poverty he has used. [113465]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional issue, affecting many aspects of people's lives—income, health, housing, the quality of the environment, opportunities to work and learn, and access to services. There is no single reliable measure.

The Countryside Agency, the Government's statutory adviser on social and economic development in rural areas, has been conducting research into indicators of rural disadvantage. The findings of this research are expected to be published in due course. Current information on rural disadvantage is contained in the Agency's "State of the Countryside", a copy of which is in the Library. It is also among the topics covered in The Cabinet Office's "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity" report, which provides information on the economic, social and environmental conditions in the countryside.

Farm Buildings

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to facilitate the conversion of disused farm buildings for residential and other purposes; and if he will make a statement. [113145]

Mr. Raynsford: Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) note 7: Countryside, already positively encourages the re-use and adaptation of rural buildings. I shall be considering whether any revised guidance maybe appropriate in the light of the Performance and Innovation Unit's report "Rural Economies".

China Clay Quarrying

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the extension of china clay quarrying in Dartmoor is an exceptional circumstance in the sense intended by his own guidance; and what examination of proposals for such quarrying he has conducted. [113573]

Mr. Raynsford: Whether a planning application for an extension of china clay quarrying in Dartmoor comprises an 'exceptional circumstance', as explained in paragraph 4.5 of Planning Policy Guidance Note 7—The Countryside: Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development, would depend upon the scale, nature and individual circumstances of that proposal.

So far as I am aware, no applications have recently been submitted for new or extended china clay quarrying. If they had, the Dartmoor National Park Authority would be responsible for determining them. The Secretary of State would only examine such an application if he called it in for his own determination or if it came before him on appeal.

I am, however, aware of several applications that have been submitted to both the National Park Authority and to Devon County Council under the old minerals planning permission (OMP) review provisions of the Environment Act 1995. These are for the determination of modern operating and restoration conditions for existing china

clay planning permissions within and adjoining the Dartmoor National Park, and not extensions of existing quarrying operations. The local authorities for areas within which these are located are responsible for determining them. As these applications may come before the Secretary of State on appeal, he is unable to comment on their merits.

A35

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what AADT figures were recorded for the Chideock section of the A35 in 1998 and 1999; and what percentage increases are projected for the years 2000 to 2010. [113576]

Mr. Hill: The Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) figures in 1998 and 1999 were 13,186 and 13,618 respectively.

DETR forecasts indicate that by 2010, a central traffic growth estimate (which represents an average of low and high estimates) would add a further 20 per cent. to traffic levels.

In the case of the A35 at Chideock this would mean estimated AADT figure in the region of 16,500 vehicles per day by the year 2010.

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will monitor kerbside nitrogen dioxide in Chideock on the A35. [113574]

Mr. Hill: Part IV of the Environment Act 1995 requires local authorities to review and assess the current and likely future air quality in their areas. Local authorities are required to consider whether one or more of the national air quality objectives, as prescribed in regulations, are unlikely to be met by the required date. Objectives have been set for a number of air pollutants including nitrogen dioxide. The Secretary of State has issued guidance on how to undertake such reviews and assessments, including on where and when monitoring of air pollutants is needed. I understand that West Dorset district council will consider monitoring the kerbside nitrogen dioxide in Chideock on the A35, in addition to their existing monitoring sites throughout the area.

Regional Assemblies

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he plans to give to regional assemblies. [113599]

Ms Armstrong: The eight regional assemblies and chambers already established are voluntary bodies. We have no plans to give them statutory powers but we have provided them with important roles specifically in relation to Regional Development Agencies, regional planning guidance, and regional sustainable development frameworks.

Housing Stock

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities in England which (i) have completed an LSVT of housing stock and (ii) are currently undertaking an LSVT. [113598]

Mr. Mullin: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 923–25W.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the average turn around times between tenants of local authority housing stock for each authority in England. [113597]

Mr. Mullin: Local authorities in England provide estimates of the average time taken to relet their housing stock on their annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) Operational Information returns. Information reported for lettings during 1998–99 is given in the table. There are variations in the way local authorities maintain lettings records and compile these estimates, and comparisons between authorities should be treated with caution.

Average time to relet local authority housing stock[1], 1998–99

	Days
North East	
Alnwick	35
Berwick-upon-Tweed	9
Blyth Valley	25
Castle Morpeth	28
Chester-le-Street	55
Darlington	31
Derwentside	16
Durham	63
Easington	66
Gateshead	32
Hartlepool	31
Middlesbrough	68
Newcastle upon Tyne	34
North Tyneside	33
Redcar and Cleveland	31
Sedgefield	28
South Tyneside	19
Stockton-on-Tees	40
Sunderland	30
Teesdale	30
Tynedale	24
Wansbeck	33
Wear Valley	58
Yorkshire and the Humber	
Barnsley	35
Bradford	52
Calderdale	50
Craven	18
Doncaster	68
East Riding of Yorkshire	53
Hambleton[2]	0
Harrogate	13
Kingston upon Hull	43
Kirklees	31
Leeds	42
North East Lincolnshire	63
North Lincolnshire	77
Richmondshire	35
Rotherham	73
Ryedale[2]	0
Scarborough	23
Selby	14
Sheffield	42
Wakefield	11
York	25
East Midlands	
Amber Valley	22
Ashfield	37
Bassetlaw	82

Average time to relet local authority housing stock[1], 1998–99

	Days
Blaby	26
Bolsover	28
Boston	86
Broxtowe	32
Charnwood	48
Chesterfield	18
Corby	50
Daventry	54
Derby	33
Derbyshire Dales	16
East Lindsey[2]	0
East Northamptonshire	53
Erewash	41
Gedling	31
Harborough	55
High Peak	29
Hinckley and Bosworth	35
Kettering	34
Leicester	40
Lincoln	37
Mansfield	50
Melton	52
Newark and Sherwood	32
North East Derbyshire	39
North Kesteven	53
North West Leicestershire	52
Northampton	42
Nottingham City	25
Oadby and Wigston	12
Rushcliffe	26
Rutland	24
South Derbyshire	25
South Holland	24
South Kesteven	33
South Northamptonshire	31
Wellingborough	57
West Lindsey	49
East of England	
Babergh	25
Basildon	35
Bedford[2]	20
Braintree	14
Breckland[2]	0
Brentwood	35
Broadland[2]	0
Broxbourne	26
Cambridge	52
Castle Point	44
Chelmsford	33
Colchester	15
Dacorum	51
East Cambridgeshire[2]	0
East Hertfordshire	25
Epping Forest	51
Fenland	30
Forest Heath	32
Great Yarmouth	27
Harlow	49
Hertsmere[2]	0
Huntingdonshire	25
Ipswich	22
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk	23
Luton	38
Maldon[2]	0
Mid Bedfordshire	[3]—
Mid Suffolk	34
North Hertfordshire	45
North Norfolk	23
Norwich	37
Peterborough	53
Rochford	31
South Bedfordshire	29

Average time to relet local authority housing stock[1], 1998–99

	Days
South Cambridgeshire	35
South Norfolk	19
Southend-on-Sea	67
St. Albans	27
St. Edmundsbury	30
Stevenage	33
Suffolk Coastal[2]	43
Tendring	30
Three Rivers	14
Thurrock	63
Uttlesford	22
Watford	49
Waveney	41
Welwyn Hatfield	50
Barking and Dagenham	51
Barnet	54
Bexley[2]	0
Brent	39
Bromley[2]	0
Camden	52
City of London	18
Croydon	33
Ealing	45
Enfield	77
Greenwich	55
Hackney	78
Hammersmith and Fulham	43
Haringey	64
Harrow	46
Havering	32
Hillingdon	30
Hounslow	46
Islington	162
Kensington and Chelsea	37
Kingston upon Thames	64
Lambeth	38
Lewisham	50
Merton	35
Newham	53
Redbride	57
Richmond upon Thames	110
Southwark	54
Sutton	56
Tower Hamlets	35
Waltham Forest	70
Wandsworth	46
Westminster	28
South East	
Adur	27
Arun	50
Ashford	25
Aylesbury Vale	52
Basingstoke and Deane[2]	0
Bracknell Forest	34
Brighton and Hove	53
Canterbury	27
Cherwell	26
Chichester	20
Chiltern[2]	0
Crawley	46
Dartford	28
Dover	54
East Hampshire[2]	0
Eastbourne	21
Eastleigh[2]	0
Elmbridge	45
Epsom and Ewell[2]	7
Fareham	20
Gosport	30
Gravesham	50
Guildford	51

Average time to relet local authority housing stock[1], 1998–99

	Days
Hart[2]	0
Hastings[2]	0
Havant[2]	0
Horsham	38
Isle of Wight[2]	21
Lewes	31
Maidstone	38
Mid Sussex[2]	0
Milton Keynes	40
Mole Valley	58
New Forest	22
Oxford	36
Portsmouth	4
Reading	28
Reigate and Banstead	58
Rother[2]	0
Runnymede	38
Rushmoor[2]	0
Sevenoaks[2]	0
Shepway	22
Slough	29
South Bucks[2]	0
South Oxfordshire[2]	0
Southampton	46
Spelthorne[2]	0
Surrey Heath[2]	0
Swale[2]	0
Tandridge	40
Test Valley	15
Thanet	30
The Medway Towns	42
Tonbridge and Malling[2]	0
Tunbridge Wells[2]	14
Vale of White Horse[2]	46
Waverley	33
Wealden	30
West Berkshire[2]	8
West Oxfordshire	35
Winchester	15
Windsor and Maidenhead[2]	2
Woking	28
Wokingham	25
Worthing[2]	18
Wycombe	20
South West	
Bath and North East Somerset[2]	0
Bournemouth	46
Bristol	22
Caradon	27
Carrick	19
Cheltenham	52
Christchurch[2]	0
Cotswold[2]	0
East Devon	33
East Dorset[2]	0
Exeter	22
Forest of Dean	30
Gloucester	20
Isles of Scilly	7
Kennet[2]	0
Kerrier[2]	0
Mendip	14
Mid Devon	27
North Cornwall	18
North Devon	17
North Dorset[2]	0
North Somerset	27
North Wiltshire[2]	0
Penwith[2]	0
Plymouth	4
Poole	38
Purbeck	25

Average time to relet local authority housing stock[1], 1998–99

	Days
Restormel	39
Salisbury	19
Sedgemoor	12
South Gloucestershire	33
South Hams[2]	0
South Somerset[2]	3
Stroud	26
Swindon	15
Taunton Deane	14
Teignbridge	29
Tewkesbury[2]	0
Torbay	26
Torridge	29
West Devon[2]	0
West Dorset[2]	0
West Somerset[2]	0
West Wiltshire	—
Weymouth and Portland	17
West Midlands	
Birmingham	47
Bridgnorth	40
Bromsgrove	34
Cannock Chase	28
Coventry	35
Dudley	115
East Staffordshire	46
Herefordshire	13
Lichfield[2]	0
Malvern Hills[2]	0
Newcastle-under-Lyme	47
North Shropshire	40
North Warwickshire	35
Nuneaton and Bedworth	71
Oswestry	45
Redditch	20
Rugby	10
Sandwell	69
Shrewsbury and Atcham	26
Solihull	35
South Shropshire[2]	0
South Staffordshire[2]	0
Stafford	39
Staffordshire Moorlands	41
Stoke-on-Trent	46
Stratford-upon-Avon[2]	0
Tamworth	25
Telford and Wrekin[2]	35
Walsall	42
Warwick	30
Wolverhampton	49
Worcester	25
Wychavon[2]	0
Wyre Forest	28
North West	
Allerdale[2]	44
Barrow-in-Furness	33
Blackburn with Darwen	56
Blackpool	37
Bolton	44
Burnley	83
Bury	58
Carlisle	74
Chester	35
Chorley	45
Congleton[2]	0
Copeland	16
Crewe and Nantwich	41
Eden[2]	0
Ellesmere Port and Neston	34
Fylde	30
Halton	83

Average time to relet local authority housing stock[1], 1998–99

	Days
Hyndburn	37
Lancaster	26
Macclesfield	55
Manchester	24
Oldham	44
Pendle	35
Preston	36
Ribble Valley	21
Rochdale	40
Rossendale	50
Salford	54
South Lakeland	23
South Ribble[2]	0
Stockport	37
Tameside	30
Trafford	40
Vale Royal	35
Warrington	37
West Lancashire	35
Wigan	28
Wyre[2]	0
Knowsley	25
Liverpool	68
Sefton	44
St. Helens	38
Wirral	44

[1] Excludes dwellings let after major works, mutual exchanges and tenancy successions.

[2] Denotes authorities which had transferred all or most of their housing stock, under Large Scale Voluntar Transfer arrangement, by 31 March 1999

[3] Not available

Source:

DETR Housing Investment Programme returns 1999

A27

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funds will be available for the study of traffic congestion on the A27 in the Worthing area due later this year; and when the study will be carried out. [113596]

Mr. Hill: The A27 Worthing-Lancing Integrated Transport Study is to be funded as part of the Department's programme of Multi Modal Studies. Tenders will be issued shortly to invite consultants to the bid for the commission to undertake the Study.

Climate Change Programme

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the Government's draft climate change programme. [113826]

Mr. Prescott: I will publish a draft climate change programme for the UK on Thursday 9 March. This will set out how we plan to deliver the UK's emission reduction target from Kyoto and move towards its domestic goal. I will also be publishing a consultation paper on a new Energy Efficiency Standard of Performance scheme which would start in 2002.

Copies of the report and the consultation paper will be available from the Vote Office and be placed in the Libraries of the House at 11.00 am tomorrow morning.

Housing Benefit

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact on the housing benefit budget of the judgment in the Court of Appeal in R *v.* Secretary of State ex parte Spath Holme Ltd. [113339]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The Court of Appeal judgment means that we can no longer factor in the capping arrangements in our forecast of rent allowance expenditure which relates to tenancies with a registered rent in England and Wales. As a result, our forecast will need to be increased by £8 million and £15 million for the years 2000–01 and 2001–02 respectively.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt Relief

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of the Government's policy on debt reduction on her target of halving world poverty by 2015. [113495]

Mr. Foulkes: The Government have continually emphasised that the purpose of debt relief is to enable countries to make greater progress on reducing poverty and achieving the international development targets. Our submission to the review of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative set out ways in which the impact of debt relief on poverty reduction could be increased, and I welcome the improvements to the HIPC framework that have been agreed internationally and are now being implemented. The revised HIPC initiative both provides deeper and faster debt relief to qualifying countries, and ensures that a poverty reduction strategy is put in place so that all development resources, including those freed up by HIPC debt relief, can be invested effectively in anti-poverty programmes.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Balloting Services

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ensure that organisations offering balloting services to *(a)* trade unions and *(b)* political parties which involve contested elections count votes in the presence of the candidates should they wish this. [113031]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government have no plans to do so.

Trade union election ballots are regulated by the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, which requires elections to be held for appointments to certain positions in trade unions and governs the conduct of those elections. In particular, the Act requires that votes should be fairly and accurately counted, an independent scrutineer should be appointed to monitor and report on the conduct of the election, and voting papers should be stored, distributed and counted by the scrutineer or another independent person. A union member or candidate who

believes that there has been a breach of the Act's requirements can apply for a remedy to the Certification Officer or the court.

The procedure for the selection of candidates by political parties is a matter for the parties themselves.

Utilities Bill

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to remove the provisions relating to *(a)* telecommunications and *(b)* water from the Utilities Bill; and if he will make a statement. [113324]

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his plans for the regulation of telecoms and water. [113280]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* I announced during Oral Questions on 2 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 555, that the provisions relating to telecommunications and water will be removed from the Utilities Bill.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 50W, on international price comparisons, for what reason his Departmental Press Notice of 11 February stated that the survey report was to be published on 11 February. [113129]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The Department Press Notice did not say that the survey report was to be published on 11 February.

Petrol (Fair Competition)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Director General of Fair Trading began the present review of the petrol undertakings given by oil companies in 1966; when the review will be completed; and if he will publish the results of the review. [113532]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Director General of Fair Trading began the present review of the 1966 petrol undertakings in July 1998. He expects to complete the review this month and will advise me on whether the undertakings should be retained, removed or amended. I will announce my decision in due course.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of changes in the number of petrol supplier and petrol retailers in the downstream market from 1997 to date on competition. [113535]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Under UK competition legislation, the Director General of Fair Trading has responsibility for monitoring markets. He completed a major review of the petrol market in 1998. He concluded that competition in the petrol retailing market was strong and working to the benefit of consumers.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ensure that voluntary agreements between petrol suppliers and petrol retailers not covered by the undertakings given by oil companies in 1966 are subject to equivalent scrutiny by the Office of Fair Trading to ensure fair competition. [113533]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Director General of Fair Trading has powers to investigate such agreements if they appear to raise competition concerns.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who has the responsibility for ensuring adherence to the petrol undertakings given by oil companies in 1966. [113534]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and compliance with orders and undertakings given under the competition legislation. He has in recent years considered a number of complaints about breaches of the 1966 petrol undertakings but has not so far found that breaches of the undertakings have occurred.

Latin American Trade Contracts

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those trade contracts with Latin American countries which have been cancelled in the last 16 months. [113595]

Mr. Caborn: I am unable to provide such a list. Companies do not generally advise my Department of contractual disputes which would be regarded as a commercial matter for them.

Telephone Call Costs

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment the OFT has made of the comparative cost of telephone calls from the UK to *(a)* India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and *(b)* the USA, Australia and New Zealand; and if he will make a statement. [113143]

Ms Hewitt: OFTEL has the main responsibility for telecoms competition issues. The market for international calls from the UK is competitive with more than 70 operators providing services. Prices for international calls have risen by only 7 per cent. in the last five years and BT's share of the market for international calls has fallen to below 37 per cent. for business users and below 70 per cent. for residential users.

There is still nevertheless a marked discrepancy in the cost of calling different countries.

BT's headline retail prices for the routes in question together with the accounting rates are:

£

Route	*Retail price per minute* [1]	*Accounting rate*
(a)		
India	1.20	0.91
Pakistan	1.35	0.81
Bangladesh	1.35	1.13
(b)		
USA	0.24	0.13
Australia	0.49	0.25
New Zealand	0.49	0.14

[1] Inclusive of VAT

The differences in the cost of calls between the two groups of country above arise because of the different stages of liberalisation in these countries and the different charges for terminating incoming international traffic (known as accounting rates). The telecoms markets of group (b) countries are completely liberalised compared to the closed markets of the group (a) countries which have big net inflows of traffic from the UK coupled with high accounting rates. Furthermore, there are much higher call volumes between group (b) countries and the UK compared to group (a).

The Government and OFTEL continue to participate in international meetings, particularly through the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) to put pressure on countries with high accounting rates to reduce them.

WALES

Teachers' Pay

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what talks he has had with *(a)* other departments and *(b)* the First Secretary concerning teachers' pay; and if he will make a statement. [108956]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a regular basis to discuss various issues including the importance of high standards of teaching in Wales. I have been involved in discussion with the National Assembly and the Department for Education and Employment on the implementation of the recommendations of the School Teachers Review Body in Wales.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112666]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No new public bodies have been established by either the Welsh Office between May 1997 and 30 June 1999, or the Wales Office from 1 July 1999 to date.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proportion of candidates for appointment to non-departmental public bodies since 1 May 1997 were not appointed due to their political affiliations. [113308]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Political affiliation is not taken into account when making appointments to non-departmental public bodies.

PRIME MINISTER

"Sharing the Nation's Prosperity"

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to update the report entitled "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity". [112253]

The Prime Minister: There have been two reports published under the general heading "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity". The first, "Variation in Economic & Social Conditions Across the UK", was completed in December 1999; the second, "Economic, Social and Environmental Conditions in the Countryside", was completed in February 2000. Both reports were prepared by the Cabinet Office and reflected relevant conditions and statistics at their time of publication. The Government will keep their findings in mind in developing and delivering future policies, but have no immediate plans to produce updates.

Leaks

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Prime Minister what recent representations he has received regarding leak inquiries in Government departments. [112265]

The Prime Minister: None.

Operation Horseshoe

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 851W, on Operation Horseshoe, if he will place a copy of the statement made by the German Defence Minister on 9 April 1999 in the Library. [113365]

The Prime Minister: I have arranged to have placed in the Library a copy of the material concerning Operation Horseshoe made public by the German Defence Minister on 9 April, along with an English language translation.

CABINET OFFICE

IT (Public Services)

8. **Mr. White:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent assessment she has made of how the use of information technology can improve the delivery of public services. [112263]

16. **Mrs. McKenna:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action is being taken to develop a strategic approach to the use of IT in delivering public services. [112272]

23. **Mr. Sawford:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action is being taken to develop a co-ordinated approach to the use of IT in delivering public services. [112280]

24. **Kali Mountford:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she is taking to develop a strategic approach to the use of IT in delivering public services. [112281]

25. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what studies her Office is carrying out into the scope for improving the use of information technology in the delivery of Government services. [112282]

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to increase communications between Ministers and members of the public by means of the Internet. [112277]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We set out proposals for improving public service delivery by information technology in our draft Corporate IT Strategy, of which I announced the publication in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) on 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 353W.

Anti-drugs Strategy

9. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the latest developments in implementing the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [112264]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are making good progress towards the tough targets set out in their strategy document, "Tackling Drugs to build a better Britain".

On 3 February, my right hon. Friend announced the joint funding of over £500,000 with the Department of Health and the Home Office to recruit up to 300 extra specialist treatment workers. This will help to ensure we have enough properly skilled staff to provide a high quality treatment service to those who need it.

We are also providing a further £7.5 million of support this year and in 2000–01 to assist all schools to deliver effective drug education.

15. **Ms Dari Taylor:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what role the drug action teams are playing in the delivery of the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [112271]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Drug Action Teams have a crucial role in the delivery of the National Drugs Strategy. They consist of agencies for Probation, Health, Education, Police authorities and local authorities. They are the main mechanism for delivery on the ground. All Drug Action Teams are required to plan and deliver an effective programme of anti-drug activities in their area, which is in line with the National Strategy.

13. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she last met the Anti-drugs Co-ordinator to discuss future policy on the control of illegal substances entering the country. [112269]

Marjorie Mowlam: I met with the Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator at the Ministerial Steering Group for Drugs meeting on 23 February.

I hold regular meetings with the Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator to discuss all aspects of the Government's anti-drug strategy.

17. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what assessment she has made of the Drug Awareness Resistance Education Programme; and if she will make a statement. [112273]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I am aware of the contribution made by the Drug Awareness Resistance Education Programme to drug education schemes in a number of areas. I know also that it has enjoyed strong support from a number of hon. Members, particularly in the Nottinghamshire area.

Social Exclusion

10. **Mr. Hopkins:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about the implementation of policies designed to tackle social exclusion. [112266]

19. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about the implementation of policies designed to tackle social exclusion. [112275]

21. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she is taking to tackle social exclusion. [112278]

22. **Mr. Salter:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about the implementation of policies designed to tackle social exclusion. [112279]

Marjorie Mowlam: I can confirm that good progress is being made towards achieving the Government's targets on the four reports from the Social Exclusion Unit that have been published. These of course are on School Truancy and Exclusion, Rough Sleeping, Teenage Pregnancy and Bridging the Gap, and 16 to 18-year-olds not in Education, Training or Employment.

A draft report for consultation, on the National strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, is due to be launched in early April.

Better Government (Older People)

11. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to develop the Better Government for Older People projects. [112267]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The pilot phase of the Better Government for Older People programme comes to an end this month. We hope that, given the 28 pilots' great success in delivering better public services to older people, the local authorities leading them continue to support them and develop their work. The Government are looking forward to receiving the programme's final report in June and to putting its lessons into practice to deliver a marked and sustainable improvement in older people's experience of public services.

Regulation

12. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to reduce the number of regulations issued by Government Departments. [112268]

Mr. Stringer: Each Government Department now has a Regulatory Reform Minister. These Ministers are directly responsible for delivering our regulatory strategy in their Department including:

getting rid of unnecessary regulations; and

consulting with business on any essential new proposals.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office will chair a Regulatory Accountability Panel which will be examining the regulatory performance and programmes of each Department. Together with the requirement to produce regulatory impact assessments, these arrangements will ensure that this Government regulates only where necessary and in the least burdensome way.

"Modernising Government"

14. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent discussions she has had with *(a)* trade union representatives and *(b)* others on the "Modernising Government" programme. [112270]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have regular meetings with the trade unions at which developments in modernising government are discussed among other topics.

I have many other meetings and it would be unusual for modernisation not to feature positively in some way.

Online Government

20. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the state of preparedness of the United Kingdom for online Government. [112276]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my reply to him on 20 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 544W.

DEFENCE

Defence Estates Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Estates organisation for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111725]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Estates agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Ian Andrews to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question on the targets set for the Defence Estate Organisation.

Detailed below are the Defence Estates (formerly the Defence Estate Organisation) published Key Targets for 1998/1999:

Target	*Subject*	*Status*
Key Target 1	Establish cost of disposals (including internal costs and consultancy fees, but not Works in Aid) as a percentage of disposal receipts and set targets for improvement	Achieved
Key Target 2	Achieve gross disposal receipts of £150m	Achieved
Key Target 3	Complete transfer of title to new owner of 90% of disposals within 3 years of property being passed to DEO for disposal.	Not Achieved
Key Target 4	Complete initial assessment against Business Excellence Model.	Achieved
Key Target 5	Complete Internal Investors in People (IIP) and external customer survey and submit reports to the Owner's Advisory Board, together with proposed targets for improvement:	
	a. Internal IIP process	Achieved
	b. External customer survey	Achieved
Key Target 6	Appointments for external Project Managers for capital works projects:	
	a. 99% achievement within 1 month for appointments made through Term Commissions or Partnering arrangements.	Achieved
	b. 90% achievement within 5 months for all appointments.	Achieved

It was not possible to achieve KT3 due to the legacy of sites in the disposal programme. The actual figure achieved for sites sold during 1998/1999, was 77 per cent.

The 1998/1999 Annual Report & Accounts for Defence Estates was published on 2 November 1999, and a copy placed in the library of the House of Commons on 2 November 1999.

The Agency's Key Targets for 1998/1999 reflected an organisation in transition. This was a period during which the Agency necessarily committed itself to essential internal restructuring to accommodate the recommendations of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR). It was also necessary for the Agency to improve its focus on the needs of its customers and other stakeholders. The 1999/2000 Key Targets reflected this. Specifically, they addressed the need to establish a corporate management strategy for the estate, the development of a new construction procurement model and to improve the process for the disposal of surplus buildings and land.

The published Key Targets for 1999/2000 are:

Key Target 1:

To demonstrate an improvement of 10% (over the figure for 1998/1999) in the level of customer satisfaction with the services provided by the Agency as measured by the 1999/2000 customer survey.

Key Target 2:

To achieve net disposal receipts of £235M.

Key Target 3:

To let three pilot Prime Contracts by 31 March 2000.

Key Target 4:

To publish a strategy for the management of the Defence Estate by 31 December 1999.

I hope this is helpful.

RAF Signals Engineering Establishment

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the RAF Signals Engineering Establishment for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111752]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from C. M. Davison to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you ask for details of those targets for the RAF Signals Engineering Establishment for 1998–99 which were, and were not, achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each

case, and detailing the action taken by the Agency to improve target achievement in 1999–2000. These matters fall within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Agency Key Targets and achievement against each one were published in the Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99 (Publication HC 677 Page 12 refers). Eight of the nine Targets were achieved. The Target not achieved—the attainment of Investors in People accreditation by 31 December 1998—was revised during the year following a mock assessment in September 1998 which highlighted the need for further work on the evaluation of training and development taking place within the organisation. The formal assessment was carried out in March 1999, and the Agency was awarded its accreditation in July 1999, well ahead of the overall MoD deadline.

In the light of revised guidance from the MoD Framework Team, only 4 Key Targets were published for the Agency in 1999–2000, and the evidence to date indicates that each Target will be achieved.

Achievement against key ministerial targets

		Targets, outturns and achievements			*Targets for*
		1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Efficiency					
To reduce the cost per task manhour, at full cost, compared with the FY 1996–97 figure	Target	Baseline set at £62.50	Less than 95%	Less than 93%	Less than 85%[2]
	Outturn	—[1]	90.6%	83.65%	—
Reduce the core as far as possible and continue to refine it against the operational need	Target	Review and reduce to minimum	Review and reduce to minimum	Review and reduce to minimum	[3]—
	Outturn	Achieved	Achieved	Achieved	—
Throughput					
Maintain core skills needed to support likely operations	Target	Maintain skills	Maintain skills	Maintain skills	[3]—
	Outturn	Achieved	Achieved	Achieved	—
Deliver operational tasks on time	Target	100%	100%	100%	100%
	Outturn	100%	100%	100%	—
Deliver non-operational tasks on time	Target	More than 80%	More than 85%	More than 90%	More than 92%
	Outturn	87.3%	87.75%	93.5%	—
Quality					
To reduce the number of quality failures in completed tasks	Target	Less than 5%	Less than 5%	Less than 4%	Less than 1.5%
	Outturn	1%	3%	1.4%	—
Financial Performance					
Develop an improved costing system which will interface effectively with the MOD's overall approach to Resource Accounting and Budgeting	Target	No Target	No Target	Develop costing system	[3]—
	Outturn	[4]—	[4]—	Achieved	[3]—
Miscellaneous					
Complete an Action Plan to resolve the Year 2000 IT problem by 30 September 1998	Target	No Target	No Target	Complete Plan	[5]—
	Outturn	[4]—	[4]—	Achieved	—
Achieve Investors in People Accreditation by 31 December 1998	Target	No Target	No Target	Achieve by 31 December 1998	[5]—
	Outturn	[4]—	[4]—	Not achieved[6]	—

[1] Previous figures based on cash cost
[2] In real terms
[3] Not a Key Target for this year following revised guidance
[4] Not applicable
[5] Not a Key Target for this year
[6] The target was revised during the year following a mock assessment. The assessment took place in March 1999. We have been informed that a positive recommendation will be made to the assessment panel on 23 July 1999.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111726]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's (DERA) targets for 1998/99.

A list of the key targets for 1998/99 and details of which ones were and were not achieved, together with an explanation of the factors affecting the outcome in each case, is given in Annual Report for 1998/99, a copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library.

You also asked for details of the action taken by the Agency to improve target achievements performance in 1999/00. The targets for 1999/00 were published in Hansard on 27 July 1999. Again, a copy is attached for ease of reference. As you will see, with the exception of target 7, "To establish at least six Defence Diversification Offices across the UK", they are essentially the same

as those for the previous year. The many trading problems caused by continuing declines in some of our core defence business have meant that the first half of 1999/2000 has been extremely challenging. We are, therefore, having to control costs carefully at the traditional technology end of our business in order to optimise our financial performance. Also of vital importance are our non-financial targets because these reflect the scientific achievements on which our reputation and hence future income stream will be based. Last year, we experienced difficulties in setting the baselines for one or two of these, but we have taken managerial steps to ensure that our true achievements are recorded this year. It is, nevertheless, too early to predict the outcome of these measures.

Overall, however, our ability to meet the targets will very much depend on a timely resolution of the debate over the future of DERA and the question of a public-private partnership announced in the Strategic Defence Review in July 1998. Naturally, such strategic uncertainty affects DERA staff and customers alike and, whilst our central direction remains unchanged, we need to establish a firm position from which to address the difficulties of our current trading environment.

Key Targets for 1999/2000

In Year Targets

consistent with Treasury requirements, to achieve at least a 6% Return on Capital Employed.

to set manpower chargeout rates for 2000/01 which reflect a reduction in DERA overheads compared with 1999/2000 budgeted levels.

to increase new business income (from customers other than the MOD) to £140 million in 1999/2000.

to increase the number of staff elected as Fellows of professional bodies by 10%.

to achieve on time 90% of the agreed milestones on work for MOD customers.

to increase the level of customer satisfaction, as measured by customer surveys.

to establish at least 6 Defence Diversification Offices across the UK.

Three Year Targets

over a period of 3 years, to achieve a 20% increase in peer reviewed publications per professional.

over a period of three years to increase by 50% the number of scientific teams assessed as 'world-class' in the technical assessment exercise.

Army Training and Recruiting Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Army Recruitment and Training Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111729]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Army Training and Recruiting Training Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from M. A. Piper to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Key Targets for the Army Training and Recruiting Agency (ATRA) and the Defence Animal Centre (DAC) for the year 1998/1999, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Deputy Chief Executive of the Agency.

You should be aware that although the DAC was an Agency in its own right in 1998/1999, on 1 April 1999 it became part of the ATRA. For the year 1998/1999 therefore, there were two sets of Key Targets, one for each agency. For 1999/2000 and subsequent years, the DAC targets are subsumed within those of the ATRA and are not separately identified. Neither Agency has yet published their Annual Report and Accounts for 1998/1999, but expect to shortly.

ATRA Key Targets 1998/1999:

Key Target 1:

To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for commissioned officers.

Requirement: 642, Achievement: 591

The continuing shortfall was due to insufficient numbers of potential officers recruited in previous years. The demographic trough continues to have an effect. The Agency has introduced an Officers Marketing Action Plan which aims to improve the level of enquiries and firm applications for commissions.

Potential officers will be targeted in tertiary education as well as the traditional area of secondary education. The Agency has also introduced an improved "nurturing" process to maintain contact with potential officers throughout their education, prior to them joining.

Key Target 2:

To meet the Adjutant General's requirements for officers qualified for service in Field Force units following successful Special to Arm training.

Requirement: 632, Achievement: 580

The shortfall results from the insufficient numbers being recruited in previous years resulting in lower numbers passing through to Special to Arm training. The action being taken to address the shortfall in KT1 will also address this KT.

Key Target 3:

To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for professional development training of officers.

Requirement: 7,500, Achievement: 7,114

Achievement of this target is entirely dependent upon release of officers from the Field Army to undertake such training. Exceptional operational commitments prevented officers being released to take up all the places allocated. More tautly defined training programmes have been introduced which resulted in a considerable improvement in performance over 1997/98, and it is anticipated that this will continue.

Key Target 4:

To meet the Adjutant General's requirements for soldiers qualified for service in Field Force units following successful Special to Arm training.

Requirement: 10,140, Achievement: 8,353

Underachievement in recruiting and higher than anticipated wastage rates in Recruit Training (Phase 1) led to lower numbers entering Special to Arm training and therefore under performance in this KT. The Agency is putting in place mechanisms to improve both the quality of recruits entering the training pipeline and to make the training process more efficient. This is already showing signs of improving performance.

Key Target 5:

To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for soldiers' professional development training.

Requirement: 55,500, Achieved: 52,183

Again, exceptional operational commitments of the Field Army prevented soldiers being released to take up all the places allocated. More tautly defined training programmes have been introduced which resulted in a considerable improvement in performance over 1997/98, and it is anticipated that this will continue.

Key Target 6:

Achieve efficiency savings. During the year develop an Efficiency Index that measures output and associated costs as a baseline to achieve year on year improvements in efficiency.

Target: £34.7M savings, Achievement: £28M savings

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The shortfall is due primarily to difficulties experienced with accounting for the pay of all Initial Trainees, for which the Agency assumed responsibility during the year. The development of the Efficiency Index has been achieved.

Overall, the Agency continued to operate in a difficult environment, the economy has been buoyant, thus increasing competitive pressure on recruiting in the target age group. The effects of the increased level of operational commitment in the Field Army continued to have an effect, principally by reducing the availability of officers and soldiers for career developments courses. The introduction of more tautly defined training programmes has resulted in an improvement in performance in the current year and this is set to continue.

DAC Targets met in 1998/1999:

Key Target 1:

To meet requirements for Military Personnel (MP) and Military Working Animals (MWA).

Target: 100%, Achievement: 100%

Key Target 2:

To meet agreed customer satisfaction for trained quality output.

Target: 95%, Achievement: 95%

Key Target 4:

To meet agreed customer satisfaction in timeliness of delivery.

Target: 95%, Achievement: 96.3%

Key Target 5:

To achieve training success rates for Course Specific MWA.

Target: 95%, Achievement: 100%

Key Target 6:

To achieve training success rates for MP.

Target: 90%, Achievement: 94.1%

DAC Target not met in 1998/1999:

Key Target 3:

To meet customer satisfaction in numbers of trained output quantity.

Target: MWA—95%, MP—100%, Achievement: MWA—78.9%, MP—100%

The shortfall in Military Working Animals was caused primarily by a shortage of suitable dogs being available and was compounded by staff shortages. This latter was caused by recruiting deficits in the past and although there have been improvements in this area, operational commitments by the Field Army are still causing problems. A number of initiatives have been introduced to overcome the shortfall in dogs, principally revised procurement procedures and veterinary screening procedures.

Service Children's Education Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Service Children's Education agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111738]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Service Children's Education agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from David Wadsworth to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

Key Targets

The Key Targets for 1998/99 for the Service Children's Education Agency, and our performance against them, are set out in our Annual Report and Accounts 1998/1999 (HC167), a copy of which was placed in the library of the House of Commons.

In broad terms the performance of the Agency was judged in 98/99 against nine Key Targets; five directly related to education; the remainder covering efficiency, customer satisfaction and response times to enquiries. A final milestone target related to the introduction of an SCE nursery education scheme.

The performance of the Agency against these targets is set out at Annexes A and B, attached.

As you will see from those figures, I am pleased to report that, in the main, we met the overwhelming majority of our targets. Those that we did not meet are as follows:

Key Target 4—The SATs targets at Key Stages 12, 2 and 3 (ages 7, 11 and 14)

Although 11 of the 18 individual aspects to this target were achieved, 7 were not. These were:

English—Key Stage 1 Test/Task, and Key Stage 3 Teacher Assessment

Maths—Key Stage 1 Teacher Assessment and Key Stage 2 Test/Task

Science—Key Stages 1 and 3 Teacher Assessment and Key Stage 3 Test/Task

No specific reasons for failing to achieve these targets has yet been adduced. It should be noted that in all assessments at KS1, KS2 and KS3 our achievement scores were higher than English LEAs, sometimes significantly so (on average by +5.8%).

Key Target 7—The Efficiency Target (reduction in per capita pupil costs, measured on an accruals basis)

An unexpected drop in pupil numbers combined with increased financial investment in education, for example extra funding for the Literacy and Numeracy strategies, meant that this target was not met in 1998/99. The use of such a blunt measure of efficiency has now been judged to be unrealistic, given the continuing investment in education spending and teaching salaries. It has therefore been proposed that, for 1999/2000 and beyond, the Agency should develop a means to measure the "value added" by SCE. This will require further developments in baseline assessments and in pupil through-life tracking via Unique Pupil Numbers (UPNs).

With regard to the future, our Key Targets for 99/00 have been modified to achieve an improvement each year on the Agency's performance on the previous year. This should reflect a more realistic but nevertheless challenging target in these subjects. My aspiration to improve our performance in 1999/2000 is being addressed by involving schools more closely in the target setting process, a continued commitment to the literacy and numeracy strategies through intensive in service training for teachers, and the greater involvement of the external advisers to Agency's Owner's, namely DfEE, HMI/Ofsted and the Chief Education Officer of Hampshire Local Education Authority to ensure that the targets are realistic.

I hope that this is helpful.

Annex A—Service Children's Education—Performance against key targets 1998–99

KT No.	*Key target description*	*Target (Percentage)*	*Achievement*	*Remarks*
1	Exceed the 1997–98 UK LEA average percentage pass rate (measured as a percentage of pupil entries) gaining A* to C grade in 5 or more subjects at GCSE by 4 per cent.	44.3%	47.4%	—

Annex A—Service Children's Education—Performance against key targets 1998–99

KT No.	Key target description	Target (Percentage)	Achievement	Remarks
2	Exceed the 1997–98 UK LEA average percentage pass rate (as measured as a percentage of subject entries) at grades A to C level at A level by 2 per cent.	54%	60.3%	—
3	Maintain an overall percentage pass rate for GNVQ intermediate level	92%	70–96%	70 per cent. of those who commenced the course completed it in the year. 96% of those who completed it were successful
4	Achieve the following results at Standard Attainment Tasks and Tests (SATs) at each of ages 7, 11 and 14	Please see Annex B	Please see Annex B	—
5	Achieve as a minimum satisfactory + in each OFSTED school inspection	Sat+	Achieved	—
6	Implement the SCE elements of the MoD scheme for the provision of nursery education overseas to be completed by September 1998	September 1998	Achieved	—
7	To achieve an overall reduction in per capita pupil costs, measured on an accruals basis	2.5%	Failed	Unexpected drop in pupil numbers and increased spend on DfEE initiatives
8	Achieve an index of satisfaction with SCE within the Army Continuous Attitude Survey above 358	+358	+371	—
9	Ensure percentage of enquiries and/or requests answered within 10 working days of receipt	90%	Achieved	—

Annex B—Key Target 4: National curriculum assessment results—1998

			Percentage
Subject/Key stage	*Target*	*Achieved*	*Variation*
English			
KS1			
Teacher Assessment	87	87	0
Reading Test/Task	87	85	−2
Writing Test/Task	89	89	0
KS2			
Teacher Assessment	68	71	+3
Test/Task	71	74	+3
KS3			
Teacher Assessment	67	64	−3
Test/Task	73	80	+7
Maths			
KS1			
Teacher Assessment	89	88	−1
Test/Task	89	90	+1
KS2			
Teacher Assessment	71	71	0
Test/Task	73	68	−5
KS3			
Teacher Assessment	71	71	0
Test/Task	68	70	+2
Science			
KS1			
Teacher Assessment	90	88	−2
KS2			
Teacher Assessment	72	74	+2
Test/Task	78	79	+1
KS3			
Teacher Assessment	73	66	−7
Test/Task	74	67	−7

Meteorological Office

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Meteorological Office for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111750]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Ewins to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Met. Office's performance against its key performance targets in 1998–99. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of The Met. Office.

Our targets in 1998–99, as announced in Hansard on 24 April 1998 (Col 714), were as follows:

Key Target 1

To achieve a value of at least 111.1 index points on 31 March 1999 from a baseline of 100.0 on 31 March 1995, for the global Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) index, which measures the overall forecasting skill of the global NWP model;

Key Target 2

To achieve an index level of 104.0 by 31 March 2000 from a baseline of 400.0 at 31 March 1996, and to achieve an increase of at least 2.0 index points during 1998–99 for the UK NWP partial index, which measures the forecasting skill of the NWP model for the UK;

Key Target 3

To increase the index of service quality to at least 104.8 on 31 March 1999 from a baseline of 100.0 for 1996–97, in line with agreed customer requirements. The index covers representative services and products across defence civil aviation, public and business users;

Key Target 4

To improve efficiency from a baseline of 100.0 on 31 March 1997 to at least 108.0 on 31 March 1999 as measured by the agreed Efficiency Index;

Key Target 5

To achieve an overall return on capital employed (ROCE) of at least 7% taken year on year. For the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99 to achieve an overall ROCE of at least 11.6% averaged over the two years;

Key Target 6

To make a contribution from commercial activities in 1998–99 of not less than £1.1 million, on the agreed basis of measurement.

Our performance against these targets was published in our Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99, copies of which are available in the library of the House, and is summarised in the following table:

Key performance indicator	*Target*	*Outturn*	*Achieved*
UK NWP Index	[1]104.2	106.3	Yes
Global NWP Index	111.1	109.9	No
Service Quality Index	104.8	114.5	Yes
Efficiency Index	108.0	111.5	Yes
ROCE[2]	7%	[3]10%	Yes
Commercial Contribution	£1.1m	£1.8m	Yes

[1] The Index score at the end of 1997–98 was 102.2.

[2] The basis of calculating ROCE changed during 1998–99 as a result of the introduction of FRS12, a financial reporting standard that affected the accounting treatment of provisions. ROCE performance in the table is shown pre-FRS12, being the basis upon which the 1998–99 target was set. The post FRS12 outturn was 6.3%.

[3] The average ROCE for 1997–97 and 1998–99 was 13.8% pre-FRS12 (13.5% post-FRS12).

As you will see, we exceeded our financial performance targets by a significant margin and substantially improved our service quality and efficiency. We also improved our UK Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) Index, which is a measure of our underlying forecasting accuracy for the UK, by a significant margin. However, we fell just short of the Global NWP target. Problems with the model's handling of the South Pole region were identified and rectified, and benefits of a higher resolution model introduced in January 1998 began to feed through towards the end of 1998–99. As a result, the target score was achieved less than 2 months into 1999–2000. Moreover, comparison with the performance for global models run by other Meteorological services shows that, despite the failure to achieve our own challenging performance target, we have maintained our position as a world-class weather forecasting centre.

To improve Global NWP performance in 1999–2000, a number of further enhancements to the model have been introduced, and I am pleased to say that we are currently on course to meet both of our NWP targets this year. We are also on track to deliver greater in-year cost efficiency, part of which has been anticipated in agreed prices for 1999/2000 with the remainder to be passed on to our customers through further price reductions in future years. We have cut the planned level of ROCE substantially, in line with our strategy of investment for growth, which will enable us, inter-alia, to improve service quality (especially forecasting accuracy and responsiveness to customer needs) and, largely through increased automation, generate further down-stream efficiency improvements. We are, however, unlikely to meet our target for commercial contribution, although our commercial business remains profitable. We have already introduced changes to our commercial division, including the appointment of a new Managing Director, which we are confidence will increase both revenue and profitability in 2000–01.

Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111742]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Steve Lloyd to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about our Agency's Key Targets and whether or not they were achieved for 1998–99. All targets were met in full.

Details of the achievements are listed below and contained in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the Houses of Parliament.

Percentage

Key target		*Target*	*Achievement*
1	To provide operational imagery intelligence (IMINT) support as follows:		
	Priority 1 tasks to be completed within 24 hours of receipt of appropriate imagery	98	100
	Priority 2 tasks within 48 hours	92	100
	Priority 3 tasks within 7 days	88	91
2	To provide detached Service personnel as required, up to a total of 22 at any one time		Achieved
3	To complete Strategic, non-operational intelligence requirements and other tasks:		
	Priority 1 tasks to be completed within 24 hours of receipt of appropriate imagery	92	95
	Priority 2 tasks within 48 hours	88	95
	Priority 3 tasks within 7 days	80	83
	Priority 4 tasks within 6 weeks	75	89
4	To revise the methodology of measuring the degree of customer satisfaction with the service provided		Achieved
5	To achieve an improvement of efficiency	2.5	3.2
6	To conduct evaluations of imagery reconnaissance systems for Government departments within agreed times and allocated resources		Achieved

Action taken by the Agency to continue to achieve its targets and where possible improve performance include:

a. The continuing refinement of the Re-organisation of all areas of the Agency, to give a better focus on satisfying tasking needs.

b. A methodology for measuring customer satisfaction prototyped during FY 99/00.

c. The continued pursuit of a clear methodology of true output measurement.

I hope that you will find that this answer gives you the information that you are seeking.

Army Technical Support Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Army Technical Support Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111747]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Army Technical Support Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from A. D. Ball to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Key Target achievement for 1998–99 for the Army Technical Support Agency (ATSA), as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the ATSA.

As reported in the ATSA Annual Report and Accounts 1998/99, copies of which were laid in the Library of the House on 26 July 1999, ATSA did not achieve one part of one of its 7 Key Targets set for 1998–99. The Key Targets, their achievement, the factors affecting their outcome and the action taken to improve performance for 1999–2000 are detailed at Annex A for your convenience of consideration.

The partial failure to achieve on of the Key Targets is also explained in detail as follows:

Key Target 4 Part 2: Despatch 90% of *routine* technical publications within 24 working days of receipt of the demand.

Although ATSA's cumulative annual achievement for 1998–99 was 85.3% of nearly 70,000 demands, the 90% target was exceeded in 6 of the 12 monthly reporting periods. This was despite an 11% increase in annual cumulative demand due to the operation and roulement of units in the Balkans and further complicated by unforeseen complete reissues of the extensive Challenger 2 Main Battle Tank support publications.

Performance against the Key Targets for 1999–2000 is monitored by the Chief Executive and Executive Management Board of the Agency on a monthly basis. This performance is reported quarterly to the Agency's Owner and annually to Ministers through publication of the Next Steps Report and the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts. Key Target achievement is also considered by the National Audit Office during the annual submission of the Accounts for external audit.

As at 31 January 2000, the Agency is on target to achieve all of its Key Targets for 1999–2000.

I hope that you find this information helpful.

ATSA Key Targets 1998–99

Definitions, performance and proposed changes for 1999–2000

Key Target 1: To influence equipment design by obtaining formal tasking from Project Managers/Integrated Logistic Support (ILS) Managers in 80% of appropriate ILS projects.

Result: Achieved: 104 (80%) of 130 appropriate ILS projects receiving tasking.

Improvement: There is no change to the 80% target for 1999–2000. This list of appropriate projects is reviewed and updated by the Customer every 6 months and thus offers fresh challenge each time this occurs.

Key Target 2: To recommend at least 10% gross cost saving in Advanced Order Spares purchasing for appropriate non-ILS projects without reducing the equipment sustainability or availability.

Result: Exceeded: A saving of £3.763M (63%) was recommended against spares listings valued at £5.96M.

Improvement: Discontinued as a Key Target for 1999–2000 since the proportion of cost savings are determined more by manufacturers' recommendations than factors within ATSA's control. As ILS and off-the-shelf procurement become the normal approach and replace Advanced Order Spares procurement, this area will become progressively less important. Although no longer a Key Target, this process of scrutiny and review is still being conducted.

Key Target 3: To provide a complete and accurate answer to 92% of ad hoc enquiries within 2 working days.

Result: Exceeded: 66,818 (96.8%) of 69,030 ad hoc queries received were answered within the period.

Improvement: The target is increased from 92% to 94% whilst also noting a typical 8% increase in annual demand.

Key Target 4: To despatch new and reprinted technical publications within the period from receipt of demand as follows:

For priority demands, 90% within 5 working days

For routine demands, 90% within 24 working days

Result: Part Exceeded and Part Not Achieved: 1,386 (99.4%) of the 1,395 priority demands, and 59,542 (85.3%) of 69,542 routine demands were met within the target periods.

Improvement: The target levels are being maintained in 1999–2000 in recognition of the steady increase in annual cumulative demand over recent years. Resource levels are unchanged. Increased efficiency is continually sought by adjusting batch-processing techniques.

Key Target 5: To complete at least: 90% of Operational projects and 75% of Priority A projects before the agreed target date.

Result: Exceeded: 5 (100%) Operational projects and 91 (89.2%) of 102 Priority A projects were completed by the agreed target date.

Improvement: The target coverage is being extended by the inclusion of an additional target of 60% of Priority B projects; the other targets remain the same. This will increase the measured target scope to 80% of all projects received.

Key Target 6: To satisfy 90% of customers in the handling of technical projects.

Results: Exceeded: 1,331 (98.1%) of 1,357 completed projects received a grading of satisfied (or better) by the customer on closure questionnaires.

Improvement: Target increased to 92% for 1999–2000. In addition, results are validated through sample customer interviews.

Key Target 7: To provide a considered response to 90% of Equipment Failure Reports (or equivalent) submissions within 10 working days of receipt.

Result: Exceeded: 22,684 (91.9%) of 24,684 EFRs received considered responses within the stated period.

Improvement: To be discontinued as a Key Target for 1999–2000. The EFR system is currently under review and major changes are expected. In the meantime the main customer (HQ LAND) has agreed to the introduction of a new, more cost-effective system of consolidated bulletins rather than individual responses.

Defence Transports and Movements Executive

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Transports and Movements Executive for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111756]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Transport and Movements Executive. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from P. T. W. Leaning to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence, about the targets for the Defence Transport and Movements Executive, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility, being the Chief Executive of the Agency which replaced the former DTMX in April 1999.

It is pleasing to report that DTMX achieved all its Key Targets for 1998–99 and the results of that financial year's performance were included in the Annual Report and Accounts which were laid before Parliament on 27 January this year (Library number 132, pages 10–14). For your ease of reference, I am providing extract details of each of the four Key Targets concerned, at Annex A.

Also included in the DTMX Annual Report and Accounts (page 27) is the background behind the launch of our new Agency, into which DTMX was subsumed. Basically, as part of the Strategic Defence Review it was decided to form one Agency which would be responsible for the provision of surface (road, rail and sea) and air transport and movements support to the Ministry of Defence. The Defence Transport and Movements Agency was, therefore, formed from an amalgamation of DTMX, the Joint Transport and Movements Staff (Northwood) and elements of 38 Gp RAF/Air Movements Executive (London, High Wycombe and Halton).

DTMA has been able to use the lessons learnt by its former constituent parts but the way that it operates, and the type of support that it provides, is different to that of its predecessors. With that in mind, it has been set new challenging targets, rather than continue with any of the targets set for its predecessors. Again, I am providing details of the four Key Targets for 1999–2000, at Annex B.

DTMX Key Targets for 1998–99

Key Target 1

To exceed 90% of Customers' perceived satisfaction of requirements.

Results: In conjunction with the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA), the DTMX Plans Team developed a survey to both map the customer base and subsequently monitor satisfaction levels. The analysis of the survey results has proved useful and encouraging. Of the 371 surveys sent out, 60% were returned. The overall satisfaction rating was 92%. Desk officers have followed up these results with customers and in particular investigated those where DTMX scored less than the prescribed 90%.

Key Target 2

To establish the baseline for the quality of the Unaccompanied Baggage (UB) Service, to enable subsequent measurement of improvements.

Results: Although DTMX had been given until May 1999 to establish a performance baseline, it was decided that with the incorporation of DTMX into DTMA, a set of results would be compiled for the period January-March 1999 for each of the UB business areas, based on the existing, DTMX compiled, survey data.

Outside of DTMX a number of different surveys were already in use by the Divisional and District Headquarters. To avoid 'survey fatigue' it was agreed that DTMX would sponsor a single set of common surveys covering the whole gambit of the Unaccompanied Baggage Service. These surveys were taken into general use at the end of 1998 and will, in the future, provide a much wider data set, allowing the Agency to monitor customer perceptions continuously and thereby improve the service.

Key Target 3

To exceed 90% satisfaction of Customers' requirements.

Results: Given that the majority of the service provided is carried out through agents and contractors, it was acknowledged that a system of negative reporting would allow us to concentrate on supplier failure and would best support customer requirements. High volume activities with few complaints have raised the percentage satisfaction rate, but there are areas that have been highlighted which require attention. Overall 210 complaints were recorded during the period and these are summarised as follows:

The performance of our suppliers to customers' satisfaction exceeded 99%.

Customers with complaints or problems are required to contact DTMX with the details, these are then confirmed in writing, investigated and if upheld recorded as a supplier failure against the target. In order to improve the capture of complaints data, action is in hand to incorporate a system of complaints logging on CARGONET, the Agency's primary data warehouse and UBMIS which is specifically tailored towards the Unaccompanied Baggage Service.

Key Target 4

To establish unit costs per output data to enable the setting of realistic efficiency targets for subsequent years.

Results: Through the development of the Agency's Activity Based Costing model, it has been possible to identify unit costs down to individual loads. For example it is now possible to identify the average cost of sending 1 tonne of aggregate to the Falkland Islands or of delivering a consignment of ammunition to one of the Ammunition Depots.

Many of the outputs produced or sponsored by the Agency are conducted under call-off contracts which are casted on a schedule of prices.

DTMA Key Targets for 1999–2000

Key Target 1

To meet the customers' requirements as specified in customer supplier agreements to deliver:

a. 90% or more of agency transactions within agreed criteria.

b. 90% or more of the services provided under call-off contracts at a satisfactory level.

This KT measures the quantity, quality and timeliness of the 36 services of the Agency as specified by its customers through the performance indicators contained in the Customer Supplier Agreements (CSAs). The CSAs have been developed with customers and will ultimately provide the basis for Agency funding. The services provided by DTMA fall into 2 categories: those processed directly by Agency staff and those that are provided as contracted capability against which a user is able to call-off.

Key Target 2

To establish baseline data for the administrative unit costs by 31 December 1999.

The administrative unit cost is defined as the cost of completing an Agency processed transaction. These costs will be obtained through the use of an Activity Based Costing model, which will need to be developed in year one with a target date of 31 December 1999 set to obtain baseline data. Efficiencies will be measured from this baseline in future years.

Key Target 3

To demonstrate net added value.

One of the benefits that DTMA ought to be able to offer its customers is the contract price advantage achieved through its corporate negotiating power and skills. This KT aims to demonstrate that the DTMA operating costs incurred by the provision of contracted services are more than covered by this

price advantage and hence add value to the Department as a whole. This will be achieved by comparison with specific indices provided by the Office for National Statistics.

Key Target 4

To achieve at least a satisfactory rating in the provision of operational transport and movements support.

This KT relates to the output in support of planning the deployment, sustainment and recovery of forces on operations that may not be subject to a CSA. It also includes the MOD tasking authority for those assets owned by HQ 38 Group and Commodore Royal Fleet Auxiliary (COMRFA). This activity is a core Agency task supporting military operations and force projection. PJHQ as the principal operational Customer, will be requested to provide a biennial assessment of the Agency's operational performance based on post exercise and audit reports on Defence operational capability.

Military Survey

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Military Survey for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111764]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Military Survey Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from P. R. Wildman to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about Key Target achievement for 1998–99 for the Military Survey Defence Agency, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Agency Chief Executive.

As reported in the Agency's Annual Report and Account, Military Survey achieved five of the six Key Targets set by its owner for 1998–99. The sixth was achieved one month behind schedule. This delay was due to the need to complete higher priority work in support of operations. Full details of the Key Targets are attached at Annex A.

The Agency monitors the performance of its Key Targets and detailed Business Plan Objectives via an electronic reporting spreadsheet, which is supplied to the Directors' Board each month. The Directors' Board Pack is supplemented with a printout containing details of all those objectives which contribute to overall performance together with commentary from the managers responsible. The introduction of these procedures has ensured that appropriate action is taken in a timely manner.

I hope that you find this information helpful.

Those targets of the Military Survey for 1998–99 which were achieved

Key Target 1:

To satisfy 100% of requirements for geographic support to current operations within the timescale agreed between the Agency and its customers.

Outcome: Achieved

Key Target 3:

To complete the agreed Annual Production Programme (APP) on the time and to cost.

Outcome: Achieved

Key Target 4:

To establish by March 1999 a process for measuring the degree of satisfaction the library service provides.

Outcome: Achieved

Key Target 5:

To maintain the required readiness state of the required Field Support elements of the Agency as required by the Department.

Outcome: Achieved

Key Target 6:

To achieve a 2.5% improvement in efficiency.

Outcome: Achieved

Those targets of the military survey for 1998–99 which were not achieved

Key Target 2:

To agree with the Joint Customer Group by March 1999, a process for measuring the degree of customer satisfaction with the service provided.

Outcome: Achieved at the end of April 1999

Factors affecting the outcome: Publication of the paper defining the process for measuring customer satisfaction was delayed due to the need to complete higher priority work in support of operations. The paper was agreed at the end of April 1999—a delay of one month.

Defence Bills Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Bills Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111730]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Bills Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from I. S. Elrick to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning performance against the targets set for the Defence Bills Agency, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The seven targets set for the Defence Bills Agency for 1998/99 are detailed below and performance was set out in the Agency's 1998/99 Annual Report and Accounts, a copy of which was placed in the library of the House on 13 July 1999. The first six were achieved in full but the seventh only attained 95.7% against a target of 100%.

1. To pay 97% of correctly presented bills within 11 working days;
2. To pay 100% of correctly presented bills within 30 calendar days;
3. To raise 100% of invoices within 5 working days;
4. To deliver services within the agreed price of £15.587 million for the financial year;
5. To increase the average number of bills processed annually by each member of staff to 6,555;
6. To ensure CAPITAL compliance by 1 January 1999.
7. To meet the criteria contracted for in the Service Level Agreement.

Performance against this final target was affected by the need, in order to meet higher priorities, to divert Agency resources from the fifteen lower-level performance indicators which are aggregated into a single target. The most significant of these higher priorities was the need to alter the Agency's business processes to accommodate the Statutory Interest on Commercial Debt (Interest) Act in November 1998. The Agency also diverted resources to assist the Department in its development of resource accounting and to undertake preparatory work on the Agency's extensive computer resources to ensure millennium compliance. In addition the Agency

assimilated a 6% increase in bill throughput numbers compared to the previous financial year, processing some 3.7 million bills in total.

To improve performance in 1999/2000 the Agency's targets were redefined following a triennial Prior Options review. This moved the main emphasis of the Agency's targets to the improvement of unit costs which could be independently benchmarked against commercial comparators. There was also a significant tightening of the targets in other areas.

The Agency has responded to these changed circumstances by preparing a Corporate Plan which is designed to achieve these new and demanding challenges. The main thrusts of the Plan are:

(i) greater commitment to E-commerce in both internal and external communications;

(ii) the more effective utilisation of Information Technology in business processes; and

(iii) the use of European Quality Foundation Excellence Model benchmarking techniques to ensure that best practice is used throughout the Agency.

The deliberately challenging new targets are not being met fully in this first year of the new Service Level Agreement. However, significant progress towards meeting the overarching outcomes contained in the Service Level Agreement has been achieved during 1999–2000 and measures have been taken to ensure that performance will be improved further during 2000–2001. Whilst some of the key targets are not being met in the current year, bill payments performance is still the highest to date in real terms and puts the Agency in the top 10% of large commercial and public sector enterprises in Europe, as measured in independent benchmarking exercises.

Army Personnel Centre

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Army Personnel Centre for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111746]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Army Personnel Centre. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from G. A. M. Hammond to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 6 March 2000:

I am replying on behalf of the Chief Executive of the Army Personnel Centre (APC), in his absence on business, to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the performance targets for the APC for the year 1998/99, as this matter falls within the responsibility of this agency.

I should explain that a copy of the APC Annual Report and Accounts 1998/99, published in July 1999, was placed in the library of the House of Commons. Annex A to the report provides details of APC performance against Key Ministerial Targets. The APC met its Key Targets for 1998/99 with the exception of Key Target 3 (KT3) - Notice of Posting, which is expressed as the percentage of personnel posted by the APC who were given at least six months' notice of their individual move. The achievement against this target averaged 25% suggesting that the target was unrealistic in the changed conditions since the target was set. With the continuing level of operational commitments and Strategic Defence Review (SDR) implementation which started in early 1999, this target has been reviewed in the light of this experience, and subject to Ministerial approval, may be adjusted in the APC Business Plan for 2000–01.

I hope that this helps to explain the position.

Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111762]

Dr. Moonie: The Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation was disestablished on 31 March 1999.

Defence Animal Centre

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Animal Centre for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111734]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Animal Centre (DAC) ceased to be a defence agency on 30 March 1999. The DAC was absorbed into the Army Training and Recruiting Agency on 1 April 1999.

General Security Agreement

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place a copy of the 1961 General Security Agreement in the Library. [111485]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The 1961 General Security Agreement between the UK Government and the US Government is currently a classified document. Before the document can be released into the public domain both signatories must agree to its declassification. We are therefore discussing the possibility of declassification with the US authorities. I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House when these discussions are complete.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what age restrictions exist for the military personnel who take part in the service volunteer programme at the chemical and biological defence establishment at Porton Down; [112370]

(2) on what date the Porton Down volunteers helpline was opened; and how many individuals have contacted it since it was opened; [112374]

(3) what recent studies have been carried out by the chemical defence establishment at Porton Down to establish whether short-term exposure to *(a)* the chemical agent BZ and *(b)* the glycollate MPIPG can cause long-term illnesses; [112372]

(4) how many times since 1 March 1998 the chemical and biological defence establishment at Porton Down has supplied information about former volunteers to the War Pension Agency when those volunteers have submitted a claim to the Agency; [112376]

(5) what is his Department's estimate of the percutaneous lethal dose of liquid sarin (GB) nerve agent for an averagely-built person; [112367]

(6) how many former service volunteers have visited the chemical and biological defence establishment at Porton Down to inspect records of their experiments and discuss their tests with members of staff since 1 January 1998; [112375]

(7) how many military personnel took part in the service volunteer programme at the chemical defence establishment at Porton Down during 1999; [112373]

(8) what work has been carried out by the chemical and biological defence establishment at Porton Down to develop a test to identify the relative sensitivity of different individuals to the effects of nerve agents. [112377]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir John Chisholm for Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 8 March 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary questions about the service volunteer programme at Porton Down since the laboratories at this site are now operated by the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

The Porton Down volunteers helpline was opened in February 1998. Since then, some 250 former volunteers and/or their representatives have contacted the line. Ten volunteers have visited Porton Down since 1 January 1998 to view and discuss records with members of the staff. CBD has also supplied information about former volunteers to the War Pensions Agency when those volunteers have submitted a claim to the Agency on 28 occasions since 1 March 1998.

During 1999, there were 71 military volunteer attendances at CBD Porton Down and 13 at HMS Phoenix, the Naval Nuclear and Biological Centre and fire training school for a study programme carried out under the auspices of the volunteer programme. The age of participants depends on the requirements of the individual study but is generally in the range from 18 to 45 years.

CBD has not undertaken any work to develop a test to identify the relative sensitivity of different individuals to the effects of nerve agents. No work involving exposure to either the chemical agent BZ or the glycollate MPIPG has been undertaken since the 1970s. None of the pre 1970s work was to establish if short-term exposure resulted in long-term illness.

I am withholding details of the Ministry of Defence estimates on the toxic doses of nerve agents including sarin (GB) under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information because their disclosure would cause harm to defence. As required under the Code, due account was taken in reaching this decision of the nature of the information and the possible public interest in disclosure.

I hope this is helpful.

Test Pilots

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to transfer test pilots from DERA's Aircraft Test and Evaluation Sector at Boscombe Down to RAF Strike Command; and if he will make a statement. [112450]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The test pilots who support the work of DERA's Aircraft Test and Evaluation Sector at Boscombe Down are currently administered and line managed by RAF Personnel and Training Command. From 1 April 2000, this responsibility will be transferred to RAF Strike Command. This recognises that most of the test pilot output of the Aircraft Test and Evaluation Sector is in support of RAF Strike Command.

Floods (Mozambique)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance his Department is giving to aid the flood victims in Mozambique; and at what cost. [113342]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence is providing four RAF Puma helicopters with around 100 support personnel, and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary FORT GEORGE with five RN Sea King helicopters to assist in the flood relief efforts in Mozambique.

The overall no loss costs (which exclude salaries and other sunk costs) are yet to be finalised. Assuming a two-week deployment, we expect the additional costs for the Pumas to be up to £1.8 million, and up to £1.4 million for FORT GEORGE. Exceptionally, £615,000 of the costs of the Pumas will be offset by the MOD against the costs of the exercise in Norway from which the helicopters have been withdrawn. The remainder will be borne by the Department for International Development.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military helicopters have been sent to Mozambique and South Africa to provide humanitarian aid for flood victims. [113300]

Mr. Spellar: The UK has sent a total of nine military helicopters to provide assistance to the international relief efforts in Mozambique. This comprises four RAF Pumas and five RN Sea King helicopters on board Royal Fleet Auxiliary FORT GEORGE. The Puma aircraft travelled via South Africa en route to Mozambique.

Defence Medical Training Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Medical Training Organisation for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111753]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Medical Training Organisation. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Brigadier J. R. Brown to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 8 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about our targets for 1998–99 as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Medical Training Organisation.

Our targets for 1998–99 are shown in the following table along with the outturn and achievement for that year. As you will see we achieved or exceeded all but three of our targets. We failed to meet our target to apply a Systems Approach to Training to a minimum of 33% of appropriate courses. This was because we had three vacant posts in the Division responsible for this work during this period. These posts have now been filled and we are on track to

achieve our target in this area for 1999/2000. We also narrowly missed our target to deliver 95% of Common Core Course trainees on time as we only achieved 94.3%. Also our target to ensure that availability meets the requirement as defined in the Annual Agreed Training Requirement where we aimed for 100% but only achieved 99.7%.

Ministerial Key Targets 1989–99

	Target/ Outturn	*Targets, outturns and achievements 1998–99*	*Target for 1999–2000*
Efficiency			
Develop and implement a corporate index of efficiency that will then form a baseline for measuring year on year efficiency improvements	Target	By 31 March 1999	To achieve 1.5% efficiency gain in matching capacity to the AATR
	Outturn	Achieved[1]	
Throughput			
Ensure that availability meets the requirements as defined in the Annual Agreed Training Requirement (AATR)	Target	100%	This target has been merged with efficiency
	Outturn	99.7%	
Quality			
To achieve the following academic success rate for the categories of training shown:			
Common Core Course	Target	92%	94%
	Outturn	98.7%	
Specialist Registrars	Target	95%	96%
	Outturn	99.2%	
Pre Registration Nurses	Target	96%	96%
	Outturn	97.4%	
The following % of trainees achieving academic success to be delivered on time agreed with the customer:			
Common Core Course	Target	95%	96%
	Outturn	94.3%	
Specialist Registrars	Target	96%	96%
	Outturn	100%	
Pre Registration Nurses	Target	98%	98%
	Outturn	100%	
Ensure comprehensive application of a Systems Approach to Training to a minimum of X% of all appropriate courses	Target	33%	33%
	Outturn	28% this target was missed due to three vacant posts in Training Development Division	
Other			
Establish and agree with customers the baseline requirements for individual baseline services training by X date	Target	31 March 1999	Establish and agree with customers the requirement for external medical services training by 31 March 2000
	Outturn	Achieved for DMTO course schedule. Target extended to incorporate external training	
Achieve a satisfactory rating of customer satisfaction	Target	Satisfied Customer	
	Outturn	Customers satisfied but no formal rating applied. Customer Satisfaction Survey to be run in 1999	

[1] 1999–2000 is baseline year for index

Defence Vetting Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Vetting Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111743]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Vetting Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Michael Wilson to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 8 March 2000:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State, in view of my responsibilities as Chief Executive of the Defence Vetting Agency, to provide a detailed response to your Named Day Written Question 111743.

The DVA was set 6 Key Targets in 1998–1999, relating to quality, timeliness and efficiency. The performance of the Agency against these is reflected in the Annual Report and Accounts, which is available in the library of the House of Commons. The complete list of Key Targets and their achievement is shown below.

1. To maintain quality standards to a 95% level through compliance with agreed procedures, and to develop quality improvement targets in the light of a Defence-wide customer survey. Achieved.

2. To complete 85% of Security Checks (SC) within 6 weeks. Achieved.

3. To complete 71% of Counter Terrorist Checks (CTC) within 6 weeks. Achieved.

4. To complete 85% of Developed Vetting (DV) checks within 6 months. Achieved.

5. To reduce the 1997/1998 average times for SC, CTC and DV by 5%. SC and CTC achieved. DV not achieved - failed by 6%.

a. As explained in the Annual Report, this was a new target in 1998/1999, and each of the individual performance indicators was to be reviewed in the light of performance achieved. Thus, there was known to be some uncertainty surrounding these targets from the outset.

b. Each DV case involves at least one face-to-face interview with the vetting subject, and a number of further interviews with their referees. The number of referees interviewed varies from case to case depending on information available. And the time it takes to arrange and complete all the interviews on any particular case is very variable. For reasons that are not altogether clear, it proved more difficult in 1998/1999 than in 1997/1998 to line up Service personnel in the Army and in the RAF for interview. High turbulence may be a factor.

c. Failure against the target has not caused undue difficulty for the Services. The same target has been set for 1999/2000, and looks like being met.

6. To maintain the 1997/1998 Unit Cost of Output. Achieved.

In 1999–2000 the agency will be preparing to collocate at York from its existing locations in central London, Portsmouth, Woolwich and Corsham. In view of this, no improvement in performance has been anticipated during the period.

I hope this explains the position. Please let me know if you require further information.

MOD Police

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the MoD Police for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111763]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency. I have asked the Chief Constable to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from W. E. E. Boreham to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 8 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about targets for 1998–99 as this matter falls into my area of responsibility as Chief Constable/Chief Executive of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency.

The Ministry of Defence Police Agency were set the following Key Targets for 1998–99:

By 31 March 1999 to have completed all remaining Service Level Agreements with the Agency customers.

By 31 March 1999 to have established an MDP Office Watch initiative at a minimum of 20 MoD locations nation-wide.

In financial year 1998–99 to have in place Local Policing and Security Plans at each MDP policed Establishment.

By 31 March 1999, in accordance with Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary's recommendations, to have put in place agreed Area Policing Team (APT) performance indicators which will enable the Agency to set targets for APT performance improvement in financial year 1999–00.

To achieve, across Chief Constable MDP's retained element of the MDP budget, an overall efficiency saving of 2.5 per cent.

To contribute to the achievement of Departmentally Mandated Standards for project CAPITAL (introduction of Resource Accounting and Budgeting).

All of these Key Targets were achieved in full, as reported in my Annual Report for 1998–99, copies of which are available in the Library of the House. Further demanding targets were put in place for 1999–00, and performance against them is monitored on a regular basis.

Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111728]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Brigadier P. D. Foxton to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 8 March 2000:

I refer to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning performance against targets set for the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency (ABSDA) in 1998/99 and what action has been taken to improve performance in 1999–2000. As Chief Executive of the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency (DSDA), the successor organisation to ABSDA, I am replying as this subject falls within my area of responsibility.

As reported in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts, which were placed in the House of Commons Library on 26 January 2000, ABSDA performance against its Key Targets for 1998/99 was:

a. Key Target 1:

To exceed 95% satisfaction for the processing of Consumers' authorised demands. This target was achieved.

b. Key Target 2:

To meet the agreed Customers' requirements for the provision of ammunition Units of Space (UOS) and ammunition processing facilities. This target was achieved.

c. Key Target 3:

To exceed Consumers' perceived satisfaction of the Agency. This target was achieved.

d. Key Target 4:

To exceed 90% of Consumers' authorised demands within Supply Chain Processing Time (SCPT) Depot Processing Times (DPT). This target was achieved.

e. Key Target 5:

To exceed a one day improvement in receipts processing cycle times. This target was achieved.

f. Key Target 6:

To establish the unit cost per output baseline to enable subsequent measurement of efficiency improvements. This target was achieved in relation to the available resources. Work on deriving costs of output should be able to follow on from the results of the Activity Based Costing trial at ABSDA sites.

A series of strategies were introduced to improve performance in 1999/2000. They are Total Quality Management, Business Excellence, Activity Based Management, and Investors in People, together with improved information systems. I am confident that these measures will build on the excellent foundations laid by DSDA's predecessor organisations in delivering improvements in both quality of service and efficiency. An early indication of their success is the selection of DSDA as a finalist in the TNT Modernising Government Partnership Awards.

ABSDA ceased to exist on 31 March 1999. The Agency's ammunition functions were transferred to Defence Munitions and its non-explosives tasks were merged with a range of storage and distribution functions from the other Services and the MOD from DSDA.

Depleted Uranium Ammunition

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent research he has commissioned into a substitute for depleted uranium ammunition. [112840]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Ministry of Defence has for many years conducted research into a range of weapon materials and designs. Research continues to include the search for potential alternatives to depleted uranium and to identify and characterise their performance and environmental impact.

Radiation Monitoring

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy on the carrying out of radiation/contamination monitoring surveys at the entrance of submarine reactor chambers on a 12 hourly basis. [112844]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* All personnel are monitored immediately on exit from the reactor compartment on-board a submarine. As a routine, the entrance to the reactor compartment is monitored for contamination at least on a daily basis. During maintenance periods a radiation survey is undertaken on initial entry to the reactor compartment and repeated as necessary.

RAF Logistics Support Services

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the RAF Logistics Support Services Agency. [113892]

Mr. Spellar: As part of the restructuring taking place within the Defence Logistics following the Strategic Defence Review, the RAF Logistics Support Services Agency will close on 31 March 2000. The Agency's constituent elements will be transferred elsewhere in Defence Logistics Organisation. It is not envisaged that this will result, at least initially, in any geographical relocations or redundancies, and staff will continue to operate from their current locations.

SCOTLAND

Tuition Fees

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what European Union legislation prevents the Scottish Executive from funding Scottish students at universities in England in the manner proposed by the Executive that funding should be provided for such students at Scottish universities; and what recent advice he has received and from whom, on this matter. [112042]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* This is a matter for the Scottish Executive. It is neither the custom nor practice of the UK Government or the Scottish Executive in Scotland to publish their legal advice.

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112667]

Dr. Reid: The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE and CJD

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the French Minister for Agriculture on the increased incidence of BSE and CJD in France. [109850]

Ms Quin: *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* The latest European Commission report, dated 21 January 2000, stated that the French government had reported a total of 77 cases of BSE, including one case imported from Switzerland. We are aware of two cases of vCJD in France.

These issues are primarily for the Commission and individual member states, rather than for bilateral discussion between member states.

Farm Repossessions

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers in the last three years have lost their businesses because of repossession of their farms by lenders. [110444]

Ms Quin: There are no statistics on farm repossessions but I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) on 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 528W.

Primate Exports

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the countries to which the UK exports primates; and what species of primates are imported to the UK other than macaques. [111150]

Ms Quin: During 1999 my Department issued health certification for the export of primates to the following countries:

Australia
Croatia
Czech Republic
Denmark
Finland
France
Gabon
Germany
Hungary
Indonesia

Israel
Poland
Republic of Ireland
Russia
South Africa
Spain
Sri Lanka.

In 1999 import licences were issued for the following species of primates:

Crab-eating Macaque (Cynomolgus Macaca Fascicularis)
Red Bellied Lemur (Lemur rubriventer)
White Fronted Brown Lemur (Eulemur fuluus albifrons)
Humboldt's Woolly Monkey (Lagothrix lagothricha)
White Collared Lemur (Eulemur Fulvus albocollaris)
Crowned Lemur (Lemur coronatus)
Western Gentle Lemur (Hapalemur griseus occidentalis)
Pale headed Saki (Pithecia pithecia)
Dusky Titi Monkey (Callicevus moloch)
Owl Faced Monkey (Cercopithecus hamlyni)
Geoffroy's Marmoset (Callithrix geoffroyi)
Western black and white Colobus (Colobus Polykomos Polykomos)
Golden Lion Tamarin (Leontopithecus rosalia rosalia)
Capuchin Monkey (Cebus albifrons)
Squirrel Monkey (Saimiri sciureus)
Tamarin (Saguinus midas)
Binturang (Artictis Binturang)
Emperor Tamarin (Saguinus imperator)
Rhesus Macaque (Macaca mulatta)
Ring Tailed Lemur (Lemur catta)
Colombian Black Spider Monkey (Ateles fusciceps robostus)
Chimpanzee (Pan troglodytes)
Golden Headed Lion Tamarin (Leontideus chrysomelas)
Sclater's Lemur (Lemur flaurifrons)
Red Ruffed Lemur (Vercia variegata rubra)
Siamang (Syndalactus)
Moloch Gibbon (Hylobates moloch moloch)
Lowland Gorilla (Gorilla gorilla)
Gelada Baboon (Theropithecus gelada)
Lesser Slow Loris (Nycticebus pygmaeus).

Agriculture (Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* pig units, *(b)* dairy units and *(c)* poultry units there were in Somerset in (i) 1990–91, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99 and (v) 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111962]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The table shows the number of main holdings in Somerset with *(a)* pigs, *(b)* dairy cattle and *(c)* poultry.

	Holdings with pigs	*Holdings with dairy cattle*	*Holdings with poultry*[1]
1990	473	1,724	950
1991	463	1,685	927
1996	350	1,422	n/a
1997	371	1,371	n/a
1998	382	1,326	815
1999	372	1,289	851

[1] Fowls including layers and broilers
Source:
Agricultural and Horticultural Census

Pig Industry

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what recent informal discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss state aid for the UK pig industry; [111719]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding schemes to compensate pig farmers for BSE-related costs. [111720]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friends the Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer discuss many issues, both formally and informally. The Government are well aware of the current market conditions in the UK pig sector and of the representations which have been made for the introduction of some form of aid to compensate for the costs of BSE control measures falling on the pig sector. The scope for providing state aid is an issue which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has looked at very closely and will continue to do so. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear, any investment by Government must be linked to the long-term strengthening of the industry as part of an agreed overall strategy. To this end, my officials are in close touch with the National Pig Association and others.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he had with representatives of the pig industry in January regarding schemes to compensate pig farmers for BSE-related costs. [111708]

Ms Quin: We have had a number of meetings with representatives of the pig industry in recent months which have included BSE-related costs. This is an issue which my right hon. Friend the Minister has looked at very closely and will continue to do so. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear, any investment by Government must be linked to the long-term strengthening of the industry as part of an agreed overall strategy. To this end, my officials are in close touch with the National Pig Association and others.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what progress his Department has made in respect of state aid to restructure the UK pig industry; [113162]

(2) what requests he has made to the EU Commission in respect of state aid for restructuring the United Kingdom pig sector; [113160]

(3) what measures he is proposing to reduce the impact of the BSE-equivalent levy on UK pig farmers. [113161]

Ms Quin: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on 1 February, any investment by Government must be linked to long-term change in the structure of the industry. It must also be part of an agreed overall strategy; to this end, my officials are in discussion with the National Pig

Association and others. Discussions on this topic are also taking place with the European Commission, including direct contacts between my right hon. Friend the Minister and the Agriculture Commissioner.

BSE Inquiry (Costs)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are the estimated public costs of the BSE Inquiry up to the date of expected reporting of the inquiry; of those costs, what has been spent during the inquiry *(a)* by the inquiry team and its staff and *(b)* within (i) the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, (ii) the Department of Health and (iii) other departments and in support of their current and ex-civil servants, *(c)* supporting current or previous external Government advisers and *(d)* supporting the relatives of people with vCJD. [112441]

Ms Quin: The estimated public cost of the BSE Inquiry, including the costs of liaison units and legal support for witnesses from the main departments involved, up to the date of expected reporting is about £27 million. This includes:

(a) The BSE Inquiry, including reimbursement of direct costs incurred by relatives of people with vCJD attending the hearings: £16 million;

(b)(i) Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Liaison Unit, including support to current and former officials, former Ministers and current and previous external government advisers: £7.63 million;

(ii) Department of Health Liaison Unit, including support to current and former officials and former Ministers: £2.73 million;

(iii) Other administrations and departments sponsoring the Inquiry—liaison units including support to current and former officials and former Ministers: £0.5 million.

(c) Costs of support for current or previous external government advisers cannot be fully separated out and are therefore included in (b) (i) above;

(d) Reimbursement of direct costs incurred by relatives of people with vCJD attending the hearings: £70,000, included in (a) above.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the total amount of public money spent to date in the BSE Inquiry on fees for lawyers not directly employed by the Civil Service; and of these how much has been spent *(a)* on fees for (i) the Inquiry Chair, (ii) the solicitor to the inquiry and (iii) the main counsel to the inquiry, *(b)* in support of external Government advisers, *(c)* in support of employees or ex-employees of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and *(d)* in support of employees or ex-employees of the Department of Health. [112442]

Ms Quin: The total amount of public money spent to date on the BSE Inquiry for lawyers not directly employed by the Civil Service is about £9.1 million. Further costs are still being incurred.

(a) The Chairman of the Inquiry and the solicitor to the Inquiry have been paid their normal salaries as public servants while involved in the Inquiry. The Counsel team to the Inquiry has so far cost around £1.7 million. It is not appropriate to provide an indication of fees for individual Counsel;

(b) In support of external government advisers: £0.33 million;

(c) In support of employees or ex-employees of MAFF: £4.95 million;

(d) In support of employees or ex-employees of DH: £1.41 million

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the direct and opportunity costs met by *(a)* witnesses to the BSE inquiry and *(b)* their employers; and what level of reimbursement for such costs has been made from public funds. [112439]

Ms Quin: We are not in a position to estimate the direct and opportunity costs to witnesses or their employers of the Inquiry. Serving civil servants have participated in the Inquiry as part of their employment and relevant direct costs—travel and subsistence—are met from local budgets. Reimbursement from public funds of direct costs incurred by witnesses, who are no longer serving officials, in preparing and giving evidence to the Inquiry which have been paid by the Inquiry, MAFF, DH and other sponsoring departments, amounts to about £60,000.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to evaluate the relationship between the costs and outcome of the BSE Inquiry. [112438]

Ms Quin: Questions about the relationship between the costs and outcome of a public inquiry can only be addressed once the Report has been received by the Government and assessed by all the parties concerned.

Cattle Passports

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of cattle passports issued in 1999 contained herd number errors; and if he will make a statement. [112429]

Ms Quin: Of the 3,026,837 cattle passports issued in 1999, 0.007 per cent. contained herd number errors.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of cattle passports needed to be corrected after their initial issue in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [112428]

Ms Quin: Of the 3,026,837 cattle passports issued in 1999, 5.44 per cent. needed to be corrected after their initial issue.

Hop Producers

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent advice he has received from the European Commission with regard to payments to hop producers under special temporary measures under Regulation 1098/98; and when he expects such payments to be made. [113504]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* We have received various advice from the Commission since the special temporary measures for hops were introduced in 1998. The Intervention Board Executive Agency, which administers the scheme in the UK, made payments to producer groups in respect of the 1999 harvest by end December last.

Day-old Chicks

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what is his policy on the methods used for slaughtering day-old chicks; and if he will make a statement; [112638]

(2) how many male day-old chicks were destroyed in the last year for which figures are available; what method was used for killing; and if he will take action to end the use of the present method and level of slaughtering. [112637]

Mr. Morley: The methods permitted for the killing of surplus chicks and embryos in hatchery waste are specified in EU Council Directive 93/119/EC and "the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter and Killing) Regulations 1995". The following methods are permitted in the UK: (a) the use of a mechanical apparatus producing immediate death; (b) exposure to gas mixtures; and (c) dislocation of the neck. The majority of surplus chicks are killed using one of the first two methods listed above, but no figures on the total numbers killed, or the method used, are available centrally.

These methods were approved after careful consideration. The Farm Animal Welfare Council assessed the mechanical destruction method, and recommended its use in preference to 100 per cent. carbon dioxide. There are currently no plans to change the permitted methods for disposing of surplus chicks.

The number of surplus male chicks disposed of annually is largely dependent on the demand for laying hens: being market-led, it is not a matter on which the Government would wish to legislate. However, research is continuing into the possibility of producing single sex eggs to help reduce the number of unwanted chicks.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 3 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 721W, on day-old chicks, if he will list each of the countries within and outside the EU from which day-old chicks were imported in 1999, and the numbers imported from each country. [113186]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The following table list the import of day-old chicks into the United Kingdom from countries within and outside the EU in 1999.

1999	*Number of chicks imported*
EU Countries	
Austria	9,270
Belgium	45,121
Germany	34,816,225
Denmark	411,000
France	4,633,625
Republic of Ireland	58,025,730
Netherlands	1,073,968
	99,014,939
Non-EU Countries	
USA	174,328
Canada	17,798
Total	192,126

The total for imports from other member states has been revised and therefore varies from the figure given in my reply of 3 February. The figures given in the table are still provisional and subject to further validation.

Genetically Modified Maize Products

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those members of the Food Advisory Committee whose participation was limited in its consideration of the labelling of genetically modified maize products placed on the market by Agrevo (T25), Monsanto (Mon 810), Novartis (Bt 11) and Pioneer (MON 809), indicating the manner in which it was limited. [113354]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* No members were limited in their participation.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library a copy of the *(a)* scientific information which the Food Advisory Committee considered before coming to its view in respect of the labelling of genetically modified maize products placed on the market by Agrevo (T25), Monsanto (Mon 810), Novartis (Bt 11) and Pioneer (MON 809), and *(b)* correspondence in respect thereof passing between the Food Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes. [113356]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2000]: (a)* Summaries of the scientific information considered by the Food Advisory Committee are available in the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes Annual Report for 1996, which is lodged in the Library of the House.

(b) I have arranged for these papers to be placed in the Library of the House.

Fisheries

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the reduction in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency for fisheries work. [112554]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 27 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 922W.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the grant-in-aid from his Department for fisheries work by the Environment Agency for each of the last three years in *(a)* current prices and *(b)* constant prices. [112553]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Grant-in-aid paid by MAFF to the Environment Agency

for salmon and freshwater fisheries work (all figures in £ million) are as follows:

£ million

	(a) Current	(b) Constant	
1997–98	7.4	7.4	(England and Wales)
1998–99	[1]22.1	[1]21.6	(England and Wales)
1999–2000	4.8	4.6	(England only)

[1] In 1998–1999 there was a temporary change in the rules whereby all revenue from licence fees was returned to Treasury but with an equivalent increase in grant-in-aid. The underlying figure for MAFF grant-in-aid is £7.9 million, which included a one-off additional payment of £0.5 million to assist with the enforcement of the salmon conservation byelaws.

Tree Felling Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions in each of the last five years breaches of tree felling licences have been brought to the notice of the Forestry Commission; and what enforcement or remedial action has resulted. [113034]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission has investigated 13 breaches of felling licences in the last five years, as set out in the table.

Year ending 31 March	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000[1]
Number of breaches	5	3	2	1	2
Successful prosecution and restocking notice	1	1	—	—	—
Successful prosecution only	—	1	—	—	—
Unsuccessful prosecution	1	—	—	—	—
Warning letter sent	2	1	1	—	2
Advice given or no further action	1	—	1	1	—

[1] Year to date

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what tree felling licences have been granted in respect of Avon Heath Country Park; how many trees are affected; how many trees have been felled; and how many have been felled in breach of the licence; [113033]

(2) what action the Forestry Commission is taking in response to reports that the RSPB is in breach of a tree felling licence granted in respect of Avon Heath Country Park in Dorset; and if he will make a statement. [113035]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission has granted one felling licence in respect of Avon Health Country Park. This allows the owner to fell 86,000 trees by selectively felling and thinning 78 hectares of woodland. The Commission is currently investigating reports that the RSPB has felled trees which were not included in the licence.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 19W, on peat compost, *(a)* what percentage of and *(b)* how much compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when peat compost will be phased out by his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [113346]

Mr. Morley: Records are not kept centrally detailing the amount of peat (if any) and peat substitutes that are used on the Ministry's gardens. To find this information would be time consuming and expensive because many contractors, subcontractors and suppliers would have to be approached for their records. Having said that, the Ministry does not have a large acreage of gardens; rather, we have smaller areas of landscaping and flower-beds around buildings.

As I said in my answer of 28 February, since 1993, the Ministry has had a policy that environmentally acceptable alternatives should be substituted for peat. We will, though, be issuing reminders shortly in line with our Greening Operations Strategy which was revised and reissued in June 1999.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Falkland Islands

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the Government have had with the new Argentine administration about the Falkland Islands. [113340]

Mr. Battle: We have established a good working relationship with the new Argentine Government. The Prime Minister has met President De la Rua twice. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met Rodriguez Giavarini. I attended the Argentine Presidential inauguration and the Secretary of State for Defence has met the Argentine President and Defence Minister.

On these and other occasions both sides have reaffirmed their commitment to the Joint Statement of July 1999 and to continue our dialogue on issues of common interest.

This does not affect our sovereignty over the Falkland Islands or our commitment to the Islanders' right to determine their own future.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka last visited *(a)* the northern area of Sri Lanka and *(b)* Jaffna; and what reports he has made of his visit. [113429]

Mr. Hain: The British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Ms Linda Duffield, last visited the north of Sri Lanka from 17–20 January when she visited Vavuniya, Mannar and Trincomalee. She reported on the difficulties faced by those displaced by the conflict and has discussed this with the Government of Sri Lanka. The High Commissioner will be visiting Jaffna from 21–24 March.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers in his Department have visited Sri Lanka since 1 May 1997. [113433]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 20 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 579W.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had within the European Union on the involvement of that organisation in the resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka; and if he will make a statement. [113432]

Mr. Hain: The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is discussed frequently in EU forums.

International Labour Organisation Convention

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Her Majesty's Government have ratified the International Labour Office Convention C138; and if he will make a statement. [113434]

Mr. Hain: We are taking steps to ratify ILO Convention 138. After a period of consultation between Government Departments, legislative amendments, necessary before ratification can be carried out, are being drafted. We will ratify the Convention as soon as Parliamentary procedures are completed.

Great Lakes Region

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the implications for the Great Lakes Region of UN Security Council Resolution 1291. [113425]

Mr. Hain: The adoption of Security Council Resolution 1291, providing for the establishment of a substantial UN observer force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is an important step forward. It is a clear demonstration of the Security Council's readiness to provide practical support to the Lusaka Agreement. It provides the framework for the UN and the international community to play a significant role in bringing peace to the Great Lakes region.

Britain wants to see results. That is why we want the observer force to deploy quickly so that it can begin its work, which includes drawing up an action plan for the comprehensive disarmament, demobilisation, resettlement and reintegration (DDRR) of all armed groups listed in the Lusaka Agreement. A credible DDRR plan is vital to the success of Lusaka and to lasting peace in the region.

And, as I made clear at January's special Security Council meeting, Britain is ready to consider a full UN peacekeeping force if the observer force deploys successfully, and the Lusaka signatories carry through their commitments.

Burundi

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of the Burundian peace negotiations in Arusha. [113424]

Mr. Hain: The Arusha talks remain the key to lasting peace in Burundi. Nelson Mandela's arrival as Facilitator has increased the chances of a peace settlement. But many difficult problems remain and the situation on the ground is deteriorating.

In discussions with President Buyoya and other Heads of State attending the Burundi Summit in Arusha, I reaffirmed Britain's strong support for Nelson Mandela's facilitation and the peace process. The presence of many international leaders in Arusha attests to the strong international support for the talks.

We continue to urge all parties to tackle the difficult issues: a ceasefire, military reform, amnesties, and the transition to a broad based democratic government. We will continue to back the peace process.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place the report containing the Wallace recommendations on the constitution of St. Helena in the Library. [113593]

Mr. Battle: I have arranged for copies of Mr. Wallace's "Review of the Constitution of St. Helena", 1987, to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received from Zimbabwe of wide-scale incursions by squatters on to white-owned farms; what assessment he has made of the extent of Government involvement in these incursions; and if he will make a statement. [113579]

Mr. Hain: We have been following events closely, and have been concerned at the lack of action on the part of the police. The High Commissioner has spoken of our concern to a number of senior Cabinet Ministers. On 6 March I spoke to the Vice President who assured me that the Government were taking action to remove the trespassers from the farms.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy to allow registered social landlords to verify new tenant claims for housing benefit. [112623]

Angela Eagle: We have no plans to make it our policy to allow registered social landlords to verify evidence for Housing Benefit claims on behalf of the local authority.

While landlords can assist their tenants by collecting the necessary evidence and forwarding it to the local authority, there is a potential conflict of interest in any landlord certifying evidence on behalf of a tenant in order that the tenant's rent may be paid by way of Housing Benefit.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy to provide housing benefit to tenants of registered social landlords on the same basis as tenants of local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [112622]

Angela Eagle: Cases involving Housing Benefit claims from local authority tenants are not subject to rent officer controls over the amount of Housing Benefit payable

because local authority rents are subject to rules set by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. In these cases, as landlords, local authorities provide Housing Benefit simply by rebating their tenants' rent accounts.

Cases involving Housing Benefit claims from tenants of registered social landlords are not referred to rent officers unless it appears to the local authority that the level of rent charged is unreasonably high or the accommodation is over-large.

Payments of Housing Benefit are made either directly to registered social landlords or to their tenants. We have no plans to empower registered social landlords to administer the Housing Benefit scheme in respect of their tenants.

Savings Limit

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 172W, to the hon. Member for Colchester, what the level of the savings limit set at £3,000 in April 1998 would be now if it had been uprated since then in line with the retail prices index. [112993]

Mr. Bayley: If the lower capital limit of £3,000, set in 1988, in the income-related benefits had been uprated in line with the retail price index it would be £4,878 at April 2000.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will estimate the number of people entitled to winter fuel payments who have yet to receive them; [112947]

(2) if he will estimate the number of appeals against *(a)* failure to award and *(b)* level of winter fuel payments that (i) his Department has received, (ii) were successful and (iii) are still outstanding. [112948]

Angela Eagle: At the end of January 2000, it was estimated that around 99 per cent. of customers who qualified under the existing arrangements had received their full entitlement to a Winter Fuel Payment. The remaining 1 per cent. were those customers whose girocheques had been returned, uncollected, from the Post Office or who queried the amount paid.

Following the European Court's ruling in the Taylor case, we have announced our intention to extend help through the Winter Fuel Payment scheme to men as well as women aged 60 and over. At the same time we also announced our intention to make backdated payments to all people who will be included within the scope of the scheme in respect of the previous three winters (i.e. 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000).

We are carefully considering what arrangements need to be made in order to issue payments accurately and securely to customers not already within the scope of the existing scheme. An announcement will be made as soon as possible once plans are further advanced.

A total of 43,000 customers have queried the level of their entitlement to a Winter Fuel Payment. Each claim was reconsidered in line with the Decision-Making and Appeal rules, resulting in the issue of a "top-up" payment to some customers. Where the original decision was not changed by the reconsideration, an appeal was sent to the Appeals Service. The total number of appeals to date is 255, but information on whether these have been successful or are still outstanding could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Low-income Households

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 333W, on low-income households, if he will publish tables as in the answer which show the position for households which do not include a self-employed adult. [112808]

Angela Eagle: The information is available for the years shown in the tables. The latest information relates to the financial year 1997–98.

Numbers of people in families where one or more adults were in paid work and where the income is below half contemporary mean income, excluding the self-employed

Before housing costs

Million

Year	*Total people*	*Total children*	*Total people in lone parent families*	*Children in lone parent families*	*Total people in couple families*	*Children in couple families*
FES						
1981	1.1	0.6	0.1	0.0	1.0	0.6
1987	1.5	0.6	0.1	0.0	1.1	0.6
1988–89	1.9	0.7	0.1	0.1	1.3	0.7
1990–91	2.3	0.9	0.3	0.2	1.5	0.8
1991–92	2.4	1.0	0.3	0.2	1.6	0.8
1992–93	2.3	0.9	0.2	0.1	1.5	0.8
1993–94	2.1	0.9	0.2	0.1	1.4	0.8
1994–95	2.3	0.9	0.3	0.2	1.5	0.8
1995–96	2.4	1.0	0.3	0.2	1.5	0.8
FRS						
1994–95	1.9	0.7	0.1	0.1	1.2	0.7
1995–96	1.8	0.7	0.1	0.1	1.2	0.6
1996–97	2.6	1.1	0.2	0.2	1.7	0.9
1997–98	2.8	1.1	0.3	0.2	1.8	0.9

Numbers of people in families where one or more adults were in paid work and where the income is below half contemporary mean income
After housing costs

Million

Year	*Total people*	*Total children*	*Total people in lone parent families*	*Children in lone parent families*	*Total people in couple families*	*Children in couple families*
FES						
1981	1.6	0.8	0.1	0.1	1.4	0.8
1987	2.1	0.8	0.1	0.0	1.5	0.8
1988–89	2.3	0.9	0.2	0.1	1.6	0.8
1990–91	3.1	1.2	0.3	0.2	2.1	1.0
1991–92	3.2	1.3	0.3	0.2	2.1	1.1
1992–93	3.1	1.2	0.3	0.2	1.9	1.0
1993–94	3.0	1.2	0.4	0.2	1.9	1.0
1994–95	3.2	1.3	0.5	0.3	1.9	1.0
1995–96	3.4	1.4	0.5	0.3	2.0	1.0
FRS						
1994–95	2.6	1.0	0.3	0.2	1.7	0.9
1995–96	2.8	1.1	0.3	0.2	1.7	0.9
1996–97	3.6	1.4	0.4	0.2	2.2	1.2
1997–98	3.8	1.5	0.5	0.3	2.3	1.2

Notes:
1. The information comes from the 'Households Below Average Income' (HBAI) series. The estimates are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs in line with HBAI conventions. All the estimates in the table relate to families with an adult in paid work rather than households with an adult in paid work, but exclude households where there is a full-time self-employed adult.
2. The column headed "Total people in couple families" does not include couples without children.
3. The estimates based on the Family Expenditure Survey (FES) are for the United Kingdom. For 1988–89 and subsequent years, two years' data have been combined to improve the robustness of the results. For 1994–95 onwards, estimates are available from the larger Family Resources Survey (FRS) and relate to single financial years. The FRS results are for Great Britain.

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the total number of disablement awards made in the UK to sufferers of asbestos-related diseases over the last five years for which figures are available broken down by *(a)* region and *(b)* occupation. [113329]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available has been placed in the Library.

Income Support

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total cost, in the latest financial year for which figures are available, of the provision of income support for persons from abroad. [113073]

Mr. Bayley: The estimated cost for 1998–99 of Income Support paid to people from abroad was approximately £150 million.

Notes:

1. Estimated annual expenditure figures are rounded to the nearest five million pounds.

2. Estimates may include a number of non-persons from abroad who receive Urgent Case Payments for other reasons.

3. Annual expenditure figures for Income Support have been based on an average of four quarters for the financial year, using numbers of cases and average weekly amounts.

4. Estimate does not include costs of administering the benefit.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1998 to February 1999.

New Deal (Lone Parents)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many persons in Wales at the latest available date received assistance under the New Deal for Lone Parents. [113072]

Angela Eagle: Since the start of the national NDLP programme in October 1998, 6,450 Lone Parents in Wales have agreed to participate in the programme. They have all been offered help and advice by their own NDLP Adviser, 2,410 have found a job, 590 have entered training or education. Advisers have also provided assistance in finding suitable child care; and claiming in-work benefits.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents have received letters inviting them to join the New Deal for Lone Parents. [113584]

Angela Eagle: 454,920 initial letters have been issued telling lone parents about the voluntary New Deal service during the National Programme (October 1998—December 1999). In addition 50,612 initial letters were issued during phase 1 and 2 (July 1997—October 1998). The letters are part of the overall strategy (including advertising locally and nationally, using TV, Radio and the Press) to make lone parents aware of the service available to them through New Deal for Lone Parents.

Family Credit (Fraud)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the level of fraudulent claims for Family Credit in the last five years. [113296]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

The number of cases of Family Credit fraud detected for the last three years

Year	*Number of fraud cases detected*
1996–97	3,366
1997–98	5,173
1998–99	10,860

Note:
We do not have statistically valid figures for the level of Family Credit fraud

Mortgages

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish, for the last two calendar years *(a)* the reports furnished to his Department on the mortgage interest rates charged by the United Kingdom's top 20 lenders, *(b)* the dates upon which the average of these rates changed by one quarter of one per cent. or more and *(c)* the date and amount of any changes he made to his Department's own standard interest rate. [113364]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Information on changes in the interest rates charged by different lending institutions is published monthly in Financial Statistics (Table 7.1L) which is compiled by the Office for National Statistics and published by The Stationary Office. The standard interest rate that is applied to the assessment of mortgage interest to be paid with Income Support and income based Jobseekers Allowance, is based on the average of Building Society rates. The Office for National Statistics notifies the Department each month of any movement in these rates. If there is a change of one quarter of a percentage point, immediate action is taken to amend the legislation to reflect this change in the standard interest rate.

Changes in standard interest rates 1998–2000

Date notification received from ONS confirming interest rate change	*Date amending regulations laid before parliament*	*Date the regulations came into force*	*Interest rate Percentage*
15 April 1998	1 May 1998	24 May 1998	8.34
9 November 1998	27 November 1998	20 December 1998	8.65
8 January 1999	28 January 1999	21 February 1999	8.24
8 April 1999	24 February 1999	21 March 1999	7.75
5 March 1999	25 March 1999	18 April 1999	7.39
9 April 1999	16 April 1999	9 May 1999	7.08
11 May 1999	26 May 1999	20 June 1999	6.66

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Festival (Scotland)

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the Millennium Festival in Scotland. [111092]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Millennium Festival in Scotland has been made possible by the Lottery distributing bodies including the Millennium Commission and the New Millennium Experience Company. They have come together to make available a fund of up to £11 million for community groups, large and small, to apply for funding. The variety of events happening in Scotland throughout the Year 2000 is considerable, from the first ever Millennium Commonwealth Youth Games in Edinburgh to a programme entitled "The Rights of Passage" in Dumfries and Galloway celebrating the notable dates in our life. The Unst Millennium Festival will be held during July 2000 and a number of projects are also happening in the Western Isles, Aberdeenshire and in Argyll and Bute—quite literally throughout the whole of Scotland.

Smaller awards are still available (up to £5,000) through the Awards for All scheme called "Awards for All . . . celebrating the Scottish Millennium Festival" up until the end of April 2000 and small community groups are still applying for this money. The New Millennium Experience Company has also established a website www.millenniumscotland.co.uk as part of the UK Festival website (www.festival2000.co.uk) and in the Scottish section alone there are already over 400 events which will happen in the Year 2000—a testimony to the work of the distributors and the New Millennium Experience Company in ensuring that everyone in Scotland has an opportunity to benefit from the celebration of the Millennium.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the subsequent beneficiaries of the £32 million to be repaid by the New Millennium Experience Company to the Millennium Commission have been advised of these forthcoming benefits. [113026]

Mr. Chris Smith: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I shall write to the right hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library copies of correspondence between NMEC and the Millennium Commission relating to the approval of further moneys from the Commission to NMEC on 5 February. [112833]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I shall write to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

National Lottery

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it remains the policy of Her Majesty's Government to seek an efficient not-for-profit

operator for the National Lottery as set out in his oral statement of 4 February 1998, *Official Report*, column 1052. [113171]

Mr. Chris Smith: We have indeed maintained the policy of seeking (and welcoming) any bids from efficient not-for-profit operators; but the selection of the next operator is of course a matter for the National Lottery Commission. The Government's objective is to maximise the returns to good causes and remove unnecessary profit margins. These aims will best be achieved through a robust competition. This has taken place and it is now up to the National Lottery Commission to evaluate the bids.

English Heritage

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those organisations that have received Grants from English Heritage together with the amounts or the purpose of the Grants, in the last five years. [113172]

Mr. Alan Howarth: A consolidated list of Grants by category offered by English Heritage over the last five years is in the table, including a budget figure for the financial year 1999–2000. A full list of repair grants offered by English Heritage to buildings and monuments of outstanding national importance is published annually by English Heritage, and is available on request.

English Heritage Grant offers

£ million

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
Historic Buildings and Monuments	12.0	11.6	9.9	10.8	14.3
Churches	11.0	9.9	10.0	12.2	10.0
Cathedrals	4.3	3.0	2.0	2.6	3.0
Conservation Areas	13.5	12.4	9.3	7.3	6.3
Archaeology	5.7	5.4	5.4	4.7	4.8
Gardens grants (other)	0.4	0	0.1	0.2	0
Total	46.9	42.3	36.7	37.8	38.4

[1] Budget

Museums and Galleries

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on progress in negotiations with museums and galleries on the provision of free entry for adults. [113441]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Funds have been made available to permit free access for the over 60s, from April 2000, to the currently charging national museums funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We are continuing to assess the most effective ways of extending access in 2001. However, decisions will ultimately be taken by the Trustees.

Museum of the Moving Image

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the British Film Institute has identified a permanent site for the re-location of the Museum of the Moving Image. [113443]

Janet Anderson: The recently announced plans for the South Bank Centre include a potential new home for the Museum of the Moving Image. This will allow for an improved and expanded Museum, to provide an interesting and educational showcase for the BFI's collections.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the British Film Institute's Museum of the Moving Image will re-open. [113439]

Janet Anderson: Work on the new BFI Film Centre, which will incorporate the museum of the Moving Image, is scheduled in Phase One of the South Bank master plan, completion of which will depend on the planning process. In the meantime, the BFI is planning a touring exhibition which will greatly increase access to the collection.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has had with the British Film Institute on the provision of a new permanent location for the Museum of the Moving Image. [113442]

Janet Anderson: The decision to seek a new permanent location for the Museum was taken by the Board of the BFI, and my Department has been kept closely in touch. The BFI proposes that the Museum will be housed at a bigger and better location within the newly developed South Bank. In the meantime, the BFI is planning a UK wide touring exhibition which will greatly increase access to the collection.

Millennium Commission (Projects)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many projects supported by the Millennium Commission *(a)* are fully operational, *(b)* will be operational during the summer and *(c)* will not be completed by 1 July. [113438]

Janet Anderson: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will reply in his capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of his reply in the Libraries of the House.

Trafalgar Square (Pedestrianisation)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action his Department has taken to identify potential sources of funding for proposals for the partial pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square. [113445]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The partial pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square forms part of the wider "World Squares for All" project, for which the new Mayor for London will take over lead responsibility. Substantial financial support

could come from the Mayor. Additional funding could be sought from the Heritage Lottery Fund and private sector sponsorship.

National Lottery Grants (Tewkesbury)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will investigate the reasons for the level of National Lottery grants given to organisations in Tewkesbury. [113185]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Tewkesbury has received a lower level of Lottery grants than the UK average. The Government wish to see a more equitable distribution of National Lottery funds across the UK. We have introduced a number of changes through the National Lottery Act 1998 and revised Policy Directions to the distributors which have already begun to improve the geographical spread of funding. My Department, jointly with Lottery distributors, has commissioned research aimed at investigating the reasons for the low take up of Lottery grants in certain areas. While the research concentrates particularly on former coalfield areas, we expect that it will also provide a number of valuable lessons about low take up in other areas, such as Tewkesbury. The first phase of this research has been published and copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House; the second phase will be published shortly.

Free TV Licences

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimates he has made of the number of families in the Elmet constituency who will benefit from the introduction of free TV licences for households with a member aged 75 years or over. [113415]

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate for each Scottish and Welsh constituency the number of households which will be entitled to a free TV licence *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of total households. [112841]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 350W.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimates he has made of the number of new households which will become entitled to a free TV licence in each of the next 15 years. [112842]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* We estimate that there are currently over three million households which include a person aged 75 or over and will consequently benefit from the introduction of free television licences for the over-75s. Estimates for future years are not available.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Department of Social Security regarding the possibility of making a payment of the equivalent value to a TV licence to those aged over 75 years through the benefits system. [112850]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* My right hon. Friend has had no such discussions.

Film Funding

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list all National Lottery-funded films to date, together with in each case *(a)* the value of lottery support, *(b)* the total production cost, *(c)* the date of lottery grant, *(d)* the planned or actual release date, *(e)* the number of screens on which they were released, *(f)* box office receipts and *(g)* repayment of lottery funds made. [113511]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I have today placed the information requested in respect of Lottery awards made in England in the Library of the House. I will write to the hon. Member in due course about awards made by the Arts Council of Wales and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

In Scotland film policy is a devolved matter and is now the responsibility of the Scottish Executive.

Television Licence Fee

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when regulations will be laid to bring into effect the television licence fee increases announced on 21 February and due to come into force on 1 April. [113952]

Mr. Chris Smith: On 21 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 1241, I announced that, from 1 April 1999, the fee for a colour television licence would increase from £101 to £104; the black and white licence fee will rise from £33.50 to £34.50. I have today laid before the House the regulations necessary to bring these fees into force.

The regulations also contain provisions in consequence of our proposal to introduce free television licences for people aged 75 or over from 1 November this year. Anyone aged 75 or over who needs to renew their licence between April and October will be able to purchase a short term licence at a reduced rate, based on the number of months covered. Similar provisions are included for people who, after 1 November, need to renew a licence less than 12 months before their 75th birthday.

We have also included in the regulations a provision to remove an anomaly of the existing concessionary licence scheme, for people in residential homes and sheltered accommodation. The effect of this is to include within the scope of the provision retired persons, whether male or female, aged 60 years or more.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Foundation Schools

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many foundation schools are within each of the education authorities identified as failing by the Schools Inspectorate. [112649]

Ms Estelle Morris: There is no specific overall category of failure in inspection reports published by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) on the performance of local education authorities.

Funding Schemes

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the funding schemes administered by his Department, indicating the total funds of each scheme and the administration costs of each scheme as a percentage of the total funds. [112492]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Total cost of departmental objectives (including the teachers pensions scheme) and the percentage that relates to internal costs, prepared on a resource basis for 1998–99, are as follows:

	Total cost £000	*Internal cost £000*	*Percentage*
Objective 1 Ensuring that all young people reach 16 with the skills, attitudes and personal qualities that will give them a secure foundation for lifelong learning, work and citizenship in a rapidly changing world	1,701,020	82,930	4.88
Objective 2 Developing in everyone a commitment to lifelong learning, so as to enhance their lives, improve their employability in a changing labour market and create the skills that our economy and employers need	10,172,042	90,776	0.89
Objective 3 To help people without a job into work	1,704,859	960,435	56.34
Teachers Pension Scheme	[1]1,484,230	0	0

[1] Net cost

Teacher Training

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision for training teachers in IT is being made from the New Opportunities Fund. [112977]

Mr. Wills: The New Opportunities Fund is making available £230 million to support the training of serving teachers and school library staff in the maintained sector in the effective use of information and communication technology. The training is available to all teachers in maintained schools.

Selection Ballot (Trafford)

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide *(a)* the full list of schools and *(b)* the total number of eligible parents for each school which has been used to set the petition threshold in connection with a parental ballot on selection in Trafford. [113025]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table.

Grammar school petition and ballot: threshold for 1999–2000

Name of school	*Number of eligible parents*
Abbotsford Preparatory	197
All Saints RC Primary	301
Altrincham C E Primary	380
Altrincham Grammar for Boys	1,302
Altrincham Grammar for Girls	1,484
Altrincham Preparatory	574
Ashton on Mersey	1,691
Barton Clough Primary	299
Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic	1,153
Bollin Primary	297
Bowden CE Primary	531
Bowden Preparatory	394
Brentwood School	92

Grammar school petition and ballot: threshold for 1999–2000

Name of school	*Number of eligible parents*
Broadheath Primary	322
Broadoak High	550
Brooklands Primary	694
Broomwood Primary	190
Cherry Manor	245
Christ the King	46
Cloverlea Primary	335
Culcetch Hall	326
Davyhulme Infant	379
Davyhulme Junior	279
Delamere	102
Egerton High	39
Elmridge Primary	299
English Martyrs RC Primary	191
Firs Primary	236
Flixton High	1,562
Flixton Infant	378
Flixton Junior	471
Forest Park	189
Forest	253
Gorse Hill Primary	414
Green Lane High	1,016
Hale Preparatory	265
Heyes Lane Infant	525
Heyes Lane Junior	624
Highfield Primary	421
Holy Family RC Primary	257
Intermediate Education	41
Jeff Joseph Sale Moor Tech College	1,419
King's Road Primary	456
Kingway Primary	250
Lime Tree Primary	131
Longford Park	73
Loreto Convent Preparatory/Grammar	307
Loreto Grammar	1,085
Lostock Community	1,282
Manor High	227
Moorlands Junior	412
Moss Park Infant	279
Moss Park Junior	405

Grammar school petition and ballot: threshold for 1999–2000

Name of school	*Number of eligible parents*
Moss View Primary	180
Navigation Primary	496
North Cestrian Grammar	484
Oakwood Primary	155
Old Trafford Community	257
Oldfield Brow Primary	121
Ortonbrook Primary	118
Our Lady of Lourdes RC Primary	195
Our Lady of Rosary RC Primary	236
Park Road Primary (M33)	279
Park Road Primary (WA14)	394
Partington Primary	348
Pictor	105
Sale Grammar	1,609
Seymour Park Primary	646
Southfields	108
Springfield Primary	594
St. Alphonsus RC Primary	215
St. Ambrose College	1,295
St. Ambrose Preparatory	432
St. Anne's CE Primary	277
St. Ann's RC Infants	307
St. Ann's RC Junior	325
St. Anthony's RC High	608
St. Bede's College	585
St. Hilda's CE Primary	363
St. Hugh of Lincoln RC Primary	361
St. Hugh's RC Primary	700
St. Joseph's RC Primary	447
St. Margaret Ward RC Primary	198
St. Mary's CE Primary (M33)	339
St. Mary's CE Primary (M41)	262
St. Matthew's CE Primary	233
St. Michael's CE Primary	331
St. Monica's RC Primary	424
St. Theresa's RC Primary	257
St. Vincent's Infant	328
St. Vincent's RC Junior	336
Stamford Park Infant	410
Stamford Park Junior	445
Stretford Grammar	1,100
Stretford High	784
Templemoor Infant	292
Tyntesfield Primary	498
Urmston Grammar	1,011
Urmston Infant	400
Urmston Junior	542
Victoria Park Infant	301
Victoria Park Junior	324
Well Green Primary	314
Well Acre High	1,316
Well Acre Infant	215
Well Acre Junior	280
Wellfield Infant	372
Wellfield Junior	406
Wellington	1,637
Willows Primary	322
Woodheys Primary	436
Woodhouse Primary	316
Woodsend Primary	176
Worthington Primary	406

The list of parent eligible to vote is provided by the schools themselves and includes some duplication where parents have children attending different feeder schools. After entering all the names onto a single computer database the Electoral Reform (Ballot Services) Ltd. remove names entered more than once. The total number of eligible parents from the "cleared" database was 42,590 which resulted in a petition threshold of 8,518.

GCE and GCSE

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each GCE and GCSE awarding body for each of the last three years, the total number of requests from candidates for *(a)* re-marks and *(b)* re-marks with reports, together with the total number of appeals against decisions lodged by individual examination centres. [112036]

Mr. Wicks: Following our 1998 review of the qualifications appeals system we introduced for the first time arrangements for the collection and publication of data on the number of requests for inquiries on results, including re-marks, and appeals. The new arrangements were introduced from summer 1999 and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is currently finalising the first set of statistics which will be published later this month.

Nautical Studies

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the contribution of the GCSE course in nautical studies in relation to the understanding and promotion of best practice in sea safety. [113544]

Mr. Wicks: We have not made an assessment of how the GCSE in nautical studies may contribute to sea safety.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the annual cost of administering the GCSE examination in nautical studies. [113545]

Mr. Wicks: The GCSE in nautical studies is offered by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance. The total costs incurred by the awarding body for offering the syllabus in 1999 were £12,282.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students took the GCSE examination in nautical studies in *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1997–98; and how many he estimates will take it in 1999–2000. [113547]

Mr. Wicks: The number of candidates entered for the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance's GCSE in nautical studies was 144 in 1995–96, 118 in 1996–97, and 105 in 1997–98. An estimate for the 1999–2000 entry will not be available from the awarding body until later in the month.

Unemployment (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the change in the number of unemployed individuals from ethnic minorities between 1997 and the latest date for which figures are available. [113523]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Shaun Woodward, dated 8 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on unemployed individuals from ethnic minorities.

Latest available non-seasonally adjusted estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) show that in the autumn (September to November) quarter of 1999 the number of ILO unemployed from all ethnic minorities in the UK was 203,000. This compares to 266,000 in the same period in 1997; a reduction of 23,000.

People interviewed in the LFS are asked to classify their own ethnic origin. The figures given represent people who did not classify themselves as being of White origin.

The measure of unemployment derived from the LFS is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It counts as unemployed people who are a) without a paid job, b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained.

HEALTH

Paediatric Intensive Care

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to provide paediatric intensive care facilities in the Royal Bolton Hospital; [104287]

(2) what plans he has to provide more paediatric intensive care facilities in the Greater Manchester Clinical Directorate. [104283]

Yvette Cooper: There are no plans to provide paediatric intensive care facilities at the Royal Bolton Hospital as it would not be appropriate for paediatric intensive care to take place in a District General Hospital setting which would not have either the required skills or bed numbers.

Any perceived need to increase the number of paediatric intensive care beds in the Greater Manchester area will be examined by the North West Specialist Group in consultation with the Paediatric Intensive Care Commissioning Group and the relevant lead health authority. In the event of a subsequent review then the following areas would be examined as part of that process; number of admissions, number of refusals, average length of stay and occupancy rates in relation to the facilities currently available and level of dependency of the child.

Childhood Cancer

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases have been reported this year and in the past three years of childhood cancer being caused by electric fields; and if he will make a statement. [108590]

Yvette Cooper: It is not possible to attribute any individual cases of childhood cancer to electric fields. The United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study, published in December 1999 found no evidence to link childhood cancer with exposure to magnetic fields from the electricity supply. Their report on electric fields is expected later this year. In 1992, the National Radiological Protection Board's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation examined in detail the evidence for an association between the incidence of childhood cancer and exposure to electromagnetic fields. They concluded that there was no clear evidence of an adverse health effect at the levels of electromagnetic field to which the public is normally exposed. A further review which will consider electric and magnetic fields independently, will be published later this year.

Genetically Modified Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the antibiotics to which marker genes used in the production of genetically modified crops convey resistance and the medical uses of those antibiotics. [108628]

Yvette Cooper: Marker genes conveying resistance to a number of antibiotics have been used in the production of genetically modified crops around the world. Those used in the development of Genetically Modified (GM) crops that have been submitted for evaluation in the UK, either for food use or for release to the environment (either marketing consent or for experimental releases), are listed in the table:

Gene	*Antibiotic*
Kan' (nptII or neo)	Amnioglycoside antibiotics including kanamycin, and neomycin
Strep'/spec' (or aad)	Streptomycin and spectinomycin
Amp' (or bla)	Narrow spectrum βlactam antibiotics such as ampicillin and amoxycillin
Tc	Tetracycline
NptII	Amikacin
Hpt	Hygromycin

In some instances marker genes have been used in the early laboratory stages of the development of GM crops but are not present in the final crop plants. In addition, all foods derived from GM crops that are currently available in Europe are highly processed before consumption and the genetic material is no longer viable.

The medical uses of these antibiotics are as follows:

Antibiotic	*Medical uses*
Kanamycin, neomycin (aminoglycosides)	Kanamycin is not commonly used now. Neomycin is used locally for ear or skin infections and may be used to reduce microbial load prior to bowel surgery. It is not used parenterally
Streptomycin, spectinomycin	Streptomycin and spectinomycin are of value in the treatment of serious infections such as TB, and for treating gentamicin-resistant enterococcal endocarditis. They are also used in the treatment of gonorrhoea
Ampicillin, amoxycillin	βlactam antibiotics are widely used to treat all forms of infection
Tetracyclines	Group of broad-spectrum antibiotics used to treat acne, respiratory infections and sexually transmitted diseases. Also used in treatment of infections in penicillin-allergic patients
Amikacin	Another aminoglycoside used to treat serious Gram-negative infections, especially those caused by organisms resistant to gentamicin (the aminoglycoside of choice)
Hygromycin	Veterinary antibiotic

The safety of any genetically modified food is carefully and rigorously assessed before it can be marketed in the United Kingdom. This evaluation will include an assessment of any potential adverse effects on health of the novel food, including the health implications of any antibiotic resistance markers that may be present in the food, taking a precautionary approach.

Global Warming

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to advise health authorities against the installation in hospitals of air conditioning and refrigerant systems which contain substances known to contribute significantly to global warming. [109331]

Yvette Cooper: It is the Department's policy to achieve best environmental practice and it is committed to the efficient use of energy and resources. This includes taking action to reduce/minimise pollution or the risk of pollution, including ozone-depleting substances and greenhouse gases.

While formulating the Strategy for 'Greening' the National Health Service, NHS Estates (an executive agency of the Department) will address the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to global warming, alongside other environmental factors, such as waste prevention and water conservation.

Worcestershire Hospitals

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* change of use and *(b)* additional facilities are planned for the Newtown Hospital site in Worcestershire. [109826]

Yvette Cooper: The Newtown Hospital site will be retained for the delivery of mental health services by the newly created Worcester Community and Mental Health National Health Service Trust, which comes into effect from 1 April 2000. The site will also provide some acute services that support the new Worcestershire Acute Hospital as set out in the approved Full Business Case for a New Hospital in Worcester.

However, I understand options are currently being explored around the suitable use of the main building on the Newtown site.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the new district general hospital at Worcester will be fully operational. [109827]

Yvette Cooper: The new £91 million Worcestershire Acute Hospital is due for completion in January 2002 and will be fully operational by the spring of 2002.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what agreement has been reached between Shropshire and Worcestershire health authorities on hospital provision following the re-organisation of hospital services in Kidderminster. [109823]

Yvette Cooper: The Government are mindful of Worcestershire health authority's responsibilities to ensure continuity and equity of access to services to neighbouring health authorities like Shropshire.

Shropshire health authority was consulted on the proposals outlined in "Investing In Excellence" and informed of Ministers' decisions to approve the service changes and the Worcestershire Trust mergers. As soon as the clinical working group's advice on the timing of inpatient service moves from Kidderminster Hospital has been received, and a firm decision made, the two health authorities and the new Trusts will obviously discuss in full the issues for hospital services provision.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when *(a)* psychiatry, *(b)* orthopaedics, *(c)* trauma, *(d)* gynaecology, *(e)* urology, *(f)* medicine, *(g)* vascular surgery and *(h)* general surgery services will cease to be provided at Kidderminster Hospital. [109825]

Yvette Cooper: There are no firm timescales at present regarding the movement of services from Kidderminster Hospital. Twelve clinical working groups, comprised of consultants from all three acute hospitals in Worcestershire and other healthcare professionals, have been set up to look at how and when it would be appropriate to implement the changes to inpatient services at Kidderminster as outlined in the "Investing In Excellence" strategy.

The groups will report back to the new shadow board of the Worcestershire Acute Trust by the end of March 2000. Decisions will then be taken on timescales, following which a comprehensive public information campaign will be implemented across the county.

Kidderminster residents will still have access to 80 per cent. of the healthcare provided at Kidderminster Hospital, including outpatient clinics, day case surgery and rehabilitation and to comprehensive primary care services.

Cancer

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish figures showing the composite index for early detection of cancer in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 for (i) England, (ii) East and North Hertfordshire, (iii) West Hertfordshire and (iv) the health authority in the prospering growth area with the (1) lowest figure and (2) highest figure. [109748]

Yvette Cooper: The composite index for early detection of cancer consists of the combined coverage figures for the eligible populations for the National Health Service breast screening programme and the NHS cervical screening programme. For the purposes of this answer we have broken down the figures, and the information requested is in the table:

Percentage

	Breast screening	*Cervical screening*
Coverage at 31 March 1998		
England	63.9	85.3
East and North Hertfordshire	66.2	86.6
West Hertfordshire	69.3	86.5
Buckinghamshire	77.3	89.2
Hillingdon	61.2	85.3
Cambridge and Huntingdon	66.0	89.4
South Essex	65.7	83.9
Berkshire	71.2	83.2
Coverage at 31 March 1999		
England	[1]—	84.0
East and North Hertfordshire	[1]—	84.1
West Hertfordshire	[1]—	85.5
Buckinghamshire	[1]—	87.7
Hillingdon	[1]—	83.3
Cambridge and Huntingdon	[1]—	87.6
South Essex	[1]—	83.1
Berkshire	[1]—	82.4

[1] Breast screening figures at 31 March 1999 not yet available

Note:
Health authorities defined as 'prospering areas: growth areas' according to the Jarman Under Privileged Areas Score.

Source:
Annual Return KC53 and KC63

At 31 March 1998, the prospering areas: growth areas Health Authority with the highest coverage of breast screening was Buckinghamshire with 77.3 per cent., and the lowest was Hillingdon with 61.2 per cent. For cervical cancer at the same point highest coverage was Cambridge and Huntingdon with 89.4 per cent. The lowest was South Essex with 83.9 per cent.

At 31 March 1999, the prospering areas: growth areas the health authority with the highest coverage of cervical screening was Buckinghamshire with 87.7 per cent. The lowest was Berkshire with 82.4 per cent.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish figures showing the composite index for five year survival rates for breast and cervical cancer in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 for (i) England, (ii) East and North Hertfordshire, (iii) West Hertfordshire and (iv) the health authority in the prospering growth area with the (1) lowest figure and (2) highest figure. [109755]

Yvette Cooper: The 1997–98 figures for the cancer survival rates indicator were published in "Quality and Performance in the NHS: High Level Performance Indicators" in June 1999, copies of which are available in the Library. Figures for 1998–99 will be published later this year.

Doctors (Criminal Records)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the General Medical Council is required to notify doctors' criminal records to him; [109943]

(2) how many doctors currently registered to practise have criminal records. [109942]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally. The General Medical Council is not able to provide this information as not all convictions are reported to them, for example minor driving offences. However, doctors working in the National Health Service are exempt from the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 and when applying for National Health Service posts are expected to declare all previous or pending prosecutions or convictions, including those considered "spent" under the Act.

We are taking action to strengthen existing recruitment and selection procedures. In guidance to be issued shortly, NHS employers will be required to include on the application form a declaration by the applicant of any disciplinary or other action taken against them or anticipated by the police, or by any overseas licensing or regulatory body.

Changes to the regulations governing general practice will require doctors working in general practice, including doctors who work as locums or assistants, to make similar declarations.

Once the General Medical Council has been made aware of a conviction, normally by the police, the case is considered through the conduct procedures, which may result in sanctions that affect the doctor's registration.

Influenza Immunisation

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 3 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 710W, on influenza immunisation for healthcare workers, which National Health Service trusts included immunising healthcare staff as part of their planning for this winter; and what proportion of healthcare staff in each trust were immunised against influenza. [110183]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not available centrally.

Advertising Budget

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's advertising budget for *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [110256]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 February 2000]:* The Department's budget for communications—including campaigns such as the tobacco education strategy—in 1999–2000 is £31 million. There is no separate budget for advertising. No information is available at present on the budget for the year 2000–01.

Post-natal Clinics

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve access to post-natal clinics for people in rural areas. [110778]

Yvette Cooper: The Government's strategy for National Health Service maternity services, of which post-natal care is an integral part, is the provision of accessible, responsive user-focused services that offer greater choice, continuity of care and control to women.

It is, however, for local health authorities and NHS trusts to develop post-natal service provision that best meets the needs of local people in light of competing priorities, available resources and evidence of effectiveness.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many senior civil servants from an ethnic minority background are employed in his Department; and how many of them are *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [110685]

Yvette Cooper: As at 1 April 1999, 14 members of the senior civil service in the Department were from an ethnic minority background (3.8 per cent. of staff with ethnicity recorded). Of these, there were five women and nine men.

Plants (Wellington and Skipton Houses)

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the contract for the provision of plants in Wellington House and Skipton House is managed; and what plans he has to change the contractual arrangement. [110947]

Yvette Cooper: The provision and maintenance of plants forms part of the Cleaning Contract for all of the Department's central London buildings, which is managed on behalf of the Department by a Facilities Management Company. There are no plans to change this arrangement.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost of the provision of plants in Wellington House and Skipton House was in 1999; and what the budgeted cost for 2000 is. [110948]

Yvette Cooper: The cost of the provision and maintenance of internal and external plants is included as part of the overall contract cost for the provision of cleaning services to the Department's central London buildings. It is not budgeted for separately. However, our best estimate is an annual cost to the Department of about £4,000 for Wellington House and £2,000 for Skipton House.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [110724]

Yvette Cooper: There is no record of the Department having purchased peat. However, should the need arise the Department would propose to substitute the use of all slow renewables with organic wastes such as coir, manure, leaf mould or bark chippings.

Departmental Energy Use

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the electricity used by his Department is generated from renewable sources; and if he will make a statement. [111038]

Yvette Cooper: Buildings occupied by the Department and its agencies currently purchase energy from utility companies via contracts let by the buying agency. The Department has no information about the proportion of energy supplied by the utility companies that comes from renewable resources.

Research and Development

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the programmes of research funded under his Department's policy research programme, indicating (i) the organisation holding the research contract, (ii) the research unit undertaking the research, (iii) the start date of the contract, (iv) the end date of the contract, (v) the date of the most recent review of the programme, and (vi) whether negotiations are under way for a new contract and the stage reached in these. [110946]

Yvette Cooper: The information is given in the table. Following independent review of the Unit's programmes of research, the Department is currently considering new unit contracts.

Contractor	*Name of research unit*	*Current contract start and end dates*	*Date of most recent review*
University of Kent	Personal Social Services Research Unit	April 1996-March 2001	February 1999
London School of Economics and Political Science	Personal Social Services Research Unit	January 1996-December 2000	February 1999
University of Manchester	Personal Social Services Research Unit	April 1996-March 2001	February 1999
Research Unit	National Institute for Social Work Research Unit	January 1996-December 2000	October 1998
University of York	Social Policy Research Unit	January 1996-December 2000	May 1999
University of Bristol	Dartington Social Research Unit	January 1996-December 2000	September 1998
University of London	Thomas Coram Research Unit	January 1996-December 2000	February 1999

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list, in cash terms and at constant prices, his Department's total spending on research and development in each of the last five years and the projected expenditure in each of the next five years; [110944]

(2) if he will list in cash terms and at constant prices, the spending on his Department's policy research programme in each of the last five years and the projected expenditure in each of the next five years. [110945]

Yvette Cooper: The expenditure in cash terms at constant prices (1999–2000) for the policy research programme and National Health Service research and development levy over the last five years are shown in the table. Expenditure in the next five years is expected to continue at a similar level.

£ million

	Policy Research Programme	*NHS R&D Levy*	*Total*
1994–95	21.16	[1]—	[1]—
1995–96	21.86	[1]—	[1]—
1996–97	26.25	398	424.25
1997–98	24.81	403.5	428.31
1998–99	26.70	417.6	444.3
1999–2000	[2]30.90	[2]433.6	[2]464.5

[1] The NHS research and development levy was first created in April 1996 and figures for NHS research and development prior to this are not available on the same basis.

[2] Estimate.

Influenza

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the number of cases of influenza per 100,000 of the population *(a)* in England and *(b)* in each health authority in England for each winter in each of the years from 1984–85 to 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [110798]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not collected centrally. Influenza activity in England is monitored through the Royal College of General Practitioners sentinel surveillance scheme, which records the number of first visits to participating general practitioners of patients with influenza-like illness. This allows calculation of a rate for those cases of influenza presenting in general practice at any given point during the year and allows comparisons with other years. It is not possible to estimate a total figure for cases of influenza each winter from these data. The information is not collected by health authority area.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of working days lost due to the recent flu outbreak. [111148]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which of the measures contained in the Government's pandemic contingency plans were

deployed during the recent flu outbreak, with particular reference to use of anti-virals to limit the spread of infection. [111147]

Yvette Cooper: We are in the interpandemic period ('phase zero' of the pandemic plan) and were throughout the winter period. The United Kingdom Health Department's Multiphase Contingency Plan for Pandemic Influenza was not implemented. A flu pandemic involves the emergence of a completely new strain of influenza virus and is a global phenomenon. We last saw a pandemic in 1968.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the arrangements that were put in place prior to the recent flu outbreak to protect *(a)* health workers and *(b)* at risk groups by means of vaccination. [111146]

Yvette Cooper: A record 8.6 million doses of vaccine were available prior to the winter flu season, of which 7.8 million doses have been distributed to meet orders. Data for flu immunisation uptake among the risk groups is derived from the General Practice Research Database by the Public Health Laboratory Service. Recent changes to the database mean it is not yet possible to provide uptake rates for last year. We expect data to be available within the next few months. In the past, vaccine uptake has not been nearly as high as the Department would like and the Chief Medical Officer has already announced that he will be looking at ways of improving uptake in the future.

National Health Service trusts were advised that they could include immunising healthcare staff as part of their winter planning last year. The decision to offer the vaccine and which groups of staff this should be offered to, were matters for local decision. Employers were not required to collect information on take up.

Recycling

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of documentation used by his Department is *(a)* made from recycled paper and *(b)* collected for recycling. [111601]

Yvette Cooper: The Department's environmental strategy supports the aim to achieve best environmental practice with a commitment to conserve paper. The paper used to print documentation contains 20 per cent. post-consumer de-inked fibre.

The Department has a paper re-cycling scheme but does not record the recycling of documentation in isolation.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the money which he has promised to tackle waiting lists represents an additional financial commitment distinct from previous commitments; and if he will make a statement. [111421]

Mr. Denham: Baseline allocations to health authorities for 2000–01 were announced on 21 December 1999. The total sum of £34 billion included £276 million to lever performance for waiting lists and times. This is over and above funds given for waiting lists and times in 1999–2000.

MMR Vaccine

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of children aged 24 months in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Greater London have had the MMR vaccine; and what level of take-up is recommended to avoid outbreaks of (i) mumps, (ii) measles and (iii) rubella. [111285]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Quarterly coverage data from the Public Health Laboratory Service's COVER programme shows uptake of measles, mumps and rubella vaccine at age 24 months at September 1999 as 88 per cent. for the United Kingdom. Uptake in the London region was 80 per cent.

The level of uptake of the vaccine recommended to avoid outbreaks of mumps, measles and rubella is 95 per cent. This level of uptake is sufficient to prevent accumulation of pools of susceptible individuals that provide the opportunity for transmission of these diseases.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the likelihood of a localised measles outbreak in communities with a low MMR vaccine uptake; and what notification he has received of such outbreaks in the last two years. [111286]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Large measles outbreaks can occur only when the proportion of children susceptible to measles exceeds target levels. These target levels vary by age and have been defined in the World Health Organisation strategy for measles elimination in Europe. The proportion of children susceptible to measles in the United Kingdom can be estimated from vaccine coverage data and from seroprevalence studies which estimate the number of people without protective levels of antibodies to measles.

The Public Health Laboratory Service routinely uses both sources of data to help to predict the likely emergence of measles outbreaks. If the current levels of vaccine coverage are maintained, large measles outbreaks in schools are not likely to occur until after 2001. Smaller outbreaks among communities with lower than average coverage may occur sooner. The Department of Health is aware of two such outbreaks in communities with low immunisation coverage. These began at the end of 1997 and at the end of 1999 and are described in the Communicable Disease Report of 28 January 2000, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Cancer and Heart Disease

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if it is his policy that future increases in funds for primary care groups will be designated for improving cancer services and coronary heart disease care, with particular reference to the most disadvantaged patients; [110359]

(2) if it is his policy that future increases in funds for health authorities and primary care groups will be designated for addressing inequalities within the National Health Service. [110360]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The objective of resource allocation is to distribute National Health Service funds fairly through health authorities to primary care groups, based on the healthcare needs of populations.

We are committed to modernising all aspects of care and treatment. But the priority is to deal with the biggest killers: cancer, coronary heart disease and stroke. This will help tackle inequalities as the burden of these diseases falls heavily on the most disadvantaged.

It is for health authorities in partnership with primary care groups and other local stakeholders to determine how best to use their funds to meet national and local priorities for improving health and modernising services. Their local strategies are set out in Health Improvement Programmes. These Programmes bring the Government's national priorities together with local priorities. There is particular emphasis on addressing areas of major health inequality in local communities and investing in primary care.

Health Improvement Programmes are underpinned by Service and Financial Frameworks. These frameworks set out the levels of resources allocated to support the local contribution to the national and local targets and priorities set out in the Health Improvement Programmes.
We have asked the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation to consider how resource allocation can contribute to the reduction of avoidable health inequalities.

CS Spray

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action his Department has taken following the publication of the report of the Committee on Toxicity, Mutagenicity and Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment on CS spray, published in September of last year, particularly with regard to those being treated with neuroleptic drugs; and if he will make a statement. [111804]

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has considered the Committee of Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment's (COT) report on the operational use of CS spray by police officers, and has concluded that there are no grounds to remove CS spray from police use. The Association of Chief Police Officers has noted the report and accepted its finding that CS spray should be used only within current operational guidelines.

The COT recommended follow-up studies on individuals treated for the immediate effects of CS spray. The Department of Health is providing technical advice to the Home Office as that Department develops practical ways to take forward this recommendation, which will include gathering information on affected individual's use of neuroleptic drugs.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on links between fluoride in drinking water and irritable bowl syndrome. [112320]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The Department has not commissioned any such research, and is not aware of any research demonstrating that concentrations of fluoride permitted in drinking water in the United Kingdom affect irritable bowel syndrome.

Fluoride

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the results of the scientific review of fluoride and health commissioned from York University. [112099]

Yvette Cooper: The National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York is expected to provide their report to Ministers in the spring. It is intended that this report will be published shortly thereafter.

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has commissioned on fluoride in *(a)* food, *(b)* soft drinks, *(c)* milk and *(d)* dental hygiene products. [112098]

Yvette Cooper: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food/Department of Health Joint Food Safety and Standards Group (JFSSG) has recently completed a survey of fluoride in the 1997 Total Diet Study, a national survey representative of the main types and proportions of foods making up the typical United Kingdom diet. This will show the amount of fluoride in the diet as a whole and in specific food groups including milk and beverages including soft drinks. The results are currently being processed and will be published in full. In addition a test of urinary fluoride is planned for inclusion in the forthcoming National Diet and Nutrition Survey.

Surrogate Births

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it a requirement that the NHS should provide for women who have had a radical hysterectomy following cervical cancer, the opportunity to have eggs frozen with a view to surrogate birth at a later stage. [112062]

Yvette Cooper: It is the responsibility of clinicians who are providing radical treatments to patients which might affect their fertility, to discuss with them the possibility of storing eggs, embryos or sperm if they feel this is appropriate.

Whether these stored gametes should then be made available for a possible surrogate birth is a matter for those individuals in consultation with their clinicians. We would of course recommend that health authorities seek legal advice before considering funding a surrogacy arrangement on the National Health Service.

NHS Logo

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the estimated total cost to the NHS of the changeover to the national logo, broken down by estimated cost per *(a)* health authority, *(b)* health trust, *(c)* regional organisation and *(d)* other NHS body; and what is the longest timescale envisaged for the completion of the exercise. [111870]

Yvette Cooper: Adoption of the National Health Service mark is being undertaken as items come up for replacement in the normal course of business. As a result, no NHS organisation has been required to undertake any additional work and no additional costs to NHS organisations are envisaged. New NHS organisations

formed as the result of mergers will save money by adoption of the existing mark rather than having to invest in designing a new logo.

No deadline has been set for NHS organisations to apply the NHS mark universally. Health Authorities have been asked to adopt the existing NHS mark on stationery by January 2001, and NHS trusts by April 2001.

Osteoporosis

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve health education and preventative programmes for older people at risk of osteoporosis. [111995]

Yvette Cooper: An Osteoporosis Strategy was launched in June 1998 by the then Minister for Public Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell) at the Sixth Bath Conference on Osteoporosis and Bone Mineral Measurement. The Strategy consisted of a Quick Reference Primary Care Guide on prevention and treatment, a laminated desk top guide, and a local health action sheet. Central to the Strategy was the Royal College of Physicians evidence-based Clinical Guidelines on the treatment and prevention of osteoporosis. This has provided a firm basis for health authorities to develop their own strategies.

Information on all these initiatives is available on the Department of Health's website at www.open.gov.uk/doh/osteop.htm.

Officials in the Department of Health also work closely with the National Osteoporosis Society (NOS) who are the leading charity in this field. NOS are in receipt of departmental funding to assist them with their work in increasing awareness about this disease among clinicians and members of the public.

Human Genetics Commission

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what annual budget will be available to the Human Genetics Commission. [111961]

Yvette Cooper: The Human Genetics Commission is still establishing its work programme and its budget has not yet been finalised for 2000–01 and subsequent years.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of tuberculosis there were in *(a)* the constituency of Hereford, and *(b)* nationwide, in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [112433]

Yvette Cooper: The available information from the Public Health Laboratory Service is given in the table. Notifications data are collected by local authority and are not routinely available by health authority. Data are not available by constituency. The final data for 1999 are not yet available and data for the five years up to 1998 are provided.

Notifications of tuberculosis 1994–98

Year	Hereford Local Authority	England and Wales
1994	0	5,590
1995	1	5,606
1996	1	5,654
1997	1	5,859
1998	2	6,087

Source:
NOIDS database, CDSC, 2 March 2000

The United Kingdom has an excellent record of tuberculosis control and notifications have reached the relatively low levels of around 6,500 cases a year from nearly 50,000 in 1950. This success is against a recent worldwide resurgence in tuberculosis that is having a small but important impact on trends in the United Kingdom, as a result we have recently seen small annual increases in the incidence of tuberculosis.

To combat these increases we have taken steps to strengthen the surveillance, prevention and control of tuberculosis, including drug resistant tuberculosis within the United Kingdom. Recent developments include:

the commencement of work on ongoing enhanced surveillance of tuberculosis to improve monitoring;

the appointment of Regional Epidemiologists to help towards a more co-ordinated approach to surveillance;

the strengthening of surveillance of drug and multidrug-resistant tuberculosis through a scheme co-ordinated by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS);

the development—by the PHLS—and availability of more rapid diagnostic and drug susceptibility tests for tuberculosis, which can be used where there is a presence of risk factors which might predispose towards multidrug-resistant tuberculosis;

the co-ordination of the PHLS's activities through the new Tuberculosis Programme.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children in Hereford have *(a)* had and *(b)* not had the BCG test and vaccination at the usual age in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [112432]

Yvette Cooper: Information about the number of children in Hereford Health Authority who have received the tuberculin test and BCG vaccination to protect against tuberculosis is contained in the table together with resident population estimates for children.

Herefordshire Health Authority: tuberculin tests and BCG vaccinations, and number of children resident by age group

	Number of skin tests			
	Found positive	Found negative	Number of vaccinations	Number of children resident[1]
Children under one-year-old				
1994–95	0	0	1	2,000
1995–96	0	0	9	1,900
1996–97	0	6	9	1,800
1997–98	2	0	2	1,800
1998–99	0	5	5	1,900

Herefordshire Health Authority: tuberculin tests and BCG vaccinations, and number of children resident by age group

	Number of skin tests			
	Found positive	Found negative	Number of vaccinations	Number of children resident[1]
Children 10 to 15-years-old				
1994–95	104	1,637	1,693	2,000
1995–96	91	1,554	1,621	2,000
1996–97	98	1,527	1,631	2,000
1997–98	160	1,636	1,837	2,000
1998–99	158	1,491	1,673	2,100

[1] Mid-year resident population estimates; figures for 10–15 age group are averages for a single year cohort, calculated as 1/6 of the total resident population aged 10–15 years.

Note:

Neonatal BCG immunisation is recommended only in children born in higher risk groups; infants under three months of age do not require prior skin testing.

Source:

KC50

Department of Health: Statistics Division SD2B

Because of severe manufacturing problems at Medeva Pharma, the only licensed United Kingdom supplier, supply of BCG and Tuberculin PPD vaccines continues to be disrupted. Stocks being received are insufficient to support the United Kingdom's full immunisation programme and the Department has had no alternative other than to suspend the routine BCG immunisation in schools for children aged 10–14 until continuity of vaccine supply can be guaranteed. Vaccine is being issued, therefore, to immunise people in higher risk categories only, such as neonates at higher risk, contacts of cases, new immigrants and healthcare workers.

The Department is actively seeking alternative supplies of BCG vaccine in consultation with the World Health Organisation.

Midwives (North West)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total number of midwifery vacancies in *(a)* England and *(b)* the North West Region. [111816]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The available information is contained in the table.

Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey—Vacancies in NHS Trusts by England and North West Region: midwives as at 31 March 1999

	Whole time equivalents	
	Total vacancies[1]	3 Month vacancies[2]
England total	810	370
North West	70	30

Notes:

1. Posts that Trusts were actively trying to fill at 31 March 1999.
2. Posts that had been vacant for three months or more at 31 March 1999.
3. Figures rounded to the nearest 10.

Source:

Department of Health Recruitment, Retention and Vacancies Survey 1999

New Public Bodies

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the new public bodies established by his Department since May 1997. [112663]

Yvette Cooper: The annual Cabinet Office Publication "Public Bodies" provides information on a range of public bodies. The 1997 edition lists those public bodies in existence prior to May 1997. The 1998 and 1999 editions list public bodies in existence in subsequent years. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Library. Copies are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

General Practitioners

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the number of general practitioners per 1,000 population in *(a)* Oxfordshire, *(b)* England and *(c)* the United Kingdom in each year since 1990. [112647]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the table. Issues relating to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are matters for their respective administrations.

Unrestricted Principals and Equivalents (UPEs[1]) per 1,000 population as at 1 October each year

	UPEs per 1,000 population
Oxfordshire[2]	
1990	0.55
1991	0.55
1992	0.57
1993	0.57
1994	0.58
1995	0.58
1996	0.59
1997	0.59
1998	0.59
England	
1990	0.53
1991	0.53
1992	0.54
1993	0.54
1994	0.55
1995	0.55
1996	0.55
1997	0.55
1998	0.55

[1] UPEs includes unrestricted principals, PMS contracted GPs and PMS salaried GPs

[2] Data relate to Oxfordshire FPC for 1990, Oxfordshire FHSA for 1991 to 1995 and Oxfordshire HA for 1996 to 1998

Source:

Department of Health General and personal Medical Services Statistics and ONS Population Data

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the population live *(a)* within one mile of, *(b)* over one mile from and *(c)* over three miles from their nearest GP in (i) urban and (ii) rural areas. [112820]

Ms Stuart: The information is not available in the form requested.

However, an analysis based on the Exeter family health services database indicates that in urban areas 94 per cent. of patients live within 1 mile of their nearest surgery, 5 per cent. between 1 and 2.5 miles, and 1 per cent. live more than 2.5 miles away. In rural areas, the figures are 72 per cent, 19 per cent, and 9 per cent. respectively.

It should be noted that in each of these analyses, percentage of patients will not be the same as percentage of population, due to the effects of any local list inflation.

Nursing Students

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many students started a *(a)* diploma in nursing and *(b)* degree in nursing courses in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999; and what was the drop-out rate for each year's intake. [112918]

Mr. Denham: Information on the numbers of students commencing nursing diploma and degree courses for the period 1997 to 1999 and attrition rates for 1997 and 1998 are shown in the table. Data on students entering training are published by English National Board in their Annual Report. The numbers entering training in 1999–2000 are based upon the latest forecast from education consortia. It is not possible to provide an attrition rate for the 1999 student intakes since they are incomplete.

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–00*
Nursing diploma intake	14,162	15,410	16,552
Attrition	16.1 per cent.	5.9 per cent.	n/a
Nursing degree intake	1,214	1,202	1,805
Attrition	13.3 per cent.	8.2 per cent.	n/a

Notes:
1. Intake data are taken from the English National Board annual report for 1997–98 and 1998–99 and the Financial and Workforce Planning Returns for 1999–2000.
2. Attrition data are taken from the English National board annual report.

Vaccines

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the wastage rate of vaccines used by the NHS resulting from poor storage or distribution conditions and the cost of such wastage to the NHS since May 1997. [112995]

Yvette Cooper: This information is not collected centrally. However, the issue of vaccine usage, including wastage, is the subject of a review currently being conducted, commissioned by the Department. This study will make recommendations on vaccine storage and usage and on measures to minimise wastage at local level; these recommendations will be issued in due course.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doses of the new meningococcal conjugate vaccine have been discarded because of poor storage or distribution conditions; and what has been the cost to the NHS of discarded doses of the vaccine. [112997]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doses of the new meningococcal conjugate vaccine have been issued under the current immunisation programme; and how many children have been immunised. [112996]

Yvette Cooper: By 27 February 2000, 3,301,280 doses of meningococcal Group C conjugate vaccine had been issued for the immunisation of babies, and 2,408,420 doses of vaccine had been issued for the immunisation of schoolchildren aged 15 to 17 years, a total of 5,709,700 doses.

Data on how many children have been immunised so far are not yet available.

Animal Experiments (Product Labelling)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce legislation to require that all animal and human medicines and vaccines that have been tested on animals should be labelled with such information so as to enable those who oppose the use of animals in medical and veterinary research to make an informed judgment as to whether they should use these products for themselves and their pets. [112625]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* All medicines for human and veterinary use must be tested in animals to provide information about their safety before they can be granted a licence. However, the Government are concerned to ensure that research in animals is undertaken only when necessary to fulfil statutory obligations. There is no statutory requirement for the labels to include a statement to this effect and we have no plans to introduce such a provision.

Acute Services

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the NHS hospitals offering full acute services which have *(a)* mixed sex wards and *(b)* shared toilets; and what targets he has set for the NHS to eliminate mixed sex wards. [113152]

Mr. Denham: The data collected on mixed sex hospital accommodation are at health authority level and do not contain detailed information about the position in National Health Service trusts. We have set three specific objectives for the NHS in order to achieve the elimination of mixed sex accommodation:

Ensure that appropriate organisational arrangements are in place to secure good standards of privacy and dignity for hospital patients;

Achieve fully the standard for segregated washing and toilet facilities across the NHS;

Provide safe facilities for patients in hospital who are mentally ill which safeguard their privacy and dignity.

We aim to achieve these objectives fully in 95 per cent. of all health authorities by 2002.

The results of a monitoring exercise published in August 1999 showed that 93 per cent. of health authorities would achieve the objectives by 2002.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospitals providing full acute services have wards which do not reach the HBN 4 minimum stipulation for *(a)* bed space in multi-bedded wards and *(b)* ratio of toilets to patients in 24 bed wards. [113158]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Treatments (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* in-patients and *(b)* out-patients were treated in Leicestershire in each year between 1992–93 and the last year for which figures were available. [113167]

Yvette Cooper: The tables show the total number of finished consultant in-patient episodes (FCEs) for patients treated in Leicestershire Health Authority for each year between 1992–93 and 1998–99 *(a)* and also the total

number of outpatient attendances and first outpatient attendances for patients in Leicestershire Health Authority for each of the same years *(b)*.

Table A

Year	*Total*
1992–93	161,824
1993–94	177,035
1994–95	191,032
1995–96	192,566
1996–97	200,726
1997–98	205,196
1998–99	225,384

Notes:
1. Figures for 1992–93 to 1996–97 are grossed for coverage. 1997–98 and 1998–99 figures are ungrossed.
2. An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year.
3. After 1994–95 District Health Authorities changed to Health Authorities.
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics, Department of Health.

Table B

Year	*Total attendances*	*First attendances*
1992–93	584,426	138,136
1993–94	600,394	152,938
1994–95	616,252	164,717
1995–96	627,634	173,060
1996–97	662,124	185,073
1997–98	686,184	189,419
1998–99	690,263	195,052

Source:
Figures are taken from the annual Körner return KH09 'Consultant outpatient attendance activity'

"Outpatients and ward attenders for England", a copy of which is placed in the Library, contains information for individual National Health Service trusts along with summary tables for England. The returns are made on a financial year basis and the latest year for which data are available is 1998–99.

£4 million Mental Health Partnership Fund to support innovative service strategies around broader mental health policy initiatives.

£12 million support for education and training for doctors and nurses.

£1 million estimated expenditure on drug treatment.

£17 million estimated expenditure on drug treatments.

Allocations to health authorities are through unified allocations and bidding processes. Allocations to local authorities are hypothecated through the Mental Health Grant.

Money allocated for implementation of the Mental Health National Service Framework across health and social care will be identified thorough Joint Investment Plans and will be robustly scrutinised through performance management systems to ensure full utilisation.

Births Asphyxia

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many payments and interim payments were made for births asphyxia by each NHS trust for *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, and *(c)* his estimate for 2000–01; and how much in total was paid out by each trust for this type of claim in (i) 1998–99, (ii) 1999–2000 and (iii) his estimate for 2000–01. [113150]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not available centrally.

Rat Infestation

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the expenditure in each of the last three financial years on controlling and treating rat infestation in *(a)* hospitals and *(b)* other NHS premises. [113042]

Yvette Cooper: The Department does not collect this information centrally.

Contraceptive Drugs

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the annual cost to the NHS of paying general practitioners an item of service fee for prescribing emergency contraceptive drugs in each of the years 1990 to 1997. [113165]

Yvette Cooper: General practitioners do not receive an item of service fee for prescribing these drugs.

Cerebral Palsy

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 388W, (1) what was the source of his Department's estimate that the risk of cerebral palsy among babies born weighing less than 1,500 grammes is 70 times higher than among babies weighing 2,500 grammes or more at birth; and what was the year and geographical area to which it applies; [113096]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to monitor trends in cerebral palsy in England, in relation to the rate of low birthweight. [113097]

Yvette Cooper: The information was obtained from the National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, based on figures from population registers of children and young adults with cerebral palsy in the former Mersey, Northern and Oxford Regions, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The risk estimates provided are based on data from babies born in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Data are not collected centrally on the numbers of children with cerebral palsy.

Births

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 387W, what attempts his Department has made to link data from the birth registration system with the data from the Hospital Episode Statistics in order to provide data of the type requested. [113094]

Yvette Cooper: Discussions are currently taking place between officials from the Department and the Office for National Statistics and a pilot study has been proposed to investigate the feasibility of linking data from the Office for National Statistics birth registration records to Hospital Episode Statistics birth records.

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 387W, what are the estimated numbers of records in the Hospital Episode Statistics for 1997–98 which relate to a delivery of a baby, the numbers of these which have maternity tails and the numbers of maternity tails which contain the data required; and what steps his Department is taking to ensure that trusts which do not submit complete maternity data do so in the future. [113095]

Yvette Cooper: There are an estimated 601,000 National Health Service hospital delivery records in Hospital Episodes Statistics (HES) for 1997–98, of which some 40,000 are thought to be duplicate records. By definition all HES delivery records have a tail; about 351,000 of the tails contain a valid method of delivery.

It is the responsibility of NHS trusts to ensure that HES data are accurate and complete. To encourage submission of complete and accurate data, the Department is to publish later this year a National Data Quality Indicator, which will include a component to address the coverage of maternity data and, where maternity data are provided, their quality will also be assessed.

Miscarriages

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 387W, what information is recorded by general practitioners on claims submitted to health authorities for fees for giving care to women who have miscarried; and what statistics are derived from this information by *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* his Department. [113092]

Yvette Cooper: General practitioners record on fee claim forms the following information relating to miscarriage services: patient name (except in cases for emergency treatment where the doctor decides not to ask for the patient's name) date, expected date of confinement, place of treatment or whether the patient was transferred to hospital, date of discharge from hospital, and date of last service provided by the doctor.

The Department does not routinely collect data on miscarriage statistics from health authorities. Health authorities make their own arrangements for reviewing miscarriage statistics where appropriate.

Foetal Tissue Banks

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the foetal tissue banks in the UK. [113496]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Medical Research Council Foetal Tissue Bank based at the Hammersmith Hospital, London is the main foetal tissue bank in the United Kingdom. The Department is aware of additional banks based at the Institute of Child Health, London and at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Smoking

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the additional health risk of smoking cigarettes containing *(a)* calcium carbonate, *(b)* cellulose fibre, *(c)* Di-ammonium *(d)* hydrogen phosphate, *(e)* ethylene vinyl acetate copolymer, *(f)* Sorbitol, *(g)* citric acid and its tripotassium and trisodium salts, *(h)* menthol, *(i)* cocoa, *(j)* sucrose and sucrose syrup, *(k)* glycerol, *(l)* liquorice, *(m)* benzoic acid and/or its potassium salts, *(n)* caramel, *(o)* dried extracts and esters of fruits, *(p)* acetic acid, *(q)* guar gom, *(r)* propylene glycol, *(s)* magnesium oxide, *(t)* carboxymethyl cellulose, *(u)* humic acid, *(v)* triethylene glycol, *(w)* polyvinyl alcohol, *(x)* triethylene glycol, *(y)* methyl hydroxy propyl cellulose, *(z)* diatomaceous earth, (aa) potassium chloride, (bb) sodium chloride, (cc) cellulose acetate propionate, (dd) glyoxal, (ee) ortho-phosphoric acid and (ff) iron oxide. [113508]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* All the substances listed have been assessed as additives to tobacco products (cigarette, cigars, pipe and hand rolling tobacco) using the guidelines detailed in the report of the Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health (Annex K Appendix 1), copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had with tobacco manufacturers regarding additives used in cigarettes; if he will list those additives known to be used; and if he will make a statement. [113509]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* None. Officials meet members of the Tobacco Manufacturers' Association twice a year to monitor the Voluntary Agreement on the approval and use of the additives in tobacco products in the United Kingdom. They have also met, both individually and collectively, tobacco company representatives on an ad hoc basis to discuss additives. The list of additives is available in the Library and on the following website:

www.givingupsmoking.co.uk

Electro-convulsive Treatment

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to monitor the use of electro-convulsive treatment following his Department's earlier survey; and if he will make a statement. [113361]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* There are no special plans for future monitoring of electro-convulsive treatment. It is expected that more useful and reliable information on ECT will be obtained from the Mental Health Minimum Data Set which is gradually being implemented across all mental health trusts between now and 2003.

BCG Vaccine

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for how long the BCG vaccine programme in schools in North Essex will remain suspended; and if he will make a statement. [113517]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) on 10 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 261W.

Mount Vernon Hospital

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the future of cleft lip and palate surgery and treatment at Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood, Middlesex. [113463]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I understand that following advice from an inter-regional group chaired by Professor John Murray, the National Health Service Executive, London Regional Office and its Regional Specialist Commissioning Group (RSCG) take the view that cleft lip and palate surgery cannot be sustained at Mount Vernon Hospital.

At its meeting of 6 March the RSCG recommended that centres should be designated at Great Ormond Street Hospital in partnership with St. Andrew's Centre Broomfield and Guy's and St. Thomas Hospitals, in partnership with Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead. If these proposals are accepted by the health authorities, following consultation, their implementation will require Mount Vernon services to transfer to another site.

My position as a Minister prevents me from commenting further on these proposals at this stage.

Cleft Lip and Palate Services

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) where in London and the south-east of England he has decided that specialist cleft lip and palate surgical facilities will be located; [113464]

(2) which specialist cleft lip and palate surgical and treatment units will be closed in London and south-east England during the next five years. [113594]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service is presently undertaking a review of cleft lip and palate services following the report of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group published in 1998, copies of which are available in the Library. Decisions on the designation of specialist cleft centres in London and south-east regions are expected shortly.

Harefield Hospital

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to close Harefield Hospital; and if he will make a statement. [113572]

Mr. Denham: The proposals made by the West London Partnership Forum (WLPF) relating to specialist services in West London are not about closure. They are about improving care for patients of the future. The WLPF wishes to do this by bringing together world leading teams from both hospitals in the best possible environment for patients, clinical services and research. There will be full public consultation on the options for specialist services in west London, starting in the summer 2000. My position as Minister prevents me from commenting further on the proposals at this stage.

Residence Orders

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many residence orders are in place for children who might otherwise be looked after; and what plans he has to increase such provision for children and young people for whom adoption is not the right answer. [113040]

Jane Kennedy: I have been asked to reply.

We do not have information about how many residence orders are extant; however in 1998, the latest year for which figures are published, 30,398 residence orders were made.

Residence orders and adoption orders are not necessarily or usually alternative disposals in the same case. Residence orders are often made in cases in which no question of adoption or any form of state intervention arises, for example to determine which parent a child will live with following the breakdown of a marriage. The Government have no plans to increase the number of residence orders; it is for the courts to determine whether the making of a residence order is in the best interests of the child in any particular case.

TREASURY

Investment (Indonesia)

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason the Inland Revenue designated Indonesia as not being a suitable market in which to invest directly. [112312]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Inland Revenue has a discretionary power to recognise overseas stock exchanges for the general purposes of the Taxes Acts.

Government policy is to consider recognition on application by a foreign exchange. So it does not follow from the fact that an exchange is not recognised that it is considered by the Inland Revenue as unsuitable for investors.

Personal Portfolio Bonds

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors are taken into account by the Inland Revenue in determining whether an overseas stock market should qualify as eligible for inclusion in personal portfolio bonds. [112313]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The test of whether shares and securities are listed on a recognised exchange is widely used to characterise tax provisions and to determine eligibility for tax reliefs. The test is therefore not related specifically to any one particular provision, like personal portfolio bonds.

Income Tax

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the expected change in after-tax income for single-income families with two children who earn *(a)* £10,000, *(b)* £20,000, *(c)* £40,000 and *(d)* £80,000 of taxable income as a result of the 1p reduction in income tax to be implemented in April. [111573]

Dawn Primarolo: This Government have introduced a range of measures designed to make work pay and to increase support for families with children, including the 10p starting rate of tax, the National Minimum Wage and Working Families Tax Credit. The cut in the basic rate is another of those measures. Families with children will on average be £740 per year better off as a result of measures in the last two budgets.

Receivers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to allow the off-setting for tax purposes of the expenses incurred by *(a)* receivers in furtherance of their official duties and *(b)* the Public Trust officers' fees, if he will allow these costs to be available for off-setting against the gross income of persons, incapable of dealing with their own affairs, who require the assistance of receivers and the Public Trust Office; and if he will make a statement. [113269]

Dawn Primarolo: We have no plans to change the tax treatment of these items.

Youth Unemployment (Worcester)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were the youth unemployment figures on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* 1 February 2000 for the following wards within the City of Worcester (i) St. Johns, (ii) St. Clement, (iii) Bedwardine, (iv) Claines, (v) St. Stephen, (vi) St. Barnabas, (vii) St. Martin, (viii) Holy Trinity, (ix) Nunney, (x) St. Peter, (xi) All Saints and (xii) St. Nicholas; and if he will make a statement. [113271]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Michael J. Foster, dated 8 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on unemployment in Worcester.

The ONS publishes a monthly count of claimants of unemployment-related benefits. The claimant count consists of all people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or National Insurance credits at Employment Service local offices. They must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which the claim is made.

Information on the levels of computerised claims by age for wards can be obtained from the Nomis database at the House of Commons Library. Computerised claims do not include clerical claims which currently make up about one per cent. of the total claimant count. Claimant count statistics for February 2000 will be released on 15 March 2000.

Unemployment Statistics

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for *(a)* each ward and *(b)* the total in Shrewsbury and Atcham the number of (i) long-term unemployed, (ii) youth unemployment and (iii) total unemployed for each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [113275]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 8 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on unemployed people in Shrewsbury and Atcham.

The ONS publishes a monthly count of claimants of unemployment-related benefits. The claimant count consists of all people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or National Insurance credits at Employment Service local offices. They must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which the claim is made.

Information on the levels of claimant by age and duration (computerised claims only) for wards and parliamentary constituencies can be obtained from the Nomis database at the House of Commons Library. Computerised claims do not include clerical claims which currently make up about one per cent. of the total claimant count.

Israel

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, on how many occasions in the past five years Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has referred to the European Commission instances of goods alleged to have been imported under preference as Made in Israel which were produced in Occupied Territories or elsewhere; on how many occasions in the past five years the European Commission had established the origin of the products in question; in how many of these cases the origin was established as (i) within the internationally recognised borders of Israel, (ii) within the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem or the Golan Heights and (iii) elsewhere; and what was the average time taken by the European Commission to establish the origin of goods referred by the UK Government to the Commission for possible violation of the Protocol on Rules of Origin of the EC Trade Agreement with Israel in the last five years. [113551]

Dawn Primarolo: Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has advised the European Commission in relation to four separate products. They have yet to be made aware of the outcome of any investigations conducted by the European Commission.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, concerning Israel *(a)* whether he has examined imported goods still held by the consignee to obtain actual evidence of origin, *(b)* when the imports of wines from (i) the Golan Heights and (ii) the Israeli West Bank settlement of Barkan, were first detected, *(c)* when details were first passed to the European Commission and *(d)* whether the Syrian Government have been informed of the detection of imports from Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights. [113417]

Dawn Primarolo: *(a)* Customs will shortly be visiting a consignee identified as being an importer of dates from Israel. The outcome will be notified to the European Commission.

(b) Information was received on both products in May 1999.

(c) In June 1999.

(d) The Syrian Government have not been informed by HM Customs and Excise.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, *(a)* when the imports of carpets from the Israeli West Bank settlement of Barkan were first detected, *(b)* when details were first passed to the European Commission, *(c)* how many consignments of carpets from the area Barkan have been imported into the UK under preferences, *(d)* what type of goods were

described in the details obtained by the European Commission and *(e)* when he expects the European Commission to make its assessment. [113550]

Dawn Primarolo: *(a)* November 1999, as a direct result of information received from the European Commission.

(b) December 1999.

(c) 1998—12; 1999—None.

(d) The goods described covered a range of agricultural and industrial products.

(e) There is no indication as to when the European Commission is expected to make an assessment.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much of the Windfall Tax Fund has been spent on programmes in Wales to the latest date. [113494]

Mr. Timms: Information on the allocation of the Windfall Tax receipts between the different programmes, as currently estimated, is set out in Table 4.1 of the 1999 Pre Budget Report. Many Windfall Tax funded programmes are demand-led, with expenditure allocated by participant and not by country, region or any other geographical area. For this reason it is not possible to provide a reliable and robust estimate of the amount which has been spent in Wales.

VAT

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to press other EU member states to broaden the experimental arrangement of Council Directive 1999/85/EC (Annex K to Sixth VAT Directive) to provide for the inclusion of repairs to historic and listed buildings. [113562]

Dawn Primarolo: Repairs to historic and listed buildings are already included in the experimental reduced rate if they are dwellings.

Further discussion of the scope of the reduced rate is unlikely until the current experiments have concluded and been fully evaluated. The Commission is due to report at the end of 2002.

Petroleum Products Smuggling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* vehicles were seized by HM Customs and Excise for alleged smuggling of petroleum products in Northern Ireland and *(b)* litres of fuel were seized in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [113538]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Customs have made the following seizures of petroleum products in Northern Ireland:

Financial year	*Litres of fuel*	*Vehicles seized*
1998–99	584,000	39
1999–2000[1]	915,691	98

[1] April to February

Duchy of Cornwall

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the tax status of the Duchy of Cornwall, with particular reference to the tax exemptions which apply. [112834]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The tax arrangements for the Duchy of Cornwall are set out in the Memorandum of Understanding on Royal Taxation, attached to the Report of the Royal Trustees published on 11 February 1993 (HC 464).

Working Families Tax Credit

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the additional cost to the Exchequer of providing the Working Families Tax Credit to couples with children if couples split their total earnings in half and the credit was calculated on each half assuming the 55 per cent. taper started cutting in at *(a)* £45, *(b)* £50, *(c)* £60, *(d)* £70 and *(e)* £80. [112475]

Dawn Primarolo: The limitations of the data available to model these changes, and the uncertainty over behavioural effects, are such that reliable estimates are not available in the detail required.

The reply I gave to my hon. Friend on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 214W, provided a rough indication of the high cost involved in splitting the total earnings of couples in the calculation of Working Families Tax Credits. Lowering the income threshold to the levels specified in the question would reduce the cost but precise estimates which take into account the varying behavioural effects could be provided only at disproportionate costs. As a rough guide, halving the income threshold from the current £90 to £45 per week would still more than double the existing cost of Working Families Tax Credits, before allowing for differential behavioural effects.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate, for each quintile group ranked by equivalised disposable household income, the percentage of gross income accounted for by the Working Families Tax Credit. [112950]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is given in the table.

Quintile by equivalised disposable household income	*Estimated percentage of gross income accounted to by the Working Families Tax Credit*
Lowest quintile group	3.5
Second	2.2
Third	0.4
Fourth	[1]—
Highest quintile group	[1]—

[1] Sample numbers too small for reliable estimates to be made

The figures assume 100 per cent. take-up of entitlement and will tend to overestimate the proportion of Working Families Tax Credit going to the higher quintiles. It is also known that some of the types of household containing families now eligible for Working Families Tax Credit are under-represented in the survey data used to model these estimates.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many recipients of Working Families Tax Credit are paid at the minimum wage; what proportion this is of total Working Families Tax Credit claimants; how much Working Families Tax Credit is being paid in total to claimants claiming at the minimum wage; and what proportion this is of total Working Families Tax Credit expenditure, all figures for over the latest period for which figures are available and including family credit if applicable; [112756]

(2) how many recipients of the Working Families Tax Credit and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit are paid at rates above the minimum wage; and how many are paid at the minimum wage. [113581]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* The information requested is not available. For each employed claimant, the information captured to the computer system is of gross earnings in each relevant pay period, and a single figure of normal hours worked. These two pieces of information therefore have different coverages, and cannot be used to derive an hourly wage for each case.

Inflation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 769W, on inflation, if regional price data have been made available to the European Commission for use in calculating regional GDP per head; and what plans the Chancellor has to instruct the Office for National Statistics to publish regional price and real GDP data for the UK. [113470]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 8 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question on whether regional price data have been made available to the European Commission for use in calculating regional GDP per head, and any plans the Chancellor has to instruct the ONS to publish regional price and real GDP data for the UK.

Regional GDP per head is calculated from estimates of regional GDP converted on to a common currency using Purchasing Power Parities (PPPs). The PPPs used in the calculation are based on national average prices and the same average PPP is applied to each region within a country.

The Office for National Statistics has no plans to publish regional price and real GDP data for the UK.

Low-income Households

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many earners in the UK earn less than £60 per week; how many households in the UK contain an earner who earns less than £60 per week; and what changes there have been in these numbers since 1980. [113469]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 8 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question concerning people earning less than £60 per week.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the ONS's major source of labour market data on individuals. It can provide information on the earnings of employees and the number and proportion of employees earning below £60. However, LFS estimates on earnings are only available from winter (December to February) 1992/3. Estimates for the autumn (September to November) quarters of 1993, 1997 and 1999 are given in the table below. The figures are for Great Britain and are not seasonally adjusted.

Employees with gross weekly earnings of less than £60 Great Britain, autumn 1993, 1997 and 1999, not seasonally adjusted

Autumn	*000s*
1993	2,466
1997	2,254
1999	1,849

Source:
ONS, Labour Force Survey

The LFS has no information available on the number of households containing an earner who earns less than £60 per week.

Estimates from the Family Resources Survey for the period 1997–98 covering Great Britain show that the ratio between the number of households, where at least one earner earns less than £60 a week, and the number of individuals earning less than £60 a week is 96 per cent.

IR35

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the maximum amount of *(a)* national insurance and *(b)* personal taxation that an individual will pay under the changes caused by the introduction of IR35. [112989]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The amount of personal tax and National Insurance Contributions that a personal service company will have to pay following the introduction of IR35 will depend on individual circumstances. It is not possible to provide estimates of the maximum amounts payable.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the expected net revenue gain from the introduction of IR35; and what assumptions the Government have made as to the number of business closures and the extent of business migration overseas for the purposes of calculating this figure. [112763]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates of the revenue which will arise from the proposed measure to stop avoidance of tax and National Insurance Contributions using personal service companies were included in the Financial Statement and Budget Report published on Budget Day in March 1999. Information on the assumptions used was included in the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill which was published in October 1999.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many contractors operating through personal service companies have moved overseas *(a)* in each year since 1992 and *(b)* in the last year for which figures are available; and what is his Department's estimate for each of the next three years. [112764]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that this information is not available.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate, broken down by industrial sectors, the extra taxation that the introduction of IR35 will place on contractors operating through personal service companies *(a)* next year, *(b)* in 2001–02 and *(c)* in 2002–03, assuming current levels of tax rates. [112765]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that it is not possible to provide a breakdown of the tax liability arising from the introduction of IR35 by industrial sector which prevents avoidance of tax and NICs. However, a breakdown of the 50,000 personal service companies that are estimated to be affected by this measure by broad industry group is provided in the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill published in October 1999.

Mr. St.Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the extra revenue which will arise as a result of the introduction of IR35. [112858]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates of the revenue which will arise from the proposed measure to stop avoidance of tax and National Insurance Contributions using personal service companies were included in the Financial Statement and Budget Report published on Budget Day in March 1999.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which sectors of industry benefit most from the rules on national insurance contributions that would be changed under IR35 proposals. [112859]

Dawn Primarolo: All sectors of industry will benefit from the changes we propose. IR35 will prevent avoidance of NIC and right level of tax, allowing us to target support on the real entrepreneurs.

Government Debt

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answers of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 516W, on Government debt over the 1975 to 1999 period, what the estimated interest cost of the difference between nominal and gross debt values is; what measures have been undertaken to ensure this will not occur again; and which officials responsible for the debt funding decisions have been disciplined in connection with this matter. [113468]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The answer of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 516W, on Government debt gave figures for central Government gross debt at *(a)* nominal and *(b)* market prices. These are two different valuations of the same debt and so the interest on them would always be the same. The reason for this is that the market values the debt, some of which may have been issued when market conditions for interest rates were different, to reflect current yields. Thus actual interest divided by debt at market valuation is in line with current rates of interest, whereas actual interest divided by nominal debt reflects the mix of historic market conditions when the debt was issued.

Taxation (Spouses)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the principle of independent taxation of husband and wife. [113580]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor stated his commitment to the principle of independent taxation of husbands and wives when he gave evidence to the Treasury Committee in March 1999.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 9 March 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Atomic Energy Research

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the budget allocation to atomic energy research made by his Department for each financial year from 1989–90 to 1999–2000; and what is his Department's anticipated expenditure for 2000–01. [113299]

Mrs. Liddell: The budget allocation to Nuclear R&D made by my Department (and by the Department of Energy prior to amalgamation) for each financial year since 1989–90 to 1999–2000, and the anticipated expenditure for 2000–01, is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1989–90	163.8
1990–91	126.4
1991–92	93.6
1992–93	85.3
1993–94	76.9
1994–95	28.4
1995–96	21.7
1996–97	21.4
1997–98	17.6
1998–99	14.2
1999–2000	16.8
2000–01	16.8

Petrol

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what information he collects on the percentage market share of each of the major suppliers of petroleum fuel to petroleum retailers. [113536]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* My Department collects and collates data from the individual companies that supply petroleum products into the UK market. However, this information is provided under strict commercial confidentiality constraints, and, as such, data on individual company market shares cannot be published.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what controls exist to prevent petrol suppliers charging petrol retailers for petrol which has evaporated before delivery. [113531]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Evaporative losses occurring between loading petrol from a storage terminal and delivering it to a retail site have been minimised by the use of vapour recovery systems. Under EC Directive 94/63/EC all storage and distribution terminals delivering more than 50,000 tonnes per annum (tpa) of petrol already operate vapour recovery equipment, and all other terminals will have to comply by 2001 or 2004 (depending on the volume of their deliveries). It is estimated that the implementation of vapour recovery has already reduced vapour losses arising from the transportation and delivery of petrol by 98 per cent. since 1996.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Emergency Towing Vessels

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce his decision on the provision of emergency towing vessels (tugs) around the UK. [114330]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) is announcing today the extension of the contract for the provision of the Emergency Towing Vessel (Tug) Anglia Monarch, to provide emergency cover for the Fair Isle Channel and the Pentland Firth for a further winter period, commencing from October 2000, and the conclusion of an agreement with the French authorities which will ensure all year round emergency tug cover for the Dover straits. A tug review team is now working to review all emergency towing provision around the UK and is expected to report its findings during summer 2000.

Code of Audit Practice

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps are being taken to replace the Code of Audit Practice which ceases to have effect on 21 July; and if he will make a statement. [114331]

Ms Armstrong: On 2 March the Audit Commission approved a new Code of Audit Practice which it has submitted to my right hon. Friend who has today laid a copy before the House.

It is now for the House to consider the Code and, if it sees fit, to approve it. If approved, the Code will prescribe the way in which auditors in England and Wales must carry out their audits of local government and NHS bodies, and it will also set out auditors' responsibilities in relation to the audit of local government Best Value Performance Plans.

The Code has been prepared under the Audit Commission Act 1998 and the Local Government Act 1999. The Code sets out the general principles to be followed by auditors, and the audit framework within which auditors will carry out their responsibilities. It also sets out auditors' responsibilities in relation to reviews of the financial aspects of corporate governance; the audit of the accounts; and reviews of aspects performance management.

Modern Zoo Practice

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the revised Standards of Modern Zoo Practice. [114356]

Mr. Mullin: I am pleased to announce that I shall be launching the revised standards at Bristol Zoo today. They will come into effect on 3 April 2000.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Regional Policy

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which Ministers have responsibility for the new unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions; and how often the ministerial board of the unit will meet. [113153]

Mr. Prescott: Lord Falconer, Minister of State at the Cabinet Office, will have day-to-day responsibility for the Regional Co-ordination Unit reporting to me. Matters relating to the new unit that require collective agreement will be considered by an interdepartmental committee of Ministers, which will meet under my chairmanship when business requires.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many civil servants have been assigned to the new unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions. [113156]

Mr. Prescott: A team of three civil servants is currently preparing for the setting up of the core of the Regional Co-ordination Unit on 1 April. Staff will be assigned to the new unit as the implementation plan on the Performance and Innovation Unit report "Reaching Out" progresses.

Domestic Emissions

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress in developing a domestic emissions trading scheme. [113054]

Mr. Meacher: The Government, in their new Draft Climate Change Programme, recognise that carbon emissions trading is a key part of the longer-term solution to greenhouse gas emissions. It will complement other measures in the business sector by offering cost-effective and flexible options for achieving emissions reductions. And an early start to emissions trading in the UK should bring valuable experience and expertise to UK business and to the City of London. This will be particularly important in advance of the international emissions trading scheme envisaged by the Kyoto Protocol, and the European trading scheme put forward in the recent European Commission Green Paper.

The design of a domestic greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme has been taken forward by the business-led UK Emissions Trading Group (ETG), with Government officials working closely alongside. The ETG has made speedy progress in addressing the key issues involved in the design of a domestic emissions trading scheme. Outline proposals for a UK trading scheme were presented to Government in October 1999, and the ETG has recently reported to Government on follow-up work in a number of areas. The group's conclusions have moved the UK significantly along the road to the launch of a domestic trading scheme. But much work on the detail of the scheme remains to be done, and the Government will expect to take this work forward with the Emissions Trading Group.

The Government have also said that firms within climate change levy agreements, who have agreed a target to increase their energy efficiency or reduce their carbon emissions, will be able to use carbon trading as one way of helping them meet their targets. And the Government are currently discussing with members of the Emissions Trading Group and climate change levy agreement sectors the most suitable way for these firms to participate in this trading, and in trading with the wider domestic scheme.

Rural Bus Fund

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each of the last five years for which figures are available *(a)* the total allocation to Shrewsbury and Atcham from the Rural Bus Fund and *(b)* the number of (i) additional and (ii) improved bus services supported by these grants; and if he will make a statement. [113484]

Mr. Hill: The rural bus subsidy grant is allocated at county council level and it is for each county to decide which services to support. In the first year of the grant, 1998–99, Shropshire county council was allocated £630,354. The same amount has also been allocated to the council for 1999–2000 and 2000–01.

In 1998–99 Shropshire county council used its allocation to fund 46 services, of which 16 served Shrewsbury. Of the total of 46 services, 16 were entirely new and 30 improvements to existing services. We shall be obtaining information on any changes to those figures at the end of the current financial year.

Freight

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to which specific classes of freight currently predominately transported by road, his policy on moving freight transport from road to rail applies. [113485]

Mr. Hill: The policy of encouraging more freight on rail extends to all classes of freight. Freight grant applications are assessed purely on the basis of environmental benefit of lorry miles saved. The process does not take into account the type of goods proposed to be transported by rail.

North Wales Main Line

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has received for an increase in freight traffic on the North Wales main line *(a)* in general and *(b)* with reference to traffic between the Republic of Ireland and other member states of the EU. [113636]

Mr. Hill: None.

Rate Relief

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about rate relief for businesses in rural areas. [112248]

Ms Armstrong: Mandatory rate relief of 50 per cent. is available to the sole village shop or post office in a qualifying settlement (one which is in a designated rural area and has a population of fewer than 3,000), provided the property has a rateable value less than £5,000. Local authorities have the discretion to provide additional relief up to 100 per cent. of the rates bill.

Local authorities also have the discretion to provide rate relief of up to 100 per cent. to any other business in a qualifying settlement, which they consider to be of benefit to the community, provided the property concerned has a rateable value less than £10,000.

These rateable value thresholds will be increased to £6,000 and £12,000 respectively on 1 April 2000, when Revaluation takes effect, giving all non-domestic properties in England new rateable values. The thresholds are being increased broadly in line with the overall effects of the revaluation on properties of the size affected, to ensure that no one loses eligibility for rate relief as a result of the general movement in property values.

Rate relief is one of a number of issues affecting rural businesses which will be considered in preparing the forthcoming Rural White Paper.

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received regarding commercial cultivation of Novartis genetically modified Bt maize in Germany; and what their implications are for decision-making in the *(a)* UK and *(b)* EU. [113617]

Mr. Meacher: I have received no reports regarding commercial cultivation of Novartis genetically modified Bt maize in Germany.

Novartis Bt maize is not and never has been grown in the United Kingdom and Novartis, through the industry body SCIMAC, have given an assurance that there are no plans to do so in the next few years. Therefore any decisions on cultivation in Germany have no implications for the UK.

GLA (Mayoral Candidates)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what statutory authority exists for costs to be met by him for expenditure incurred on the provision of a booklet of election addresses by mayoral candidates at the first election of the Greater London Authority. [114329]

Mr. Hill: Pending parliamentary approval of powers in the Representation of the People Bill, urgent expenditure on the preparation and delivery of the booklet, estimated at some £0.4 million in 1999–2000, will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund. The cost of repaying the advances will be met from within the Department's existing provision.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

School Sports and Community Sports Clubs

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to promote closer links between school sports activities and local community sports clubs. [113059]

Kate Hoey: The first School Sport Co-ordinators, an initiative being supported by the Lottery Sports Fund, with additional support expected to come from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF), will be in place in September.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the administrative cost to the BBC of issuing free TV licences to households containing a person aged over 75 years. [112851]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Estimates are currently being prepared and will be incorporated in the Department of Social Security's Departmental Report, which is due for publication following the Budget.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice he has been given on the question of possible breach of EU state aid rules as a result of payments to the BBC in lieu of the revenue lost through giving free TV licences to those aged over 75 years. [112849]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Government have taken legal advice on the application of state aid rules to its recently announced policy on free television licences for people aged 75 or over.

NESTA

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport with what assistance the NESTA programme provides for talented young sports people. [112955]

Kate Hoey: The NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) programme, created under the National Lottery Act 1998, with £200 million of National Lottery money to invest, exclusively focuses on British creativity and innovation. NESTA's main aims are to nurture talented people to pursue potential and produce services, and to bring the appreciation of science, technology and the arts to the public domain.

While NESTA does not offer support to sporting activities, Sport England's Lottery Fund has created an opportunity to help young people develop their sporting skills and talent, with several million pounds being invested in education based projects. The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) is intended to promote after-school-hours activity with £180 million earmarked across the UK for revenue funding to support after school clubs. NOF has a target of funding 50 per cent. of secondary schools and 25 per cent. of primary schools by 2001 with after-school sports being a major beneficiary. Sport England is now able to solicit applications where it can identify significant need to ensure that young people develop their sporting skills and talent.

Youth Sports Unit

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to set up a youth sports unit within his Department; and if he will make a statement. [112956]

Kate Hoey: The Unit is dedicated to the implementation of young people's sport and activity, from children's play to sport in schools. It works closely with the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and other organisations involved in sport and physical education for young people.

British Resorts Association

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when Ministers from his Department last held discussions with the representatives of the British Resorts Association. [113437]

Janet Anderson: I last met representatives of the British Resorts Association (BRA) when I spoke at their conference on 21 June 1999. I am in regular contact with BRA via their president, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden), whom I will next be meeting on 13 March. I will also be addressing the BRA conference in Eastbourne this June.

DEFENCE

Hercules

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the specifications for number of crew in cockpit required in contracts placed for the Hercules C130J. [113471]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Peter Keetch, dated 9 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the specifications for number of crew required in the cockpit of the C-130J transport aircraft. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The specification for the RAF C-130J states that the cockpit crew shall consist of a pilot and a co-pilot situated in a conventional side-by-side arrangement. In addition the specification calls for an additional crew seat aft of the pilots for the use by a third cockpit crew member should one be required for missions where high crew workload is expected.

Anthrax Vaccines

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantities of squalene and mercury are used as preservative and adjuvant in anthrax vaccines used by his Department. [113000]

Mr. Spellar: Squalene is not added to or used in anthrax vaccine used by the Ministry of Defence. Mercury is a component of the preservative Thiomersal which is used in the manufacture of anthrax vaccine. The maximum quantity of mercury allowed under the Department of Health Marketing Authorisation is 1.5 microgrammes per dose and the anthrax vaccine used by the Ministry of Defence does not exceed this limit.

Mozambique

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military transporters that can carry helicopters are in service; and if he will estimate the journey time for them to travel to Mozambique. [113086]

Mr. Spellar: The only UK military aircraft capable of transporting helicopters is the RAF Hercules C130 of which there are currently 54 in service. A C130 can transport one Puma, two Lynx or two Gazelle per flight. The estimated flying time for a Hercules to fly from the UK to Mozambique is 25 hours. However, the estimated total time to transport a Puma to Mozambique in a Hercules, including dismantling, reassembling and stops to refuel and change crew, is a minimum of four days if relief aircrew are prepositioned along the route and up to six days if relief aircrew are not available.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Development about humanitarian aid to Mozambique. [113781]

Mr. Hoon: I have discussed the provision of humanitarian aid to Mozambique with my right hon. Friend on a number of occasions since the onset of the crisis. Other Ministers and officials have been in regular contact with DFID throughout.

Force Operating Costs

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total cost of operating *(a)* an air defence squadron (43 Squadron), *(b)* a strike attack squadron (12 Squadron), *(c)* an offensive support squadron (1 Squadron), *(d)* a photo-reconnaissance squadron (41 Squadron and 51 Squadron), *(e)* a maritime reconnaissance squadron (120 Squadron), *(f)* a transport squadron (24 Squadron), *(g)* a transport flight (C130), *(h)* a refuelling squadron, *(i)* a refuelling flight, *(j)* a support helicopter squadron (18 Squadron and 33 Squadron), *(k)* an SAR squadron (202 Squadron), *(l)* UAS, *(m)* JEFTS and *(n)* No. 3 FTS in the last year for which figures are available. [112854]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* We do not account for squadron operating costs in this way. Budgets are broken down to station level only. A station's operating budget would include the costs of personnel, fuel, maintenance and works services, infrastructure, utilities and other overheads, all of which contribute to the proper and effective functioning of squadrons based there. The costs for aircraft maintenance and spares would not be included, as these costs are managed separately on a fleet-wide basis.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Solicitor-General how many pupillages have been offered by the Crown Prosecution Service in the last 12 months. [113420]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service has not offered any pupillages in the last 12 months. The position is currently under review.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Street Signs

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland further to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 6W, on street signs, what is his assessment of the community relations impact of the erection of bilingual street signs in *(a)* Irish and *(b)* Ulster Scots; how he will monitor the rise or fall of opposition

and support for bilingual signs (i) internally within each tradition and (ii) between different traditions; how many bilingual signs have been erected and if any have subsequently been removed; and if he will issue guidelines to ensure that instances of criminal damage that have a sectarian or racist element are recorded as a distinct category. [111944]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Current research, funded by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, will assess the demand for, and attitude towards, the use of Irish in the provision of services, including bilingual signage. Consideration is being given to commissioning similar research on Ulster-Scots. Otherwise, there has been no separate assessment made of the community relations impact of the erection of bilingual street signs.

As the erection of street nameplates is a function of district councils in Northern Ireland, information on the number of bilingual signs erected and on whether any have subsequently been removed, is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Currently, information recorded by the Royal Ulster Constabulary on the motivation of a crime can only be obtained manually. It is intended to introduce, during 2001, an Integrated Crime Information System which will permit the central recording of crime motivation, where this can be determined. The system is presently being designed to record the motive of any crime, be it racial, sectarian, domestic or other designated motive, in line with the Association of Chief Police Officers' guidelines.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Belize

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to Guatamala, in support of the Government of Belize, in relation to the incursion into Belize territory and seizure of officials on 24 February; and what future action is proposed. [113615]

Mr. Battle: Following the detention by the Guatemalan Armed Forces on 24 February of three members of the Belizean Defence Force and a Belizean policeman, the British Ambassador in Guatemala City was instructed to call on the Guatemalan Foreign Ministry. He stressed our hope for an early and amicable resolution. I am pleased to report that the four Belizeans were conditionally released on 3 March. We shall continue to monitor developments closely.

Entry Clearance Times (Indian Sub-continent)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the waiting time for a person applying for entry clearance for settlement in *(a)* September 1999, *(b)* October 1999, *(c)* November 1999, *(d)* December 1999, *(e)* January 2000 and *(f)* February 2000 for an interview in each queue at each post in the Indian sub-continent; and if he will make a statement. [113587]

Mr. Vaz: The statistics requested are as follows:

Waiting times in weeks on last day of each month

Post	*Queue*	*September*	*October*	*November*	*December*	*January*
Bombay	Q1	0	0	0	0	0
	Q2	4	4	6	5	6
	Q3	4	4	6	5	6
	Q4	4	4	6	5	6
Calcutta	[1]—	0	0	0	0	0
Colombo	[1]—	0	0	0	0	0
Dhaka	Q1	17	14	18	16	16
	Q2	26	28	28	30	28
	Q3	11	12	12	16	16
	Q4	49	60	59	61	56
Karachi	[1]—	8	8	10	14	10
Madras	[1]—	2	2	3	5	2
New Delhi	Q1	0	0	0	0	0
	Q2	4	4	6	5	8
	Q3	21	22	24	20	8
	Q4	25	28	24	25	8

[1] Calcutta, Colombo, Karachi and Madras do not operate separate queues

Notes:

Queue 1—Right of Abode cases and Dependant Relatives over 65

Queue 2—Spouses and Children under 18

Queue 3—Finance(e)s and Other First Time Applicants

Queue 4—Re-applicants

Statistics for the month of February are not yet available

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how much Price Waterhouse is being paid to headhunt applicants for the post of chairman of the Appointments Commission. [112817]

Mrs. Beckett: There is no single identifiable cost payable to PricewaterhouseCoopers Executive Search and Selection solely for the "headhunting" of the chairman.

The cost for recruiting the whole Commission will be £52,000 plus expenses and VAT. Advertising costs will be in addition to this.

Parliamentary Counsel

Mr. Kidney: To ask the President of the Council how many hours have been spent by Parliamentary Counsel in preparing *(a)* Government legislation announced in the Queen's speeches, *(b)* private members' Bills, *(c)* Law Commission work and *(d)* private legislation, and what proportion of Parliamentary Counsel's time was spent on each, in each of the parliamentary sessions (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000 to date. [113349]

Mrs. Beckett: The Parliamentary Counsel Office answers to the Prime Minister, but I am replying to this question since it relates to the Government's legislative programme.

Information is not available on the number of hours spent by Parliamentary Counsel on different types of legislation. However, a reasonable indication of how the Counsel are deployed is given by their location. Counsel at 36 Whitehall work on Government Bills and on Private

Members' Bills supported by the Government. Other Counsel are on loan to the Law Commission, to the Inland Revenue's Tax Law Rewrite Project and to the Department of Trade and Industry's Company Law Review.

The following table shows the total number of Counsel in these locations in the 1997–98 and 1998–99 Sessions (as at 1 January) and at present. The figures exclude Scottish and Northern Ireland Parliamentary Counsel.

In the table, part-time Counsel are counted as equivalent to half a full-time Counsel. The split between Government legislation and Private Members' Bills supported by the Government is pro rata the number of pages of each enacted in the Session or, in the case of the 1999–2000 Session, the number of pages enacted to date plus the number of pages, on introduction, of Bills introduced but not yet enacted. A split of work on Government Bills between those in the Queen's Speech and others is not available. Parliamentary Counsel are not involved in drafting Private Bills.

Deployment of Parliamentary Counsel by type of work (numbers of Counsel, full-time equivalents, as at 1 January 1998, 1 January 1999 and at present

Type of legislation	*1997–98*		*1998–99*		*Session 1999–2000*[1]	
	Counsel	*Percentage*	*Counsel*	*Percentage*	*Counsel*	*Percentage*
Government Bills (est.)	[2]27½	77	[2]24½	73	[2]30	80
Private Members' Bills supported by the Government (est.)	[2]1	3	[2]1½	5	[2]½	1
Sub-total 36 Whitehall	28½	80	26	78	30½	81
Law Commission	4½	13	5	15	4	11
Inland Revenue	2½	7	2½	7	2½	7
DTI	—	—	—	—	½	1
Total	35½	100	33½	100	37½	100

[1] To date
[2] Rounded to the nearest ½

Although there are minor fluctuations from year to year, the figures show that, since the start of the 1997–98 Session, about one-fifth of the Parliamentary Counsel have been engaged on work for the Law Commission, for the Inland Revenue Tax Law Rewrite Project or (since the beginning of this month) for the DTI's Company Law Review. Some four-fifths of Counsel work on the Government's Bills and Private Members' Bills, with on average about 97 per cent. of that work concentrated on the Government's Bills.

HEALTH

Infertility Services

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he will receive the third set of guidelines from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists on the provision of specialised infertility services; [108122]

(2) what have been the findings of his Department's survey to ascertain the current provision of infertility services; [108123]

(3) if he will make it his policy to ensure that equality of access to infertility services is provided throughout England; [108124]

(4) what guidelines he plans to issue to health authorities on the provision of infertility services. [108125]

Yvette Cooper: The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists published its final set of guidelines on the provision of specialised infertility services on 20 January 2000. The Department has copies.

The survey returns are still being analysed. The conclusions will be published shortly.

While the Government have already set their priorities for the National Health Service in the immediate future (cancer, coronary heart disease, mental health) we remain committed to ending the postcode lottery for all services in the National Health Service. We will therefore be working towards greater equity in access to services within available resources over the coming years.

There are no immediate plans to issue guidance to health authorities on infertility services.

BSE

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out his Department's assessment of the hierarchy, by method of transmission, of likelihood of risk of transmission of BSE. [111897]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* In experiments involving strains of prion that have been adapted to laboratory animals, such as mice, it has been shown that intracerebral inoculation is more likely to cause infection than intravenous injection which, in turn, is more likely to cause infection than intra-peritoneal or sub-cutaneous inoculation. Parenteral exposure is, in turn, more likely to cause infection than oral exposure.

Experiments on mice challenged with a strain of scrapie—a Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy of sheep—that had been adapted to mice showed that exposure by placing the inoculum directly into the stomach was about 100,000 fold less efficient than by direct inoculation into the brain.

As part of its remit to consider emerging scientific findings the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), the expert Committee that advises the Government on all aspects of TSEs, has considered

the results of experiments designed to investigate the link between BSE and variant CJD (vCJD). The Committee has stated that

> BSE and vCJD were caused by a closely similar prion strain, and concluded that vCJD was an acquired prion disease caused by exposure to BSE or BSE like agent.

However, these results do not provide information about the route of exposure, and research to establish this factor remains part of the Government's TSE Research Strategy.

Cancer

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health What funding there is in the current year for medical activities relating to *(a)* prostate, *(b)* breast and *(c)* testicular cancer; if he will break down each figure into (i) treatment, (ii) prevention, (iii) detection and (iv) research; and if he will make a statement. [112331]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* The information on overall spending on cancer is not currently held centrally. Spending on cancer in-patient care is estimated to account for 6.3 per cent. (£1,479 million) of National Health Service hospital expenditure but there is no measure of the additional spending on cancer services not normally provided on an in-patient basis, for example cancer screening, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and community palliative care services. Breast screening for women aged 50–64 is estimated to cost around £37 million per annum. However, information is not available on the annual spend for cancer diagnosis, treatment and prevention for individual cancer tumour types.

Government funding for cancer research is provided through the Medical Research Council (MRC) which receives most of its income via grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The MRC funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base and is the main agency through which the Government support research on the causes and treatment of disease. The Department also funds research to support policy development in health and social care and manages the NHS research and development budgets.

The Department also provides support for research commissioned by charities and the MRC that takes place in the NHS. Over £63 million per year of this funding supports cancer research, with £16 million going to the Royal Marsden Hospital alone.

Total Government expenditure on cancer research is estimated to be £110 million per annum. This does not include basic biomedical research, which may lead to breakthroughs for cancer treatment.

The latest figures available for annual Government (Department of Health/NHS, MRC and other Government Departments—principally devolved Health Departments) expenditure on breast cancer, prostate cancer and testicular cancer:

	£ million
Breast	9.33
Prostate	1.55
Testicular	0.49

We have recently agreed an additional £1 million for prostate cancer research next year.

These figures underestimate the total expenditure, as detailed estimates of NHS support funding expenditure are not collected routinely.

New research projects are being funded regularly through both the MRC and DH/NHS directly commissioned programmes and priorities for research funding are kept under review.

Tobacco Duty

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what planning assumptions he has made on the basis of the additional revenue which the NHS will receive as a result of hypothecation of increased levels of tobacco duty in 2000–01. [112785]

Yvette Cooper: The allocations to health authorities for 2000–01 take account of the possibility that £250 million will be available to the National Health Service as a result of changes in tobacco duty, in the light of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Pre-Budget Report speech last November. Decisions about tobacco duty will be announced by the Chancellor in his Budget Speech.

Cerebral Palsy

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the incidence of cerebral palsy per thousand of the population *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in the north-west Region for each of the past 10 years. [113661]

Ms Stuart: Data are not collected centrally on the numbers of children in England with cerebral palsy.

Medical Devices Agency

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the key targets for 2000–01 for the Medical Devices Agency. [114357]

Yvette Cooper: We have agreed the agency's key targets for 2000–01 and copies have been placed in the Library.

Medicines Control Agency

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the members of the Medicines Control Agency and the interest each one has in *(a)* local, *(b)* national and *(c)* international drug companies. [113614]

Ms Stuart: The Medicines Control Agency is an executive agency of the Department of Health and is accountable direct to Ministers. It has over 500 staff who are Civil Servants and subject to all the normal Civil Service employment rules, including those on interests in commercial concerns.

PRIME MINISTER

Chest and Heart Services (Wales)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Prime Minister if his proposals to establish fast track chest pain clinics and a National Heart Director apply in Wales. [113635]

The Prime Minister: The responsibility for health in Wales has been transferred to the National Assembly for Wales.

Government Contracts (Representations)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the occasions when Heads of foreign Governments have made representations to him relating to the allocation of a particular Government contract; who the Head of Government was in each case; and in each case if the contract allocation was in accord with the representations made. [113065]

The Prime Minister: It is established practice under exemption 1(c) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose information received in confidence from foreign Governments.

Prior Options Review

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what evaluation he has made of the mechanisms presented in the Prior Options Review for opening up the operation of non-departmental public bodies. [113304]

The Prime Minister: In line with a commitment in the Modernising Government White Paper, we have recently reviewed the entire review process for non-departmental public bodies. We have concluded that the Prior Options stage of the review process should reflect the Government's wider objectives. This includes taking greater account of the views of stakeholders and focusing on delivering services which are of a higher quality, more responsive and better integrated.

CABINET OFFICE

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) if she will make it a requirement for non-departmental public bodies that they should record the matters discussed and agreements reached in meetings held with other NDPBs in the form of minutes; [113302]

(2) what proportion of non-departmental public bodies hold open meetings; [113307]

(3) how many people are board members of non-departmental public bodies in the United Kingdom; broken down between *(a)* England, *(b)* Northern Ireland, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* Wales. [113311]

Mr. Stringer: All executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) are encouraged to publish minutes of meetings, either whole or in summary form, and to hold meetings in public. Individual Departments and NDPBs themselves are best placed to determine whether this is appropriate on a case-by-case basis. Information on the number of NDPBs holding open meetings is not held centrally.

There are currently over 30,000 men and women serving on the boards of NDPBs (and their equivalents) across the UK. Information on these office-holders, including information on the numbers serving in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, is published in "Public Bodies 1999". Copies of "Public Bodies 1999" are available from the libraries of the House.

Public Sector Ombudsman

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the review of public sector ombudsman schemes will be published. [113421]

Mr. Stringer: I expect the report on the review of public sector ombudsman in England to be published by the end of March.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Global Warming Refrigerants

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy to issue advice to local education authorities discouraging against the use of global warming refrigerants, including HFCs, on their estates. [112566]

Jacqui Smith: The Department gives advice to local education authorities and schools in Building Bulletin 83, "Schools Environmental Assessment Method (SEAM)". This recommends specifying refrigerants which do not cause both ozone depletion and global warming.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions steers policy on issues concerning ozone depleting chemicals and greenhouse gases, and the European Union has issued regulations to phase out the use of certain of these, such as CFCs and HCFCs. HFCs are often used as refrigerants in place of CFCs and HCFCs, and I understand that there are not any plans to prohibit their use at present.

Post-16 Curriculum

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the local education authorities which *(a)* have and *(b)* have not made additional funds available to schools for the implementation of the new post-16 curriculum. [113666]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not available. Local education authorities are not required to publish budget statements for school funding until 31 March 2000; and in any case such statements identify funding for 16+ pupils only in terms of the factors used for distribution rather than the curriculum components of sixth-form funding.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people have stayed at school after the age of 16 years in each of the 12 pilot areas for education maintenance allowance since the scheme was introduced; and what the figures were for the comparable period in 1998. [113120]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Comparative data at this level of detail are not yet available for the period of the pilots. However, early

indications are promising, with a number of schools and colleges in EMA areas reporting higher post-16 intakes this year.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the estimated cost of extending the Education Maintenance Allowance to the whole of England *(a)* if everyone eligible applied and *(b)* if take-up was the same as in the pilot areas. [111715]

Mr. Wicks: Extending the Educational Maintenance Allowance to the whole of England would cost between £670 million and £940 million for an academic year if everybody eligible applied, depending on which model is chosen. However, we would not expect to achieve 100 per cent. take-up, as some young people would continue to choose alternatives to education such as a modern apprenticeship or a job with training.

If take-up is the same as in the pilot areas so far, the cost would be between £440 million and £560 million for an academic year, depending on which model is chosen.

ONE Service (Mentally Ill People)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will make it his policy that people with a mental illness will not be required to attend a ONE interview, if they do not wish to, for a period of three months following discharge from a psychiatric hospital; [113291]

(2) how many people with a mental illness have attended for a voluntary ONE interview across the pilot sites in England; [113292]

(3) if ONE personal advisers will visit places of work to check their suitability for clients with a mental illness prior to placement; [113293]

(4) if the training of personal advisers and start-up personnel involved in the ONE project has involved directly people with a mental illness; and if he will make a statement; [113294]

(5) if clients will have the choice of an interview at home with ONE personal advisers. [113295]

Ms Jowell: ONE puts work, and helping people to overcome barriers to work, at the heart of the benefit system. Everyone of working age making a claim to benefit meets with a Personal Adviser, who works with them to assess their job potential and provides access to a variety of help and information on work, benefit and services. Clients are treated as individuals with their own unique needs, abilities and circumstances, instead of being categorised as "unemployed", "lone parent" or "disabled".

It is entirely reasonable to expect all clients to come in for meetings with a personal adviser as a part of their claim so they can stay in touch with the labour market and be informed about the help and support on offer. We want to treat people as individuals, not to categorise people and make assumptions about whether or not they can work.

The requirements of ONE should be appropriate for all, including people with a mental illness. In developing the policy and the detailed processes, officials have had in-depth discussions with some of the key organisations dealing in mental illness (including MIND and the National Schizophrenia Fellowship) to ensure that ONE enables the groups they represent to participate in a positive way.

All ONE advisers have been trained to work effectively and sensitively with all ONE clients. Those with experience of, or expertise in, mental illness have participated in the training process. Advisers have guidance on working with clients with special needs which has been developed with their help.

Where it is appropriate for people to attend interviews, the ONE process is designed to give them sufficient time to make arrangements and sufficient opportunities to attend. Clients can bring an advocate with them to interview if they wish, and home visits can be offered where appropriate. Personal advisers also have the discretion to waive or defer an interview.

Personal advisers may consult with a Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) and the DEA may accompany the personal adviser on the home visit. If a client has recently stayed in a psychiatric hospital, advisers should certainly consider carefully whether to defer an interview—but should not automatically assume that to be so. For some people the priority may be to sort out the benefits they are entitled to and to ensure their welfare needs are properly identified. Where ONE advisers place clients into work, we have no present plans for personal advisers to visit places of work prior to placement.

Finally, it is not possible to provide the information requested on participation in ONE by people with mental illnesses. Separate statistics on the numbers of people with mental health illness attending ONE meetings are not recorded.

Regional Policy

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which of his Department's regional initiatives will come under the remit of the new unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions. [113155]

Mr. Wicks: The work of the Government Offices for the Regions on behalf of DfEE will come under the remit of the interdepartmental unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions.

School Sports

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by what means his Department monitors the quality and range of *(a)* sports teaching and *(b)* sports provision in schools; and if he will make a statement. [113058]

Jacqui Smith: Ofsted has the remit to monitor the quality and range of all teaching in schools, including PE activities, and to report on the quality and range of provision in schools. Ofsted's 1999 review of primary schools in England found that overall progress in PE is satisfactory or better in 97 per cent. of schools. The review of secondary schools found that in physical education pupils make good progress in most schools in Key Stage 3. The performance of skills and their application in games are usually satisfactory or better.

We have set an aspiration that all schools should provide two hours of curricular or extra-curricular activities a week, and my officials are meeting with DCMS and representatives of PE and sport organisations to discuss ways of promoting that aspiration in schools.

Further Education (Enrolments)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the total enrolments and *(b)* the full-time equivalent enrolments in further education in England in each year since 1992. [112118]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the tables.

The decline in headcount numbers in 1998–99 reflects the clampdown on the unacceptable aspects of franchising which grew up under the previous Administration.

The Further Education Funding Council will be consulting on measures to support recruitment in line with our plans, which provide for an increase of 700,000 students in further education by 2002.

(a) Further education student numbers

	000s
1992–93	—
1993–94	—
1994–95[1]	3,034
1995–96[1]	3,845
1996–97[1]	4,2[illegible]
1997–98[1]	4,259
1998–99[2]	4,142

(b) Full-time equivalents (FTE) in further eduction

	000s
1992–93[1]	1,101
1993–94[1]	1,140
1994–95[1]	1,179
1995–96[1]	1,262
1996–97[1]	1,295
1997–98[2]	1,263
1998–99	—

[1] Actual

[2] Provisional

Notes:

1. The figures are provided on a whole year basis. Student numbers include Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) funded and non funded students.

2. Table *(a)*:

Student numbers for 1992–93 and 1993–94 are excluded as the available figures are inconsistent with later years.

Student numbers for 1994–95 onwards are from the Individualised Student Record and give the numbers of students enrolling, rather than the total number of qualifications entered.

The figures relate to FE sector colleges and FEFC funded students in External Institutions.

External Institutions did not return data in 1994–95 and are not included in the student numbers for that year. For later years only FEFC funded provision is included.

In line with the normal publishing convention, Specialist Designated Institutions (SDI's) are not included.

FEFC funded HE students in FE sector colleges are included but FE students in HE institutions are excluded.

Three colleges transferred to the HE sector in 1998–99 and are not included in the figures for 1998–99.

3. Table *(b)*:

In line with the normal publishing convention, FTE data include FEFC funded and non funded FE students in FE sector colleges, FEFC funded FE students in External Institutions, Specialist Designated Institutions, Higher Education Institutions and non FEFC funded FE students in adult education centres. Also included are FEFC funded HE students in FE sector colleges.

Outturn FTE figures for 1998–99 are not yet available.

Sure Start

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the Sure Start pilots. [111666]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

Of the 60 Sure Start trailblazers that were announced in January 1999, 47 have now received approval and are now starting to help young children and their families. The remaining 13 will follow shortly. In November 1999 we launched the second wave of Sure Start by inviting a further 69 areas to develop local programmes, and these are now drawing up their outline plans. This brings the number of Sure Start programmes so far announced to 129, more than half-way towards the target of 250 by March 2002.

Food Technology (National Curriculum)

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will replace food technology with home economics in the National Curriculum. [111951]

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in September last year the revised National Curriculum which will apply from September 2000. The revisions were the outcome of a wide-ranging review and consultation which considered, among other matters, how pupils are taught about food, nutrition and textiles in the curriculum.

Within the revised National Curriculum, food technology (including cooking) and textiles remain within the Design and Technology programmes of study; and nutrition and health eating are covered in Science and Personal, Social and Health Education. Home economics also can play a complementary role, and many schools include it within their curriculum. It is also available as a GCSE option.

We are continuing to look at food and cooking in the curriculum with the aim of ensuring a more coherent approach. We will, of course, take into account the role of home economics in this context.

School Sports Links

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to encourage sporting links between private schools and state schools; and if he will make a statement. [113679]

Jacqui Smith: We are keen to encourage links between independent and state schools in all areas, including sport. The Government are currently considering the future role of sport and PE in schools, and part of that will involve developing links that can be made with the independent sector.

There is already good practice in this area including sharing facilities and teaching resources. We will seek to build on that.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

G8 Development Ministers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many meetings of the G8 Development Ministers, Ministers in her Department have attended since 1 May 1997, indicating the Minister involved and the date and location of each meeting. [113090]

Mr. Foulkes: Neither the Secretary of State nor myself has attended any meetings of the G8 Development Ministers.

Technical Co-operation

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much bilateral aid has been spent on technical co-operation in each of the last 10 years *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* as a proportion of total overseas development aid. [113492]

Mr. Foulkes: Technical Co-operation is defined to include expenditure on personnel, training, scholarships, knowledge and research. DFID's expenditure on Technical Co-operation over the latest 10 years is shown in the table, both in cash terms and as a percentage of the bilateral programme in each year.

Technical co-operation

	£000	*As percentage of DFID bilateral programme*
1989–90	309,335	31
1990–91	354,568	33
1991–92	412,956	38
1992–93	422,975	37
1993–94	423,811	36
1994–95	430,447	38
1995–96	453,149	40
1996–97	467,682	44
1997–98	496,003	47
1998–99	503,878	43

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of technical co-operation contracts are awarded to non-UK companies. [113489]

Mr. Foulkes: In the financial year 1998–99 DFID issued just under 3,000 contracts for services with a value of nearly £250 million. Of these 776 contracts with a value of some £14 million were issued by DFID's Overseas Offices to local consultants, i.e. non-UK companies.

Aid Programme

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the likely impact on the UK economy of *(a)* unilaterally, and *(b)* multilaterally untying the UK's aid programme. [113487]

Mr. Foulkes: Studies have shown that both unilateral and multilateral untying are likely to bring benefits to the UK economy. Multilateral untying will, however, bring greater development benefits. We are working to encourage all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries to join the OECD's Development Assistance Committee initiative to untie development assistance to the least developed countries.

Management Consultants

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the services that management consultants provided to her Department in each of the last 10 years, indicating the remuneration made in each case and the number of person days employed. [113491]

Mr. Foulkes: DFID does not collate this information centrally and it could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mozambique

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when the projected spending plans by her Department in Mozambique for 2000–01 and 2001–02 were first included in a document in the public domain. [113662]

Mr. Foulkes: The plans for Mozambique for 2000–01 and 2001–02 were first published on 30 March 1999 in the Departmental Report 1999.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development at what time on what date officials in her Department first discussed sending helicopters to Mozambique with the Ministry of Defence. [113663]

Mr. Foulkes: We first asked the Ministry of Defence what military assets were available in the region on Saturday 26 February at 19.30. At that point we were informed that no military assets were available within 3,000 miles.

On Tuesday 29 February at 9:00 we held further discussions regarding the use of UK military helicopters with the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development on what date her Department first requested assistance from the armed services to alleviate hardship in the floods of Mozambique. [113674]

Mr. Foulkes: We first asked the Ministry of Defence what military assets were available in the region on Saturday 26 February. At that point we were informed that no military assets were available within 3,000 miles.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Toilet Facilities

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what access there is to toilet facilities in the House for people who are wheelchair users. [113603]

Sir Sydney Chapman: Specially equipped lavatories for wheelchair users are situated off the Lower Waiting Hall, the Committee Corridor, the Upper Committee Corridor and the Centre Curtain Corridor. The hon. Member may wish to note that there is also a specially equipped lavatory off Peers' lobby.

SCOTLAND

Pay Inequalities

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what data he has collated on current inequalities in pay between men and women in Scotland; and what measures the Government *(a)* is taking and *(b)* plans to take to tackle such inequalities. [111346]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

Average pay of full-time employees in Scotland and Great Britain, 1999, is as follows:

	Hourly	*Weekly*	*Annual*
Scotland			
Women (£)	8.03	298	15,001
Men (£)	9.83	406	21,791
Women's pay as a percentage of men's	82	[1]73	[1]69
Great Britain			
Women (£)	8.70	[illegible]	16,481
Men (£)	10.75	[illegible]	23,412
Women's pay as a percentage of men's	81	[1]74	[1]70

[1] Widening of pay gap for weekly and annual earnings reflects that men work on average 3.9 hours more per week than women, including 1.9 hours more overtime

Source:
New Earnings Survey 1999

Other figures on earnings for men and women in Scotland can be found in "Scottish Economic Statistics" which is available in the Library.

We are tackling the gender pay gap across Great Britain through a range of action to ensure women can reach their full potential, including tackling gender stereotyping in career choices; and encouraging them to take up opportunities in the information and communication technology sector. We will also be consulting on changes to Employment Tribunal procedures to speed up and simplify equal pay claims. This builds on action we have already taken to help women combine work and family responsibilities, including the National Childcare Strategy, parental leave and improved maternity leave.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

EU Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much European agrimonetary compensation scheme funds have been drawn down to the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement. [112230]

Ms Quin: A total of £397 million in EU-funded agrimonetary compensation has been paid.

Fields

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many fields with uncropped margins in excess of two metres were recorded in 1999, as a proportion of the total number of the integrated administrative and control system fields inspections during the year. [112818]

Ms Quin: Of the total number of fields inspected by MAFF in 1999 under the Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS), it is estimated that just under 4 per cent. involved claims for arable area payments which were paid on the basis of full Ordnance Survey field areas but which, because the field margins were found to be wider than two metres, would only be payable on the basis of actual cropped areas in 2000.

CAP Payments

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the 10 largest recipients of CAP payments made to farms in Herefordshire for the calendar year 1998; and if he will make a statement. [113482]

Ms Quin: Amount received by each of the 10 largest recipients of CAP payments in Herefordshire during the 1998 calendar year were:

£236,601.76
£217,922.74
£191,714.98
£172,860.74
£168,856.75
£144,200.16
£136,475.79
£119,918.47
£115,826.01
£115,646.58

Farmland

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the estimated acreage of farmland taken out of farming in each of the last five years in the United Kingdom. [111988]

Ms Quin: The total area on agricultural holdings in the United Kingdom over the last five years is shown in the table.

thousand hectares

Year	*Area*	*Area difference*
1994	17,626	—
1995	17,520	(-)106
1996	17,527	(+)7
1997	17,432	(-)95
1998	17,372	(-)60
1999	17,351	(-)21

Notes:
Total area includes tillage and grass, rough grazing, woodland, set-aside and other land (paths, buildings etc).

Source:
Agricultural Census Statistics 1998 and June Statistical News Release. Data include minor holdings.

Seed Lists

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons in the proposed draft Seeds (National Lists of Variations) Regulations 2000 consultation he proposes to abolish statutory measures relating to *(a)* oral representations at a public hearing, *(b)* the definition of persons affected, *(c)* rules of conduct for public hearings and *(d)* the requirement of fees in respect of such hearing; and replace them with ministerial discretion. [111649]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The proposed regulations do not abolish statutory rights to make oral representations about proposed decisions on National Listing. The proposal is to transfer the detail of how such rights are exercised from Regulations to the Plant Varieties and Seeds Gazette. It is now more usual to set out such administrative detail separately, rather than include it in legislation. The proposals also provide for all fees associated with National Listing to be set administratively, rather than by regulation, subject to such fees being reasonable. The draft regulatory impact assessment which accompanied the proposals explained that we do not expect them to result in extra costs to industry, citizens or the environment.

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what applications in respect of genetically modified wheat and genetically modified maize *(a)* have been considered and *(b)* are currently under consideration in respect of inclusion on the European seed list common register; if such applications will be a matter for joint consideration with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions; and if he will make a statement. [111412]

Ms Quin: Prior to February 2000, varieties added to a member state's National List could be included on the Agricultural Common Catalogue provided no member state indicated they intended to seek a derogation prohibiting marketing of the variety in their territory. No Genetically Modified varieties of wheat or maize were added to the Agricultural Common Catalogue under these arrangements.

Under new arrangements which came into effect in February 2000, varieties may progress automatically from member states National Lists to the Common Catalogue. For genetically modified plant varieties, this progression requires a marketing consent under Directive 90/220/EEC on the Deliberate Release into the Environment of Genetically Modified Varieties and, where appropriate, an authorisation under the Novel Foods Regulation No. 97/258/EEC. No genetically modified wheat varieties have either been considered or added to the Common Catalogue under these new arrangements. There are currently three genetically modified maize varieties included in member states' National Lists which the EU Commission is considering for inclusion in the Common Catalogue. These are CHARDON LL, included in the Dutch National List, and COMPA CB and JORDI CB, included in the Spanish National List. The decision on whether to add these varieties to the Common Catalogue is for the Commission to determine on the basis of whether the necessary regulatory requirements have been met.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is not involved in considering whether plant varieties may be added to the Common Catalogue.

Pig Industry

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the cost of BSE to the pig industry. [111706]

Ms Quin: No official assessment has been made by Government, but industry assessments have been discussed between Government and industry representatives.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations were made to him in January by representatives of the pig industry regarding legal opinion on the feasibility of state aid for the pig sector under European law. [111709]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister received a letter from a group of solicitors acting on behalf of the British Pig Industry Support Group, threatening to bring a Judicial Review of the Minister's failure to grant state aid to the pig sector.

Salmon Freshwater Fisheries

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the report of the independent Salmon Freshwater Fisheries Review Group will be published. [114309]

Mr. Morley: I am pleased to announce that the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group's report is being published today. The group has carried out a very thorough and wide ranging examination of salmon and freshwater fisheries policy and legislation in England and Wales. We now intend to seek the views of interested parties; the consultation period will run until 31 July 2000. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Claims

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants have been denied access to any benefits for each month of *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* the current year to date. [110486]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mr. Leigh Lewis to Mr. Jeremy Corbyn dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your question about the number of claimants who have been denied access to any benefits after failing to attend an Employment Service advisory interview. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Employment Service.

Information on the numbers and types of decisions given by Employment Service Decision Makers on labour market questions are recorded quarterly rather than monthly, and published in the 'Analysis of Sector Decision Making' (formerly known as the 'Analysis of Adjudication Officers' Decisions'), copies of which are held in the House of Commons Library. The most recent publication is for the quarter ending 30 September 1999.

For each quarter in the calendar year 1999, the numbers of jobseekers whose entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance ceased as a result of failing to attend an Employment Service advisory interview are as follows:

Quarter ending	*Number*
31 March 1999	29,335
30 June 1999	31,400
30 September 1999	35,189

Information for the quarter ending December 1999 will be published by 31 March 2000 and lodged with the Library.

I hope this is helpful.

Unclaimed Benefits

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the number of people in the Elmet constituency aged over 60 years who are not claiming benefit to which they are entitled. [113416]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency level.

Pensions

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the compensation and general levies payable under the Pension Schemes Act 1993 by occupational and personal pension schemes. [114334]

Mr. Rooker: I am pleased to announce that the rate of the Compensation Levy will remain unchanged at a maximum of 23 pence per member for the third year in a row and that it will not be necessary to raise a Compensation Levy in 2000–01.

Regulations are being laid today for the General Levy that will increase rates for most pension schemes from 1 April 2000 with the exception of occupational schemes with 6,604 or more members. Rates for these schemes have been frozen at their present levels for the coming year. The rates for 2000–01 are shown in the table.

The General Levy covers the costs of the bodies that safeguard the rights of pension scheme members or provide them with help, advice and information. These bodies are the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (Opra), the Pensions Ombudsman, the Pensions Advisory Service and the Pension Schemes Registry. It is essential that these bodies have the resources necessary to meet their continuing and new responsibilities so that all scheme members' interests are properly protected.

The increase in the General Levy rates for most, but not all, occupational pension schemes reflects that the biggest schemes generate little work for Opra, and have not contributed to the steady increase in the number of cases referred to them or to the complexity of the issues with which they deal. The new rates for personal pension schemes reflect that Opra's regulatory functions are extended to those schemes and to Stakeholder pension schemes by the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999.

General Levy rates 2000–01

Scheme size (Number of members)	*Basis*	*Amount per member (£)*	*Minimum payment per scheme[1] (£)*
Occupation Pension Schemes			
2 to 11	£12 per scheme	—	—
12 to 99	Per member	1.25	—
100 to 999	Per member	0.90	125
1,000 to 4,999	Per member	0.70	900
5,000 to 9,999	Per member	0.53	3,500
10,000 or more	Per member	0.37	5,300
Personal Pension Schemes			
2 to 11	£5.20 per scheme	—	—
12 to 99	Per member	0.50	—
100 to 999	Per member	0.35	50
1,000 to 4,999	Per member	0.30	350
5,000 to 9,999	Per member	0.20	1,500
10,000 or more	Per member	0.15	2,000

[1] Minimum payments ensure that schemes in the lower bands do not pay more overall than those in the higher bands.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to consult on draft regulations on employer payments to personal pensions and stakeholder pensions. [114332]

Mr. Rooker: We are today issuing a consultation document containing draft regulations on employer payments to personal pensions and stakeholder pensions.

The new requirements represent a major change for both insurance companies and employers. The consultation document contains a full description of the new arrangements. We want to alert employers and insurance companies now so that they can start planning for the new regime, which we plan to bring into force in April 2001.

An important part of our pension reforms is that people should have greater confidence in private pensions. Regulations require deductions from pay to be paid by employers to occupational pension schemes within set deadlines. Today's draft regulations extend this requirement to personal pensions and stakeholder pensions.

Incapacity Benefit

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes he plans to make to the all work test in Incapacity Benefits. [114333]

Mr. Bayley: We are laying regulations today which, together with regulations made in November (The Social Security (Incapacity for Work) Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 1999), give effect to the changes to the All Work Test which were introduced by the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act.

The All Work Test provides an assessment of the effect of a person's medical condition on their functional abilities, to determine whether they reach the threshold at which it is appropriate to pay incapacity benefits rather than to treat them as unemployed. It is a negative test in that it currently looks only at people's incapacities and

not at why they are able to do despite their illness or disability. The very name gives the wrong impression that people who reach the benefit threshold are unfit to do any work. But many sick and disabled people already work, and many more want to and may be able to, given the right encouragement and support.

From 3 April 2000 the All Work Test will be replaced by the Personal Capability Assessment. The threshold for entitlement to incapacity benefits, and the way that incapacity is assessed will not change in any way. But the doctor who advises the decision maker will also be able to prepare a Capability Report, with positive and constructive advice on what the person can do despite their incapacity and on measures such as workplace adaptations which might help them to work. This report will not be seen by the benefit decision maker but will go to Personal Advisers, to help them and their clients plan a return to employment.

As part of the ONE pilots, our doctors are already providing Capability Reports in appropriate cases. The process was trialled successfully last summer. We aim to extend the use of Capability Reports as we gain experience through the pilots and as Personal Adviser services are expanded.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the pilot areas for enhanced medical assessment for incapacity benefits in respect of incapability information; and on what basis they were selected. [113046]

Mr. Bayley: From 3 April, the All Work Test for incapacity benefits will be replaced by the Personal Capability Assessment. This will continue to determine benefit entitlement in exactly the same way as now but will also allow the doctor who assesses a person's incapacity to prepare a separate Capability Report with positive information on what they can do despite their medical condition and on measures such as workplace adaptations that might enable them to return to employment.

Capability Reports will not be seen by benefit decision-makers. They are intended to assist Personal Advisers in providing advice and support to people who want to plan a return to work. Some initial trialling of the Capability Report was undertaken for a short period last summer in Bolton, and in Bristol, East and Bath, two of the areas in which Personal Adviser services are being piloted as part of the New Deal for Disabled People. Since last November, the new procedure has been included in the 12 ONE service pilots. The ONE pilot areas were selected on the basis of a number of criteria including the need to cover a range of geographical and labour market conditions so as to minimise bias and enable results to be extrapolated nationally.

The areas are:

Clyde Coast and Renfrew
Lea Roding
South Essex
Warwickshire
Calderdale & Kirklees
Gwent Borders
Buckinghamshire
Somerset
Leeds
Suffolk
North Nottinghamshire
North Cheshire.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when payments will be made to those people under the age of 65 years entitled to receive winter fuel payments. [112656]

Angela Eagle: Following the European Court's judgment in the Taylor case, we have decided that help through Winter Fuel Payments will be extended to everyone aged 60 or over, regardless of whether they are receiving a pension or another qualifying benefit.

We accept the judgment of the Court and intend to comply by equalising the age of the Winter Fuel Payment entitlement to men and women at age 60.

The Winter Fuel Payment qualifying age will be increased in line with the increases previously announced in respect of the State Retirement Pension (between April 2010 and April 2020 State pension age for women will be increased in stages until both men and women share a State pension age of 65).

We intend to make retrospective payments to all people now included within the scope of the scheme in respect of the previous three winters (1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000).

We are carefully considering what arrangements need to be made in order to issue payments securely to customers not already in the scope of the existing scheme. An announcement outlining the full details of how and when these payments will be made will be announced as soon as possible.

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many workers and former workers in the power industry received awards for asbestos-related diseases in the last year for which figures are available; and how many deaths from asbestos-related diseases occurred in this sector for the same period. [113330]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Awards of industrial injuries disablement benefit for asbestos related prescribed diseases in the generation, production and distribution of electricity

Period	*Number*
January to September 1999	50
January to December 1998	57

Notes:
1. The following prescribed diseases have been used when identifying asbestos related diseases:
D1—Pneumoconiosis (in the asbestos industry).
D3—Diffuse mesothelioma.
D8—Primary carcinoma of the lung with accompanying evidence of i or both (a) asbestosis (b) unilateral or bilateral diffuse pleural thickening.
D9—Unilateral or bilateral diffuse pleural thickening.

2. D1 and D3 are paid from 1 per cent. disablement, and D8 and D9 are paid from 14 per cent. disablement.
3. Figures are based on the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) of economic activities 1992 and the following has been used:
40.10—Production and distribution of electricity; Electricity generation.
4. These figures are based on a 100 per cent. count of Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit initial assessments.
5. Figures for 1999 are for nine months only. December 1999 quarterly figures are not yet available.
6. The number of deaths related to this sector resulting from asbestos-related prescribed diseases is not available.
Source:
Analytical Services Division.

Verification Framework

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the average cost to local authorities since April 1999 of implementing the Verification Framework; and how much of that cost has been met by *(a)* central Government and *(b)* local government since April 1999. [113625]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the form requested. The cost of implementing the Verification Framework (VF) will vary according to the size and nature of each local authority's caseload, and the extent to which they already have systems required under the VF in place.

The funds the Department makes available to local authorities are distributed on the same basis as they receive their main administration subsidy. We expect to pay over £29 million in total to 229 local authorities for the Verification Framework during 1999–2000. Some authorities will have received set-up costs, some will have received continuing costs and some will have received both set-up and continuing costs.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent examination of the performance of housing benefit delivery in the London Borough of Islington he has undertaken. [113673]

Angela Eagle: As part of our determination to drive up the standards of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit administration, we have asked the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate to inspect the 30 local authorities which spend most on these benefits. The London Borough of Islington is included among these authorities and will be inspected this summer.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the margin of error of the estimate of housing benefit *(a)* fraud and *(b)* error to be provided by the on going Area Benefit Review. [113817]

Angela Eagle: The margin of error expressed as a percentage of estimated losses depends to a degree on the amount of fraud and error found in the review: the less found the wider the margin.

The current prediction for the first set of review data covering the period October 1999 to March 2000, is that the margin of error on the estimated value of losses will lie between +/- 10 per cent. and +/- 20 per cent. of those losses. When data for the period October 1999 to September 2000 become available we expect the margin of error to contract.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities are covered by the Area Benefit Review of Housing Benefit. [113784]

Angela Eagle: 195 Local authorities have volunteered to take part in the Area Benefit Review of Housing Benefit.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what data his Department collates on the time taken to process *(a)* initial and *(b)* repeat housing benefit applications for each London borough. [113669]

Angela Eagle: The Department collects data from all local authorities on a quarterly basis in relation to both new and renewal Housing Benefit claims. The data collected for both types of claim includes:

the number of claims determined successful;
the number of claims determined unsuccessful;
the number of these claims (*(a)* + *(b)*) determined within 14 days of receipt of all necessary information.

From this April, Best Value performance indicators will be the main yardstick against which local authorities' performance will be judged. The indicators we have set for Housing Benefit delivery include new measures of the average time taken to process new claims and notifications of changes of circumstance, and the percentage of renewal claims processed on time. Local authorities will be required to set challenging targets for improved performance against these indicators year on year.

The Department has made arrangements for data on performance against all the Best Value indicators to be reported periodically by authorities as part of the normal provision of Housing Benefit management information. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced to the House on 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 756, his intention to use his statutory powers to compel authorities to provide this information.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many tenants were evicted from *(a)* local authority, *(b)* housing association and *(c)* private rented accommodation in each London borough because of delays in payment of housing benefit in 1999. [113672]

Angela Eagle: The information is not collected centrally.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average cost, for each London borough, of the administration of housing benefit in the last year for which figures are available. [113670]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Housing benefit administration costs 1998–99

£

Local authority	*Average cost per case*
Barking and Dagenham	37
Barnet	110
Bexley	41
Brent	128
Bromley	114
Camden	105

Housing benefit administration costs 1998–99

£

Local authority	*Average cost per case*
City of London	206
Croydon	84
Ealing	176
Enfield	116
Greenwich	141
Hackney	118
Hammersmith and Fulham	139
Haringey	174
Harrow	110
Havering	91
Hillingdon	78
Hounslow	78
Islington	94
Kensington and Chelsea	194
Kingston upon Thames	82
Lambeth	105
Lewisham	222
Merton	65
Newham	205
Redbridge	190
Richmond upon Thames	101
Southwark	157
Sutton	121
Tower Hamlets	81
Waltham Forest	86
Wandsworth	86
Westminster	234

Notes:

1. 1998–99 are the latest figures available.

2. The "average cost" has been calculated as the cost per case using the authority's total expenditure on administration costs and the total Housing Benefit caseload.

3. The total expenditure on administration costs used in the calculations are those reported by the authorities to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the RO4 forms. The caseload figures used are the Housing Benefit caseloads supplied by the local authorities on the Management Information Statistics Stats forms 121 and 122. The caseload figures for financial year 1998–99 were calculated by taking an average of the data for the four quarters May 1998 to February 1999.

4. As can be seen from the table, the average cost per case varies considerably between authorities. Different local authorities use different basis to calculate the administration costs they report. The reasons for the differences include the different mix of caseload the authorities have and their relative complexities to administer, and also the different components included in the total administration costs expenditure, for example, the treatment of overheads.

Source:

The information is as supplied on the RO4 forms to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions by the local authorities.

MIS information supplied by local authorities on forms 121 and 122.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if remote access terminals are being installed with software that will automatically cross reference details of claimants of housing benefit with other benefits. [113624]

Angela Eagle: Remote Access Terminals are currently used by LAs to access a range of the DSS held information which is relevant to the administration of Housing and Council Tax benefit. Although there are no plans in place to install software for the purpose described, the Housing Benefit Matching Service performs a similar function. This quarterly operation cross references a range of DSS held data with data provided by the LAs. The results are then used to identify potential fraud and error.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which local authorities, in each of the past three years, have been served with improvement notices on the administration of housing benefit. [113671]

Angela Eagle: The Secretary of State has powers under section 139D of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 to direct an Authority as to the standards which it is to attain, in the prevention and detection of fraud relating to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit or otherwise in the administration of benefits. To date, we have not issued any such directions.

However, as my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State announced in the House on 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 756, we have warned councils that where investigation by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate identify persistent failings, we will use our statutory powers to direct standards and timescales for improving performance.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the margin of error for the inspection of fraud and error in each of the benefits inspected in the most recently published Area Benefit Review. [113629]

Mr. Rooker: There is 95 per cent. confidence that the true figures for fraud and error for Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance in the most recently published Area Benefit Review report are within 8 per cent. of the estimates.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what steps he is taking to (i) measure accurately and (ii) reduce fraud and error in *(a)* invalid care allowance, *(b)* disability living allowance and *(c)* incapacity benefit; [113795]

(2) what was the monetary value of (i) official error, (ii) customer error, (iii) confirmed claimant fraud, (iv) high suspicion claimant fraud, (v) low suspicion claimant fraud, (vi) confirmed official fraud, (vii) high suspicion official fraud, (viii) low suspicion official fraud for *(a)* invalid care allowance, *(b)* disability living allowance and *(c)* incapacity benefit for each of the past three years. [113794]

Mr. Rooker: The results of national benefit reviews carried out on Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) were published in July 1996 and February 1997 respectively. These are the latest figures for fraud and error in these benefits and the reports are in the Library.

We plan to conduct a national benefit review of Incapacity Benefit later this year.

There are security checks in place in these benefits to make sure that tackling fraud and error is an integral part of their administration. In addition there are a number of initiatives to promote greater security and accuracy in these benefits. Examples include:

From April, the ICA payment order book, normally valid for 22 weeks, will be aligned to the length of time for which a qualifying benefit is in payment where that is shorter than 22 weeks.

From April, Automated Credit Transfer will be introduced for ICA customers receiving Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based).

For DLA, work being undertaken within the Disability Benefits Modernisation Programme which is focused on getting benefit entitlement right at the outset and keeping it right from first to final payment.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which ministers are currently in the Ministerial counter-fraud group; [113620]

(2) how many times the Ministerial counter-fraud group *(a)* has met since it was formed and *(b)* met in 1999. [113621]

Mr. Rooker: Information relating to the proceedings of Cabinet or Cabinet Committees is not made public under exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what evaluations his Department has conducted of the use of biometric data as a means by which to reduce benefit fraud. [113793]

Mr. Rooker: This Department already makes use of biometric data in certain exceptional circumstances. The War Pensions Agency use fingerprinting in overseas cases where they suspect that a pensioner or widow is no longer alive and a pension is still in payment. The Child Support Agency use DNA testing to confirm paternity, where the alleged non-resident parent has contacted the Agency to dispute that they are the father.

There are problems with biometric technology, such as the absence of 100 per cent. reliable tests to establish whether an individual matches his record in the database. Such failure rates would clearly be unacceptable from a Social Security customer service standpoint. Until we see advances in the biometric technology particularly in terms of reliability, but also in ease of use and cost we must continue to rely on other authentication techniques for bulk day to day business.

We will continue to monitor progress on the reliability of using biometric data to reduce benefit fraud.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps his Department is taking to eradicate fraudulent housing benefit claims by landlords. [113792]

Angela Eagle: We have already introduced a range of approaches to tackle landlord fraud which we are continuing to develop;

we are already involved in very successful joint activities between the Benefits Agency (BA), local authorities (LAs) and the police which are getting positive results;

we have given LAs new powers to control direct payments more tightly and recover overpayments more easily, and to require landlords to provide information;

we are involved in matching exercises with Inland Revenue (IR) of landlords and savings;

we have established an agreement with IR to allow BA and LA fraud investigators to ask centrally for tax information on a case by case basis.

We are setting up a new national benefits intelligence unit to co-ordinate and extend intelligence on Social Security fraud, as the basis for both prevention and detection;

overhauling and strengthening the capability and professionalism of investigators to tackle organised benefit fraud right across the benefit system. A senior civil servant will be appointed to manage the central organised fraud investigation service and to act as the Head of Profession for all benefit fraud investigators;

setting up new arrangements with local authorities to ensure investigations are targeted properly across the Social Security system.

Weekly Benefit Savings Scheme

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the annual savings were from the weekly benefit savings scheme for each year from 1996 to 1999. [113791]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables.

Security control programme savings

£ million

Financial year	*Total weekly benefit savings claimed*
1996–97	1,509.0
1997–98	1,918.5
1998–99	1,645.5

Note:
The figures are not comparable, as from April 1998 the WBS claiming criteria was tightened.

Local authority weekly benefit savings (WBS) data for England, Scotland and Wales

£

Financial year	*Total weekly benefit savings claimed*
1996–97	293,672,397
1997–98	346,407,498
1998–99	235,679,923

Note:
The figures are not comparable, as from April 1998 the Weekly Benefit Savings claiming criteria for Local Authorities was tightened.

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 334W, on National Insurance staff, if he will list the types of automatic security check that prompt a management check. [113665]

Mr. Rooker: The types of security features which trigger management checks are:

where there is an excessive time between receiving access powers and the issue of a new National Insurance Number (NINO);
where a NINO is issued and no record of the issuer is held on the central database;
the audit trail and analysis (ATAS) system which detects when there is any unusual activity e.g. a larger than normal volume of NINOs issued.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 334W, on National Insurance staff, by what criteria the number of staff able to allocate new numbers were reduced. [113664]

Mr. Rooker: The number of staff who had National Insurance number allocation powers were reduced by critically reviewing the existing users and ensuring only those with essential business need were allowed to keep National Insurance number allocation powers, and restricting to a single group of specialists the facility to allocate National Insurance numbers.

Previously staff had various levels of access to the Departmental Central Index, each of which allowed them to carry out a range of activities on Departmental Central Index, such as viewing data, or allocating National Insurance numbers. The number of access levels providing the facility to allocate National Insurance numbers has been reduced, so that the power is not routinely given to staff who do not need it.

Cheque Cashers Association

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a copy of his Department's formal memorandum of understanding with the British Cheque Cashers Association. [113619]

Mr. Rooker: The Memorandum of Understanding between the British Cheque Cashiers Association and the Benefits Agency is still under negotiation at this time. Once the document is finalised a copy will be placed in the Library.

Departmental Programme Protection Fund

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the funding for the Departmental Programme Protection Fund for each year for which it has been budgeted; and what savings *(a)* it has achieved so far and *(b)* it is expected to achieve each year to meet the Public Service Agreement targets. [113790]

Mr. Rooker: The Programme Protection Fund consists of money whose main purpose is to safeguard Social Security against fraud and error. The budget for the current financial year was £464 million, the actual level of spending will not be known until after the year ends. Funding for 2000–01 is currently being finalised.

One of the fund's main goals is to ensure the achievement of the Public Service Agreement target, to reduce fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance by 30 per cent. by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002. We do not yet have figures for this, the first, year in which the fund has been in operation. However, our initial expectations are that we shall achieve a reduction in the rate of overpayments of 1.5 per cent. in 1999–2000, 3.5 per cent. in 2000–01 and 5 per cent. in 2001–02. We shall reconsider these figures in the light of performance in the first year.

Tax Credits (Remote Access Terminals)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if local authorities will be able to access information held by the Inland Revenue on each of the tax credits using remote access terminals. [113622]

Angela Eagle: Remote Access Terminals are currently used by LAs to access a range of DSS held information relating to claims for Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance which is relevant to the administration of Housing and Council Tax benefit. We are currently exploring the implications of extending the range of available information to include details relating to other benefits and tailored access to the Departmental Central Index.

We anticipate being able to start implementing these enhancements within the next financial year. There are no plans at present to extend this level to access to include Inland Revenue systems.

The Inland Revenue do not currently have Remote Access Terminals for local authorities to access tax credits information. However, they do operate several dedicated helplines to provide local authorities with information about tax credits.

Benefit Uptake

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the number of people in Barnsley, East and Mexborough aged over 60 years who are not claiming benefits to which they are entitled. [112979]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency level.

Vaccine Damage Payment Scheme

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what further progress has been made on the establishment of a fund to assist those eligible under the vaccine damage payment scheme; and if he will make a statement. [113044]

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made with establishing a fund to compensate vaccine-damaged children. [113418]

Mr. Bayley: We are examining the feasibility of setting up a fund to provide help to people who have received vaccine damage payments.

TREASURY

Aggregates Tax

14. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on his proposals for an aggregates tax. [112229]

Mr. Timms: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has received a number of representations from a range of organisations about the Government's proposals for an aggregates tax.

Climate Change Levy

15. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received since his pre-Budget report on the climate change levy. [112231]

16. **Mr. Gill:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received regarding the proposed climate change levy; and if he will make a statement. [112232]

Mr. Timms: The refinements to the design of the climate change levy announced in the November 1999 Pre-Budget Report will increase its environmental effectiveness, whilst protecting the competitiveness of UK firms. The changes made were widely welcomed by both business leaders and environmental groups.

Small Businesses

17. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact tax changes since May 1997 have had on small businesses. [112233]

Mr. Timms: The effects of the tax announcements are shown in the relevant tables of the Red Book. A number of these measures are of particular benefit to small businesses.

Employment Trends

18. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on employment trends since May 1997. [112234]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Since May 1997 employment has increased by over 800,000 and there are now more people in work than ever before.

BT

19. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on his speech on BT charging and access to the internet. [112235]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor receives numerous representations on a wide range of issues.

Enterprise Culture

20. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will ensure that his policy in respect of the United Kingdom's enterprise culture, described in his recent speech in New York, takes account of the needs of the labour force; and if he will make a statement. [112236]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's productivity agenda takes full account of the needs of the labour market through the New Deal funded from the Windfall Tax and through investing an extra £19 billion over three years, both to increase standards in schools and to encourage life-long learning.

Low Pay

22. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he has taken to increase the take-home pay of those in low-paid work. [112238]

32. **Mr. Reed:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is taking to increase the level of take-home pay for low-paid workers in the east midlands. [112250]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are committed to creating employment opportunities for all.

A key element of this strategy is the commitment to making work pay, and creating a fairer system for all low-paid workers. The key measures are:

The National Minimum Wage, which was introduced in April 1999 and has boosted the hourly wage of over 1.5 million low-paid workers. The adult rate will be increased from £3.60 per hour to £3.70 per hour from October 2000, while the youth rate will be increased from £3.00 per hour to £3.20 per hour from June 2000;

The 10p rate of income tax from April 1999, which has halved the marginal tax rate for 2.3 million people, of whom 1.7 million are low-paid. Those on the lowest taxable incomes have gained up to £2.88 a week, compared to £1.15 a week for basic rate taxpayers;

Reforms to National Insurance Contributions which will remove around one million low-paid people from national insurance, while protecting their benefit entitlement;

The cut in the basic rate to 22p, from April 2000;

For families with children, the Working Families Tax Credit, which guarantees a minimum income of £200 a week for a family with someone in full-time employment—£80 a week more than a couple would receive on Income Support.

Telecommunications

23. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has held with the telecommunications industry. [112239]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor regularly meets people from a wide range of industries.

Future Spending

24. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning future spending levels in relation to his forthcoming Budget; and if he will make a statement. [112240]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Treasury Ministers have received representations from a number of organisations in relation to the forthcoming Budget.

Taxation

25. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much tax will be payable in the period 1997–98 to 2001–02 as a result of his Budget measures to date. [112241]

Dawn Primarolo: Details of the Budget measures can be found in relevant tables of the July 1997, March 1998 and March 1999 Red Book. As a result of these Budgets, the direct tax rate on an average family with children will fall below 20 per cent. for the first time since 1979, and be at its lowest level since 1972.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer during which quarters since May 1997 the level of tax taken by Government have fallen as a proportion of GDP. [112228]

Mr. Andrew Smith: As a result of the last Budget, the tax/GDP ratio is lower this year than last year. The tax ratio in the two following years will also be lower than last year. Under the last Government's plans these rates would have been higher than the latest projections, not only in this year and both of the next two years.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much extra tax will be paid in 2000–01 as a result of measures announced in his Budgets to date. [112226]

Mr. Andrew Smith: All changes to the tax system are included in the relevant Budget reports, which are publicly available. As a result of these Budgets, the direct tax rate on an average family with children will fall below 20 per cent. for the first time since 1979, and be at its lowest level since 1972.

Inflation

26. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in how many months since the power to set interest rates was transferred to the Bank of England, Britain's inflation rate has *(a)* exceeded and *(b)* fallen below the median range of its inflation target. [112243]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's inflation target since May, 1997 has been 2.5 per cent. for RPIX inflation. In the 33 months since operational independence was given to the Bank, inflation has exceeded the target on 16 occasions, has fallen below on 11 occasions and been exactly on target on 6 occasions. RPIX inflation has averaged 2.5 per cent. during this period and has been in the range of 2.1 to 3.2 per cent.

Film Industry

27. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the efficacy of his tax relief measures to support the film industry; and if he will make a statement. [112244]

Dawn Primarolo: We are continuing to assess the effectiveness of the tax measures introduced in 1997 and indications are that they are working well. It would of course be improper for me to anticipate what may or may not be in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budget.

Market-sensitive Announcements

28. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on the making of announcements which are market sensitive. [112245]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury has well-established procedures which allow us to advance policy while taking account of any potential market sensitivity.

VAT (House Renovations)

29. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of VAT on house renovations. [112246]

Dawn Primarolo: Statistics on renovated dwellings and on the VAT relating to such work are not directly available.

Based on data published in Housing and Construction Statistics 1988–98, VAT charged in 1998 in respect of repairs, maintenance and improvements carried out by contractors on private sector housing in Great Britain is estimated at £1.7 billion. It is not possible to identify renovations separately.

Contingency Fund (Kosovo)

30. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the latest costs to the contingency fund of *(a)* civil and *(b)* military actions in Kosovo. [112247]

Mr. Andrew Smith: No advances from the Contingencies Fund have been made to Departments in respect of military or civil actions in Kosovo. There have however in the course of the current financial year been allocations from the Reserve of £396 million in respect of military operations and £154 million in respect of peacekeeping, humanitarian and refugee programmes.

Interest Rates

31. **Mr. Butterfill:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his objective to harmonize Sterling interest rates with those of the euro-zone. [112249]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Monetary Policy Committee sets UK interest rates at the level it considers necessary, in its best collective judgment, to keep inflation on track to meet the Government's inflation target. Similarly, the European Central Bank set interest rates to achieve their objective of maintaining price stability in the euro-area.

Public Finances

33. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the net effect on public finances arising from changes in the rate of employment since May 1997. [112251]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Employment has increased by over 800,000 since the last election, and there are now more people in work than ever before. While higher employment improves the public finances by raising revenue and reducing social security payments, it is difficult to identify the precise effect of changes in the rate of employment on the public finances, as this depends on a large number of factors. None the less, a higher rate of sustainable employment has been an important contributory factor to the substantial improvement seen in the public finances since May 1997.

EU Trade

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of United Kingdom jobs dependent on trade with the European Union. [112237]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is estimated that up to 3½ million jobs in the UK are linked, directly and indirectly, to the exports of goods and services to the European Union from the UK.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the cost of including within the working families tax credit an additional £32 per week if the claimant is 18 or over and is married; and what would be the cost if this additional credit was also extended to claimants who are not married but living with someone as though they are married to that person. [112807]

Dawn Primarolo: Within the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), both those couples who are married and those living together as if they are married are treated alike. It is therefore not possible to provide separate estimates for the two groups.

Based on the full year cost of the WFTC, the cost of including an additional £32 per week within the credits for all couples already in receipt of WFTC would be about £1.3 billion. In addition, there will be couples who previously did not qualify on income grounds who will become eligible because of the additional credit. It is not possible to estimate the additional costs arising from this and other behavioural effects, except at disproportionate cost.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met representatives of low cost airlines to discuss air passenger duty. [112216]

Mr. Timms: I have recently had various discussions about air passenger duty with representatives from a wide range of organisations within the airline industry, including EasyJet.

Sterling

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to help reduce the level of sterling. [112223]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government want a stable and competitive pound over the medium term that is consistent with price stability, but does not have a target for the exchange rate. The best contribution the Government can make, consistent with this objective, is to maintain sound public finances and low inflation.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 379W, if he was informed before the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February that additional funding had been promised to Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd by his Department; if he or any of his Ministers authorised such funding or promises of funding; and if he will make a statement. [113800]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I do not accept that a promise was made to provide additional funding.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 288W, concerning the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, if he will make a statement on the timescale for the review to be conducted by the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality which he announced on 22 February. [113803]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The timetable is still under discussion with Gurbux Singh. It will be announced shortly.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 288W, concerning the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, if he will place the full text of the report by the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality in the Library when it is available, along with the key findings of the report. [113802]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer to the reply given to my hon. Friend, the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 548W.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 378–83W, if he had been informed of *(a)* the involvement of Mr. Hugh Harris with Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. and *(b)* the fact that additional funding for Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. was to be discussed at the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February, when he appointed Mr. Harris as acting Chairman of the Commission of Racial Equality on 7 February; and if he will make a statement. [113804]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, was aware that Hugh Harris was a member of the Board of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd at the time of his appointment, but did not become aware until later of all the issues that led my right hon. Friend, to decide that substantial public funds could not be justified to support the Congress.

My right hon. Friend was also aware that additional funding for Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd was to be discussed at the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the organisations which have agreed to provide accommodation on contract to the National Asylum Seekers Support Agency. [113785]

Mrs. Roche: We are currently concluding negotiations with accommodation providers prior to awarding contracts very shortly. In the meantime, information about those providers, including their identities, must be treated as commercially confidential.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 556–58W, to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) what additional funding will be provided to local authorities supporting asylum seekers after 1 April. [113797]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office has a provisional allocation of £300 million to meet the costs of supporting asylum seekers in 2000–01. The cost of supporting asylum seekers is sensitive to a wide range of factors,

including the level of applications, the rate for take-up of support and the speed with which applications are processed. We are continuing to work with local authorities and others to determine an accurate estimate of costs and consider the most suitable method of reimbursement.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many units of accommodation for asylum seekers after 1 April he has asked the National Asylum Seekers Support Agency to secure; how many such units of accommodation have been secured so far; and if he will make a statement. [113788]

Mrs. Roche: We intend to have enough accommodation from 3 April to take destitute port asylum applicants on to the new support arrangements. We aim to build up numbers fairly swiftly from there on to be able to bring in-country applicants on to the arrangements as soon as possible.

We expect to conclude supplier negotiations and award contracts very shortly.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of his Department's expenditure on asylum seeker support in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; [113787]

(2) what estimate he has made of the amount of money his Department will pay to local authorities in 2000–01 to reimburse them for the costs of supporting asylum seekers who claim asylum on or after 1 April. [113789]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office has provisional allocations of £300 million to meet the costs of supporting asylum seekers in 2000–01 and £250 million in 2001–02.

The cost of supporting asylum seekers is sensitive to a wide range of factors, including the level of applications, the rate for take-up of support and the speed with which applications are processed. We are continuing to work with local authorities and others to determine an accurate estimate of costs and consider the most suitable method of reimbursement.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims for asylum have been submitted by people who came into the United Kingdom *(a)* under the United Nations Humanitarian Evacuation Plan from Kosovo and *(b)* through organised medical evacuations from Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [113323]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Non-Governmental Organisations representing Kosovan Albanians evacuated to the United Kingdom have been asked to direct applications for asylum to a central unit in the Integrated Casework Directorate of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. These records show two asylum applications to have been made by people who came into the United Kingdom from Kosovo under the United Nations Humanitarian Evacuation Plan, one of which has subsequently been withdrawn, and that none have been made by people who came into the United Kingdom from Kosovo through organised medical evacuations.

Jury Trial

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 376W, for what reasons he has assumed that 25 per cent. of defendants who would have elected Crown Court trial and whom the magistrates decided to try would appeal against the magistrates' decision; what research he has undertaken into the likelihood of a defendant appealing against the magistrate's decision; and if he will make a statement. [113805]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible to make a precise estimate of the number of defendants who would appeal against the magistrates' decision on mode of trial; we have merely made the cautious assumption that a quarter of defendants would do so. By way of comparison, the percentage of defendants availing themselves of the unfettered right to appeal against summary conviction after a contested trial is about 14 per cent.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 377W, on which judges will hear appeals from magistrates on mode of trial, if he will list, for each Crown Court centre in England and Wales, the estimated number of appeals to be heard by each resident judge; what discussions he has had with *(a)* resident judges and *(b)* senior presiding judges regarding the requirement for resident judges to hear such appeals, and what representations have been made to him; how the requirement for resident judges to hear such appeals relates to his estimate of a hearing within 48 hours; and if he will make a statement. [113809]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Assuming that 25 per cent. of defendants appeal against the magistrates' decision on mode of trial, it is estimated that there will be 3,500 appeals a year, which is on average less than one appeal per week for each of the 78 Crown Court centres. The proposal that these appeals should be heard by the resident judge has already been discussed with the Lord Chief Justice, who further proposed that a deputy should be nominated by the senior presiding judge of the Circuit to provide cover. This will ensure that appeals will be heard within 48 hours.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the increased number of committals to the Crown Court for sentence if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is enacted. [113806]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Assuming that eight per cent. would be committed for sentence, the number of formerly-electing defendants who under the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill would be convicted in the magistrates' courts and committed for sentence would be 1,050, 160 more than under the original Bill.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons the assumption of the increased number of defendants who would be tried in the magistrates' court rather than the Crown Court changed from 12,000 under the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial)

Bill to 14,000 under the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; what the basis was for each of those assumptions; and if he will make a statement. [113807]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The estimate that 12,000 formerly-electing defendants would have been tried in the magistrates' courts under the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill was based on the generous assumption that a quarter of such defendants might, through representations, have been able to persuade the magistrates to direct their case to the Crown Court. Since the criteria in the No. 2 Bill are more restrictive, it has been assumed—again generously—that this proportion would be halved.

Press Officers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 385W, for what reasons the statistics given on the number of press officers in his Department differed from the statistics given to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report, The Government Information and Communication Service (HC770) in July 1998; and if he will publish statistics comparable to those provided to the Select Committee for the dates requested by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald; and if he will make a statement. [113801]

Mr. Straw: One difference between the two sets of statistics is that the figures provided to the Select Committee included senior managers, press officers and staff on temporary attachments; whereas the question asked by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) specifically requested only the number of press officers employed in the Department on certain dates.

The other difference lies in the fact that the figures provided to the Select Committee represented averages of Press Office staff over 12 month periods as opposed to the figures requested by the right hon. Member for a specific series of dates.

In addition, some secondments and attachments are very short term and individuals are not always on the Home Office payroll.
Therefore, it is not possible to supply comparable statistics in the form requested by the hon. Member.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) of 3 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 384W, on press officer salaries, on what basis press officers recruited to the news team could have earnings up to and beyond £30,000, as stated in the recruitment document, Just Another Day at the Office; what will be the maximum earnings of press officers recruited to the news team; and if he will make a statement. [113808]

Mr. Straw: As stated in my reply of 3 March, to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), press officers will be largely recruited at Information Officer grade for which the pay band salary is up to £27,709. Press officers working on the news team will be operating on a rota system for which there is an additional shift disturbance allowance amounting to 12.5 per cent. of salary. All press officers, including those on the news team, are expected to join an out of hours duty rota, nights and weekends, for which overtime is paid. There is also a non-pensionable recruitment and retention allowance which can be varied at management's discretion.

For those candidates recruited at the top end of the Information Officer pay scale, which would be dependent on factors such as experience and current salary, annual earnings could therefore be up to and beyond £30,000 as stated in the recruitment document.
Due to the varying hours press officers will work, their individual circumstances on taking up post and the unpredictable amount of overtime which might be payable, it is not possible to give an exact figure for the maximum earnings of a press officer.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the report by Clear Communications Ltd. which led to the restructuring of his Department's Press Office. [113799]

Mr. Straw: Yes. I will place a copy in the Library today.

Press Office Database

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what purposes his Department's Press Office Briefing and Research Database is to be used; what information will be stored on it; and if he will place its technical specifications in the Library. [113798]

Mr. Straw: The purpose of the Briefing and Reference Database (BARD) is to improve my Department's capability to handle media inquiries and to enable more effective briefing of Ministers on current and developing Home Office policies. BARD is a central database that stores news releases, speeches, Parliamentary business and basic facts and figures about Home Office business. BARD is currently being piloted and its technical specification will be placed in the Library once the pilot is complete.

Royal Family (Protection)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many members of the Royal Family currently receive protection from officers of the Royal and Diplomatic Protection Squad; and what is the cost; [113049]

(2) how many officers of the Royal and Diplomatic Protection Squad are assigned to protect members of the Royal Family; [113048]

(3) if he will list those members of the Royal Family who have received protection from officers of the Royal and Diplomatic Protection Squad in the past five years but no longer do so. [113050]

Mr. Straw: We seek to ensure the most effective and efficient protective arrangements for the Royal Family and other public figures in the light of the changing threat from terrorism and other continuing risks. It is our policy not to comment on the details of protection arrangements for individuals, as to do so could compromise their security.

Prisoners

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the reoffending rates of former inmates of *(a)* private and *(b)* publicly owned prisons in the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [113483]

Mr. Boateng: Since prisoners may move between privately owned and publicly owned prisons on a number of occasions during their sentence, it is not possible to calculate the reoffending rates requested.

Prisons

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports he has received from the operators of HMP Blakenhurst and HMP Forest Bank as to the current financial difficulties being experienced by Prison Realty Trust Inc. and Corrections Corporation of America; and what assurances he has obtained that these financial difficulties will have no detrimental effect on the companies currently operating HMP Blakenhurst and HMP Forest Bank and their ability to meet all their respective contractual obligations. [113563]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has received a verbal report from the operator of Blakenhurst prison and Forest Bank prison, UKDS, about the financial issues being faced by Prison Realty Inc. or Corrections Corporation of America. The Service has received adequate written assurance that they will not have a detrimental effect on UKDS and will not affect its ability to meet its contractual obligations.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 10 March 2000

WALES

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113978]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113988]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Wales Office deals with a variety of newspapers and media bodies, with distribution relying on the subject and content of the specific press release. Furthermore, all media outlets can request press releases. All press releases issued are available on the Wales Office website.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales on how many occasions *(a)* he and *(b)* his predecessors met with (i) the Chairperson and (ii) the board of non-departmental public bodies in Wales since May 1997; and on how many occasions a press statement was issued on the matters discussed and agreed at the meeting. [113312]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There are currently 14 non-departmental public bodies in Wales sponsored by the National Assembly, but the list of such bodies has changed since May 1997 and the frequency of meetings with the Chairpersons and boards of these organisations varies considerably from one body to another.

The information requested is not held centrally, and because of the factors outlined above, could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council when she expects to appoint the chairman of the House of Lords Appointments Commission. [112813]

Mrs. Beckett: A five-strong selection panel chaired by the Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Richard Wilson, and including an independent assessor will determine the final shortlist for both the position of chairman and the positions of independent members; the Prime Minister will then make the formal appointment. The procedure will follow the principles of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

We hope to have the House of Lords Appointments Commission in place by April. However, these are important appointments and we do not intend the process of making them to be skimped to meet a self-imposed artificial deadline.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the President of the Council for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from her Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113974]

Mrs. Beckett: There were no occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from my Department. No cost was involved.

Mr. Brady: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which her Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113982]

Mrs. Beckett: This question cannot be answered without incurring disproportionate costs.

Press Releases are available to all press via the news distribution service managed by the Central Office of Information and are also available on the Internet. Targeted distribution will rely on the subject and content of the specific press release.

DEFENCE

Anthrax Vaccine

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department last *(a)* purchased and *(b)* issued for use new supplies of anthrax vaccine. [113001]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence last purchased supplies of anthrax vaccine in 1991 from the Centre for Applied Microbiological Research, the sole manufacturer in the UK. No new vaccine has since been supplied. The anthrax vaccine issued from 1993 onwards has had its shelf-life extended by the Medicines Control Agency.

Gulf War Illnesses

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the membership of the Independent Panel on Gulf War Illnesses, including the term of appointment in each case and any changes to the membership; how often it meets; and if he will make a statement. [113958]

Mr. Spellar: The Independent Panel on Vaccines Interactions was established to scrutinise all aspects of proposals for research into the potential adverse effects of interactions between the vaccines and tablets which could have been administered to Service personnel at the time of the Gulf conflict. The Panel is chaired by Professor Donald Davies. The other Panel members are: Professor J. E. Banatvala, Professor P. Beverley, Dr. J. Bird,

Dr. A. Boylston, Dr. P. Fawcett, Professor A. Grossman, Professor Malcolm Hooper, Dr. Ian Kimber, Dr. Norman Jones, Professor Stafford Lightman, Dr. Christopher Martyn, Dr. Elizabeth Miller, Dr. David Ray, Professor E. M. Sedgwick, Professor A. Silman and Dr. Geoffrey Schild.

The Panel has met on four occasions since December 1997. The frequency of the meetings is dictated by the research programme. Professor Davies was appointed chairman in January 1999. Professor Hooper, Dr. Schild and Dr. Kimber have all joined the Panel since the first meeting. Panel members are not appointed for a specific term.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason no minutes were taken of the meeting on 29 March 1999 between Professor Hooper and the Independent Panel on Gulf War Illnesses; if he will place copies of the presentations made at the meeting in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [113898]

Mr. Spellar: On the evening of 29 March 1999, the Head of the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme gave a presentation on Gulf veterans' illnesses to the Independent Panel, of which Professor Hooper is a member. Only personal notes were used and, as the presentation was informal, no minutes were taken.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113984]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is not recorded. All media outlets can request press releases—current or archive—at any time. In addition, all MOD press releases are made available on the Internet. Targeted distribution of press releases relies on the subject and content of the specific press releases.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113972]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence uses the Central Office of Information (COI) News Distribution Service. Until April 1998, we subscribed to their courier service. For the period 2 May 1997 to 31 March 1998 we used the couriers on 240 occasions at a total cost of £9,600 (240 x £40).

From April 1998, MOD has distributed press releases electronically and by fax only, through the COI News Distribution Service. Press releases are also posted on the Internet.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 325W, on peat compost, what percentage of the compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when use of peat compost will be phased out on his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [114144]

Mr. Spellar: The information on what percentage of the compost used in my Department's estate gardens is peat, is not held centrally and can be provided only at disproportionate cost. All indications are, however, that such use of peat is infrequent. My officials are currently assessing the full impact of phasing out the use of peat on the MOD estate and it is anticipated that an action plan will be in place by the summer.

Select Committees

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Select Committees, other than the Defence Committee, Ministers in his Department have *(a)* submitted memoranda to and *(b)* appeared before in the present Parliament. [112402]

Mr. Hoon: In the present Parliament, Defence Ministers have not given evidence to any Select Committee of the House of Commons other than to the Defence Committee inquiring on their own or when acting in partnership with other Select Committees. However, I have just agreed to give oral evidence to the International Development Select Committee as part of that Committee's inquiry into Mozambique.

Memoranda have been submitted by the Department to the Foreign Affairs Committee, Transport Sub-Committee, Agriculture Committee, Treasury Sub-Committee, Environment Sub-Committee, Environmental Audit Committee, the Science and Technology Committee, and the Public Accounts Committee.

PRIME MINISTER

Tuition Fees

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* No. 10 policy advisers have had with the Committee of Vice Chancellors on the subject of top-up tuition fees. [113919]

The Prime Minister: None.

Seals

Mr. Howard: To ask the Prime Minister if he will raise the killing of baby seals during his forthcoming discussions with Acting President Putin. [114101]

The Prime Minister: This has been raised with the Russian Ambassador. The Russians are not in breach of any international agreements but are aware of our concern.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mozambique

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what additional funding for the years 2000–01 and 2001–02 over and above the bilateral

country programme for Mozambique contained in the Departmental report 1999 is to be made available for Mozambique following the recent flooding crisis. [113927]

Mr. Foulkes: In the light of the current major disaster we are reviewing urgently with others the needs of Mozambique, to help restore livelihoods, rehabilitate infrastructure, and maintain economic growth and poverty reduction.

Meanwhile, we have already allocated £20 million for immediate humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation needs, and £10 million is planned for emergency budgetary support to help the Government cope with the immediate crisis.

Local Sourcing

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to use companies in local recipient countries to provide the advice and products necessary for UK aid projects. [113488]

Mr. Foulkes: Far too little attention has been paid to local procurement in the past. Sound local procurement of goods and services gives a substantial development benefit. DFID is taking steps to increase both our use of local resources and our capacity to carry out local procurement effectively. We have recently appointed two procurement advisers with the remit of increasing the use of local consultants in Africa and India. We are increasingly working with our development partners to strengthen their own capacity to undertake procurement competently. Over the last two years the percentage of consultancy services which we purchased locally rose from 5 per cent. to 12 per cent.

Crown Agents

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which UK companies received *(a)* the greatest number and *(b)* the greatest value of contracts from the Crown Agents in the past three years in respect of their procurement activities on behalf of her Department. [113490]

Mr. Foulkes: From January 1997 to date, the UK suppliers to receive the greatest number of contracts from Crown Agents in respect of their procurement activities on behalf of the Department were:

	Number of contracts
Globe Microsystems	108
Landrover Exports	32
Ko-Ed	29

The UK suppliers to receive the greatest value of contracts were:

	£
Mabey and Johnson	12,578,000
Qualter Hall	4,054,000
KSB Exports Ltd.	3,044,000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Asbestos Removal Companies

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many Health and Safety Executive inspections were made to sites operated by licensed asbestos removal companies in the last year for which figures are available; and how many were found to be breaking the law. [113326]

Mr. Meacher: In 1998–99 HSE's Field Operations Directorate inspected 961 sites. 41 enforcement notices were issued and seven prosecutions taken where inspectors considered that there was a breach of the law.

Railway Inspections

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate will carry out inspections on services between Shrewsbury and Birmingham; and if he will make a statement. [113272]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive's (HMRI) Railway Inspectorate monitors and enforces safety on Britain's railways. Responsibility for the safety, welfare and convenience of passengers rests with railway operators.

The HMRI has a planned inspection programme, including inspections of Central Trains Ltd. The last inspection of the activities of Central Trains, Railtrack and the track maintenance contractor between the Birmingham and Shrewsbury line was on 7 March 2000.

The inspector was generally content with the drivers' competence and the track layout and condition on the Birmingham to Shrewsbury line. HMRI are pursuing some matters with the maintenance contractor regarding the condition of certain sections of track, where drainage appeared to be a problem.

Landfill

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the distribution of resources generated by the landfill tax; and if he will make a statement. [113290]

Mr. Mullin: Landfill site operators may claim landfill tax credits for voluntary contributions to support specified environmental objectives. As we said in response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee's report on the operation of the Landfill Tax, we are discussing with industry the setting of indicative guidelines for the distribution of funds to each objective under the credit scheme, in line with the priorities we set out in our draft waste strategy "A Way with Waste".

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those items of *(a)* special, *(b)* toxic and *(c)* liquid wastes that will be excluded from landfill sites when the new directives are introduced in 2005. [113287]

Mr. Mullin: The EC Landfill Directive will prohibit from disposal in landfill sites special wastes which are infectious clinical wastes or which, in the conditions of landfill, are explosive, corrosive, oxidising, or flammable. The Directive will allow the disposal of other special and toxic waste to landfills, provided that the waste meets the acceptance criteria in Annexe II of the Directive. The Directive prohibits the landfill of all liquid wastes.

Tour Buses

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many tour buses are registered to operate in *(a)* London, *(b)* Oxford, *(c)* Cambridge, *(d)* Bath and *(e)* Stratford upon Avon; and how many are entitled to a fuel-duty rebate. [113440]

Mr. Hill: Local bus service registrations outside London do not identify tour buses as a separate category. It is not therefore possible to supply the information requested for items *(b)* to *(e)*. In London, around 68 London Local Service Licences have been granted by the Traffic Commissioner for excursions and tours.

Fuel Duty Rebate is paid on bus services which are registered with the Traffic Commissioner as a local bus service, and which meet the requirements of the relevant Regulations, designed to ensure that, among other things, they are available to the general public. Fuel Duty Rebate claims do not separately identify tour buses.

Recycling

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he plans to take to increase the income from Packaging Recovery Notes to ensure the continuing recovery and recycling of glass and other waste materials; and if he will make a statement. [113423]

Mr. Meacher: The main purpose of the Packaging Waste Recovery Note (PRN) is to enable those obligated under the packaging Regulations to demonstrate compliance with their obligations. In addition, the PRN is intended to direct the necessary resources at increasing collection and reprocessing capacity in the UK and developing end-use markets for recyclate. The PRN system is a market-based system and PRN prices are therefore affected both by the balance between targets and available capacity and by developments in the international market. Prices for both virgin and recycled materials are currently low.

Given the targets in the EC Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste that the UK must meet in 2001, it is clear that a considerable increase in recovery will be needed between now and 2001 if the targets are to be met and we would expect this to influence PRN prices.

Seeds Regulations

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library his response to the MAFF response to changes to the 1982 Seeds Regulations. [113475]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The letter from MAFF on the 1982 Seeds Regulations was circulated to Departments for information only. Since the matter was clearly for MAFF, and not a matter for DETR, a response was not necessary.

Fuel Duty

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate how much it would cost to extend the fuel duty rebate to *(a)* school buses and *(b)* dial-a-ride schemes. [113583]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* Those school bus services which are registered with the Traffic Commissioner as local bus services, and which are normally available to, and used by, the general public, are already eligible for bus fuel duty rebate.

Possible changes to the scope of bus fuel duty rebate are currently being considered as part of the Commission for Integrated Transport's review of value for money from public financial support for bus services.

At this stage no estimate has been made of the cost of extending eligibility for the rebate specifically to dial-a-ride schemes or to those school bus services which are currently not eligible. Any such estimates would depend on the precise definition of the newly eligible services which was adopted for the purpose and a forecast of eligible mileage run by them.

Housing Green Paper

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in which month he plans to publish the Green Paper on Housing. [113644]

Mr. Raynsford: We will publish a Housing Green Paper in the reasonably near future aimed at ensuring everyone has the opportunity of a decent home. The Green Paper will be fully consultative and we hope as many people as possible will take the opportunity to let us know what they think of our proposals on the future of housing in the 21st century.

North Wales Main Line

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 6W, on the electrification of the North Wales main line, if he will place in the Library the evidence arising from the investigation into electrifying the North Wales line that led him to the conclusion that electrification could not be justified. [113631]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 10 February 2000]:* The Study which investigated the possibility of electrifying the North Wales main line was produced by Virgin trains to the Franchising Director in March 1998. The Study was produced on a commercial in confidence basis and I am therefore unable to place a copy in the Library.

Homeowners

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* homeowners and *(b)* ethnic minority homeowners there were in Britain in each year since 1990. [113885]

Mr. Raynsford: The table shows estimates from the Labour Force Survey of *(a)* the total number of homeowner households; and *(b)* the number of homeowner households headed by a member of an ethnic minority, in Britain in each year since 1990.

Homeowner and ethnic minority homeowner households in Great Britain: 1990–99

Thousand

	All home owning household	*Home owning households with ethnic minority head of household*
1990	14,725	479
1991	15,024	538
1992	15,191	555
1993	15,408	539
1994	15,660	520
1995	15,919	536
1996	15,625	530
1997	16,212	594
1998	16,385	635
1999	16,730	648

Notes:

1. Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sampling variability
2. Data shown are for the Spring quarter (March-May) of each year

Blight Notices

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he intends to take to amend the eligibility of small business owners to serve blight notices in the light of the 2000 non-domestic rating revaluation; and if he will make a statement. [114488]

Mr. Raynsford: The Town and Country Planning (Blight Provisions) (England) Order, laid today, will raise from £18,000 to £24,600 the annual rateable value limit at or below which businesses are eligible to serve a blight notice. The change, which will come into effect on 1 April 2000, means that small businesses will not be disadvantaged when the year 2000 non-domestic rate revaluation comes into effect on the same date.

The new threshold also applies to businesses claiming compensation for loss of value under Part I of the Land Compensation Act 1973 when their premises are affected by physical factors such as noise, vibration, fumes and artificial lighting from the use of new or altered public works such as highways and aerodromes.

This threshold also applies under the 1973 Act to enable proprietors aged 60 or over to claim disturbance compensation on the basis of the total extinguishment of their business when they are subject to a compulsory purchase order. This allows claimants of that age to retire if they do not want to re-establish their business elsewhere.

Thameslink 2000

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the public inquiry into Railtrack's applications for orders under the Transport and Works Act 1992 in respect of Thameslink 2000 will commence. [114491]

Mr. Hill: The public inquiry will start on Tuesday 27 June 2000 at 10 a.m. at Bankside House, London School of Economics, 24 Sumner Street, London SE1 9JA. There will be a pre-inquiry meeting to discuss practical arrangements for the inquiry on Monday 10 April at 2 pm at the same venue. The inspector appointed to conduct the inquiry is Mr. D. Ward Bsc. CEng. MICE FIHT. The inquiry will also consider Railtrack's application for various listed building and conservation area consents required for the scheme. All persons who have made representations to the Secretary of State about Thameslink 2000 will be informed of these arrangements.

Port Marine Operations

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made with the development of a safety code for port marine operations; and if he will make a statement. [114492]

Mr. Hill: The Port Marine Safety Code is being published on Monday and copies will be placed in the Library of the House. The Code represents an important waypoint in the development with all parties in the ports and shipping industry of an agreed national standard for the discharge by harbour authorities of their legal functions relating to marine safety. It applies to port marine operations the well-established principles of risk assessment and safety management systems. It establishes a measure by which harbour authorities can be accountable for the legal powers and duties which they have to run their harbours safely. We are asking all harbour authorities with these obligations, to prepare plans to implement the Code by the end of 2001. In the meantime, work will continue with the industry to develop competence standards for all port marine professionals, and associated qualifications. We are also supporting the development of a guide to good practice on port marine operations, which we hope will be completed this year.

Disabled Motorists

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will introduce the new European model parking badge for disabled motorists. [114549]

Mr. Hill: The Regulations have been laid before Parliament today.

We aim to phase in the new parking badge over three years from 1 April 2000 as existing badges come up for renewal and as new applications are processed. It is, of course, only the design of the badge which is affected. The eligibility criteria and the concessions provided under the parking scheme will be unchanged.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Family Planning Services

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he has taken to promote access to family planning services; and if he will make a statement. [113682]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* Family planning services are provided in community and hospital settings throughout Northern Ireland. To improve access provision has also been made for evening and weekend services and for services which meet the needs of particular groups such as young people. In addition 95 per cent. if General Practitioners provide family planning services.

Paper and Timber Products

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he has taken to ensure that paper and timber products purchased by his Department come from a sustainable source. [110155]

Mr. Ingram: The Government Purchasing Agency follows the guidance issued by the Secretary of State in his Policy Statement on Green Housekeeping, which closely follows the model policy statement.

The Government Purchasing Agency has established contracts for the purchase of paper and timber products on behalf of the NICS, Departments, their Agencies and NDPB's.

The contracts require that where virgin pulp is used it must come from sustainably managed woodlands.

More guidance is available to buyers from the DETR's Green Guide for Buyers, which is available to all our staff on the Internet.

The Agency also issues to all our tenderers, the booklet "Selling to Government—A Green Guide for Suppliers of Goods and Services to the Northern Ireland Civil Service" which sets out the requirements for paper and wood products in more detail.

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will ensure that paper and timber products purchased by his Department are independently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as coming from a sustainable source. [110156]

Mr. Ingram: The FSC label is accepted by buyers as demonstrating that timber and timber products have come from sustainably managed sources. However, it is not practicable to require that all paper and timber products purchased by the Department are independently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council because this might discriminate against any equally valid schemes and therefore be against procurement rules.

Specifying just the FSC label might also result in us failing to meet all our requirements as currently only a tiny percentage of timber products are currently FSC certified. That is why the Department's policy statement for greening its operations suggests that evidence of sustainability might take the form of a certificate issued under a credible, preferably independent, verification scheme; or other documents which demonstrate the operation of an environmental management system incorporating forest management criteria that conform with internationally recognised principles such as the Helsinki Guidelines.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113967]

Mr. Lock: My Department did not use any couriers to distribute news releases over the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. LCD press notices are distributed to the media by e-mail, fax and post. LCD press notices for matters other than judicial appointments are placed on the Central Office of Information's (COI) press notice website and are given wide electronic distribution by the news distribution service which is also managed by the COI.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113993]

Mr. Lock: Over the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 my Department issued 1,062 press notices. Targeted distribution relies on the subject and content of each specific press release. Provision of the distribution lists for all press notices issued over the period could only be undertaken at disproportionate cost.

All LCD press notices for matters other than judicial appointments are placed on the Central Office of Information's (COI) press notice website and are given wide electronic distribution by the news distribution service which is also managed by the COI.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent assessment he has made of the distribution of lottery funding across the regions of the United Kingdom. [113642]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has directed the Lottery distributors to ensure that all parts of the country have access to funding. My Department regularly monitors the distribution of funding to the regions and to areas of economic and social deprivation and it is clear that some areas have to date benefited less than others. My Department and the Lottery distributors have commissioned joint research into the impact of the National Lottery on coalfield areas which I expect to hold lessons for these and others areas of low take-up.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the total Lottery funding made available to the English Sports Council in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and what is the estimated total Lottery funding to be made available to Sport England in each of the years (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01 and (iii) 2001–02. [113770]

Kate Hoey: The total amount of Lottery proceeds (including interest) allocated to the English Sports Council for 1997–98 and 1998–99 was:

£ million

Year	*Amount of lottery proceeds*
1997–98	307
1998–99	255

The total Lottery proceeds (including interest) to be allocated to Sport England for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 have been estimated using the Lottery income scenarios which the Department sent to Distributing Bodies in October.

Million

Year	*Forecast income*
1999–2000	£206-£211
2000–01	£185-£221
2001–02	£170-£226

The forecast for 1999–2000 was calculated by adding the share of Lottery proceeds allocated to Sport England from 1 April 1999 to the end of January 2000 to estimates for February and March 2000 based on the Lottery income forecast scenarios.

Museum Funding

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to alter the funding arrangements for national museums. [114117]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have no such plans.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113971]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Department has not used outside couriers to distribute news releases in that period.

The Parliamentary Lobby is provided with copies of news releases by the Department's messengers. The cost of this exercise cannot be separately estimated.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113998]

Mr. Chris Smith: News releases are routinely sent to the Press Association (and if relevant PA Sport), national daily and Sunday newspapers, relevant BBC and ITN outlets, Sky News and IRN.

All releases are also given to the COI's News Distribution Service, which in turn supplies a copy to the Parliamentary Online Information Service (POLIS), which is available on-line to all hon. Members.

If releases have a regional angle, copies are either sent direct to local papers and broadcasters, or distributed by the relevant COI regional office. Further distribution depends on the particular news release and we could not, without disproportionate cost, provide a comprehensive list of bodies who have received one or more releases during the period in question.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the names of unpaid creditors of the New Millennium Experience Company, together with the amount owed in each case and the dates of the relevant invoices; and if he will make a statement. [113510]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The amount owed to suppliers by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is commercially confidential. Disclosure of such information would be in breach of contractual terms between NMEC and the third party.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many calls have been received by the Minimum Wage Hotline *(a)* in his Department's administrative region containing Paisley, *(b)* in Scotland and *(c)* nationally; and what action he is taking to publicise the existence of the service. [113552]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* Nationally, as at 7 March, the National Minimum Wage helpline had received over 157,000 calls. Information on the total number of calls received by the helpline is not broken down by region. Some calls are anonymous and addresses are not taken. Others are simple inquiries where it would not be appropriate to request such information.

The helpline telephone number (0845 6000 678) is given in all National Minimum Wage literature and publicity. Last spring we spent £5 million publicising the minimum wage which included national TV coverage and gave details of the rates and confidential helpline number.

There will be further publicity in advance of the youth rate increase on 1 June, and the main rate increase on 1 October, and this will also feature the helpline number prominently.

Utilities Bill

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when consultation took place with consumer groups between 20 January and 2 March on the decision to remove the provisions concerning telecommunications and water industries from the Utilities Bill; and what responses were received; [113570]

(2) which consumer groups were consulted on the decision to remove the provisions concerning telecommunications and water industries from the Utilities Bill between 20 January and 2 March. [113571]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* Both the National Consumer Council and the Consumers Association made representations to the Department.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list *(a)* the meetings and contacts his Department has had with the telecommunications industry in connection with the Utilities Bill between 20 January and 2 March, *(b)* the telecommunications companies involved and *(c)* the occasions on which Ministers from his Department attended; [113568]

(2) what representations his Department received on behalf of the telecommunications industries between 20 January and 2 March in connection with the Utilities Bill; and if he will list the telecommunications companies involved. [113569]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* A number of letter have been received from the Other Licensed Operators (OLO) group and from individual companies including BT. The OLO group comprises Atlantic Telecom, Eurobell, Kingston Group, ntl, Telewest, COLT, Cable and Wireless, Energis, GTS, Global Crossing, Global One, Hermes, MCI/Worldcom, Norweb Telecom, Thus, Teleglobe, Telia, Telinco, Telstra, Viatel, Dolphin, One2One, Orange and Vodaphone.

Officials of the DTI met the OLO group on 15 February for a regular liaison meeting and the Utilities Bill was discussed. No DTI Ministers attended.

Regional Initiatives

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which of his Department's regional initiatives will come under the remit of the new unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions. [113157]

Mr. Caborn: The work of the Government Offices for the Regions on behalf of the DTI will come under the remit of the new unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113986]

Mr. Byers: All DTI News Releases are distributed to the media through the Central Office of Information. The COI's News Distribution Service distributes news releases electronically to all the main national and regional newspapers, news agencies and to broadcasting organisations. The COI distribute News Releases via fax and mail to other media organisations who have asked to receive DTI News Releases. The COI's Regional Offices also distribute DTI News Releases via fax and mail to their local media organisations. All DTI News Releases are available on the Internet.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113965]

Mr. Byers: Between 2 May 1997 and 29 February 2000 the DTI has used no couriers to distribute news releases. All DTI News Releases are distributed to the media through the Central Office of Information.

Cash Terminals

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assurances have been given by Barclays and other banks committed to installing cash terminals in branch post offices as regards *(a)* access and *(b)* charges for customers belonging to banks and mutuals which do not have the same outlets; and what impact the decision of the LINK group of banks to allow ATM charging will have on the assurances. [113179]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend considers that the imposition of such charges will impact disproportionately on the socially excluded and those in rural areas. People on fixed budgets, particularly pensioners and the unemployed, should not be charged £2.50 a time to withdraw small amounts of cash. If charges are to be introduced, we will ensure that consumers know what they are before they proceed with a transaction. If the banks will not do this voluntarily, my right hon. Friend has powers under the Prices Act 1974 to compel them.

Under the new Competition Act 1998, the Director General of Fair Trading can investigate whether the LINK agreement on surcharges is in any way anti-competitive and he now has powers to impose severe penalties for infringements of the prohibitions of the Act.

I understand that the Post Office does not have a commercial agreement with Barclays regarding the installation of cash machines in post offices. Contract arrangement with the proposed partners have not yet been finalised.

No assurances have been provided by potential partners, nor have they indicated yet how they will react to the LINK decision on charging which is under review. Access and charging arrangements will, in the first instance, be commercial matters for the Post Office and its partners.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the cost to his Department of the survey on international price comparisons. [111638]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The cost was £88,066 (including VAT).

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the cost of the AC Nielsen survey into international price comparisons; and what products were included in the survey. [114075]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* The cost was £88,066 (including VAT). The report contains a complete list of items for which comparisons were made. The report is available from the Library of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the draft regulations on stakeholder pensions will be issued for consultation. [114550]

Mr. Rooker: The stakeholder pensions draft regulations have been issued today for consultation.

Copies of "Stakeholder pensions—Consultation on Draft Regulations" have been placed in the Library and the Vote Office.

Responses to last year's series of consultation papers on stakeholder pensions have been summarised and copies of "Stakeholder pensions—summary of responses to the government proposals" are also available in the Library and Vote Office.

Departmental Solicitors

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the pilot scheme giving local authorities access to departmental solicitors. [114086]

Angela Eagle: The pilot scheme giving local authorities access to Departmental solicitors has been extended and cases are still being referred. The pilot will be assessed when all the information is received.

Order Books (Bar Coding)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list the (i) areas in which pilots of barcoded orderbooks and giros have taken place, (ii) duration of each pilot and (iii) estimated savings from each pilot; [113461]

(2) what is the monetary value of fraud involving barcoded order books to date; [113626]

(3) what are the savings to date from the barcoding of order books in each of the pilot areas; [113627]

(4) if he will list *(a)* the pilot areas for the barcoding of order books and *(b)* the duration of each of the pilots. [113628]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking about barcoded order books.

Barcoding of Order Books was first used for the Electronic Stop Notice System (ESNS) for post offices within the area of London bounded by the M25. Initially introduced in 1992 in 17 post offices, this was expanded to 180 post offices in 1994 and then to 1460 post offices in April 1995 and has been in continuous operation since.

Following the introduction of ESNS, the order Book Control Service (OBCS) has been piloted for use in a number of areas. However, you will appreciate that to divulge the exact areas involved could enable fraudsters to avoid detection.

Implementation of OBCS, which uses the equipment installed by the Post Office as part of its automation under the Horizon Project, began in May 1997 when the system was installed in 204 "live trial" post offices. A further 95 posts offices went live within these areas in May 1999, extending the "live trial" to 299 post offices. These areas are continuing to use OBCS.

These live trials are intended to test the equipment and processes involved, but were not set up to measure fraud savings. No information is available for individual pilots or of the value of fraud involving barcoded order books.

There have been no pilots of barcoded girocheques.

I hope this is helpful.

Child Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what checks are routinely made on child benefit claimants to ensure their children are in full-time education; and if he will make a statement on planned reforms in this area. [113816]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 9 March 2000.

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about what checks are routinely made on child benefit claimants to ensure their children are in full-time education; and if he will make a statement on planned reforms in this area.

When a child reaches age 15 the Child Benefit Centre write and ask the parent or guardian to confirm that the child will be continuing their education after age 16. They write again when the child turns 17 years old asking for confirmation of continuing full time education.

In addition, parents or guardians of all children are reminded of the need to report changes, including leaving full-time education, whenever, their award is changed or reviewed. In practice, this is at least once a year.

In addition to these routine checks, the Benefits Agency is currently checking entitlement to Child Benefit in a random selection of cases involving 16 to 19 year old children. This exercise will be completed at the end of March 2000. The findings will be used to inform decisions on measures to prevent fraud in cases where Child Benefit continues to be claimed for a person who has left full-time education.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if staff calculating benefit entitlement at the Benefits Agency will be able to electronically access information held by the Inland Revenue on each of the tax credits. [113623]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my right hon Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if staff calculating benefit entitlement at the Benefits Agency will be able to electronically access information held by the Inland Revenue on each of the tax credits.

Relevant information held by the Inland Revenue Tax Credit Office can be accessed electronically by Benefits Agency staff to enable them to accurately calculate benefit entitlement.

There is a mechanism which allows one computer system to access the enquiry dialogues of another. This enables staff within the BA to access the enquiry dialogues of the Tax Credit system and vice versa.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to improve the medical expertise of the fraud investigators in each of his Department's agencies which execute counter-fraud work. [113815]

Mr. Rooker: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what plans he has to improve the medical expertise of the fraud investigators in each of his Department's agencies which execute counter-fraud work.

Department of Social Security fraud investigators are trained to a high standard, ensuring all aspects of investigation are carried out professionally.

At present there is no specific training aimed at improving a fraud officer's medical expertise, neither are there any plans to provide any as fraud officers are not tasked with gathering medical information. Their role is to establish whether the customer's activities are consistent with the circumstances stated in their claim. If the claim involves medical decisions, the fraud officer's role is to establish whether the customer's current activities are consistent with the stated mobility, care needs or incapacity as documented in their claim. They do this by recording information gathered from observation of, and interviews with the customer. Photographic and video evidence is often gathered in these investigations.

Fraud officers never take decisions on benefit entitlement. Their role is to gather evidence and pass it to the appropriate District Manager. They never make medical decisions and cannot influence the decision making process. The District Manager may choose to pass the case on to an independent "lay decision maker" who can seek medical evidence from a General Practitioner, consultant or hospital. They may also request examination by an Examining Medical Practitioner or seek advice from the provider of Medical Services to the Benefits Agency (Sema Group).

I hope this is helpful.

Housing Benefit

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many representations he has received on implementation by local authorities of the Housing Benefit Verification Framework. [113651]

Angela Eagle: The Department receives inquiries and comments from a range of sources including individual local authorities, representative organisations, and individuals through correspondence, telephone calls, seminars, working groups and meetings. It is therefore not possible to place a number on the representations we have received about the Verification Framework (VF).

We have monitored the live running of the VF from its launch and have already made several improvements to the VF in the light of operational experience. We will continue to monitor the VF and will consider further improvements when we have analysed information from the range of sources available, including any representations we may receive.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact of implementation of the Housing Benefit Verification Framework on the level of rent arrears for private sector landlords, voluntary housing organisations and housing associations which provide accommodation for the vulnerable and socially excluded. [113649]

Angela Eagle: The day-to-day administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit is the responsibility of local authorities. We are already working towards driving forward improvements in the benefit services authorities provide to claimants and their landlords.

From experience gained through the live running of the Verification Framework (VF) we have made several improvements to it. For example, the changes we have made to identity requirements will help vulnerable groups, particularly hostel dwellers and providers. We are evaluating the VF and will continue to learn lessons from its operation.

The Best Value regime, which will be introduced from April, is a key part of the modernisation of local government and one of the main ways that we will be able to measure LA achievements and secure a programme of continuous improvement in the delivery of Housing Benefit (HB). Best Value performance indicators for HB administration will include the key areas of speed and accuracy so that all claims can be decided speedily and those claiming benefit get the right amount first time round.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what powers are available to him to require local authorities to participate in *(a)* the Area Benefit Review of Housing Benefit and *(b)* the Housing Benefit Review. [114004]

Angela Eagle: There is no explicit legislative power to require local authorities to participate in exercises to measure levels of fraud and error in Housing Benefit. Currently 195 Local Authorities participate in the measurement of fraud in Non-Standard Housing Benefit through the Benefits Agency's programme of Area Benefit Reviews.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the Area Benefit Review of Housing Benefit will include a representative sample of claims for people who do not claim either *(a)* income support or *(b)* jobseekers' allowance. [113999]

Angela Eagle: The exercise to measure levels of fraud and error in Housing Benefit through the Benefits Agency's Area Benefit Review programme is currently

restricted to the two thirds of Housing Benefit cases where benefit is paid with Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Support).

Our aim is also to measure levels of fraud and error in the remaining third of the Housing Benefit caseload and work is proceeding on the design of a suitable mechanism.

Fraud and Error

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the savings in fraud and error in *(a)* jobseeker's allowance and *(b)* income support if those area directorates with above average levels of fraud and error reduced fraud and error to the current average; and if the achievement of such a reduction by March 2002 would fulfil the relevant departmental public service agreement. [114000]

Mr. Rooker: Overpayments in Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support would be reduced by £61 million and £75 million a year respectively, if Area Directorates with higher than average levels of overpayment were to reduce them to the present average level. Assuming that expenditure levels remained constant, this would meet our Public Service Agreement target of a 10 per cent. reduction in losses in these benefits.

It is in the nature of an average of a set of values that the set will contain some values above the average. Nevertheless, we are paying close attention to how those areas with higher than average losses are planning to reduce them.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113991]

Mr. Rooker: All national, regional and local newspapers and media bodies to which the Department sent news releases between 2 May 1997 and 29 February 2000 are distributed by the Central Office of Information (COI) on behalf of the Department's Headquarters and Agencies. All addresses are listed in the COI New Distribution Service list. A copy of this has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

The list contains details of organisations to which news releases are faxed and those which are affected by electronic transfer.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113981]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's Headquarters and Agency Press Offices do not use couriers to distribute news releases.

Benefit Claims

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women who are not claiming the benefits to which they are entitled in the (i) constituency of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East, (ii) Teesside Region, (iii) Northern Region and (iv) United Kingdom. [114120]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimated numbers not claiming income-related benefits, Great Britain 1997–98

Benefit	*Numbers entitled and not claiming*	*Percentage of those entitled and not claiming who were:* *Single men*	*Single women*	*Couples*
Income Support	640,000 to 1,150,000	25	58	17
Housing Benefit	0 to 420,000	23	43	35
Council Tax Benefit	880,000 to 1,630,000	18	40	42

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000 and nearest percentage point.
2. Figures may not add exactly due to rounding.
3. Figures are based on data from the Family Resources Survey, 1997–98.
4. Figures are subject to sampling error, response biases and reporting errors.
5. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency or sub-regional levels. The scope for regional estimates will be kept under review; no figures are currently available.

Benefits (Paisley)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Paisley, South constituency are in receipt of *(a)* Jobseeker's Allowance and *(b)* Incapacity Benefit. [113175]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Douglas Alexander, dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking how many people in Paisley South constituency are in receipt of (a) Jobseekers Allowance and (b) Incapacity Benefit.

As at August 1999 there were 2,392 Jobseekers Allowance customers and 3,600 Incapacity Benefit customers in Paisley South Parliamentary constituency.

I hope this is helpful.

Benefits Agency Leaflets

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when Benefits Agency leaflet GL24 superseded leaflet NI246. [113080]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking when the Benefits Agency (BA) leaflet GL24 superseded leaflet NI246.

Leaflet NI246, "How to Appeal", is appropriate to appeals being made under the old adjudication system. Leaflet GL24, "If You Think Our Decision Is Wrong", applies to the new rules on decision making and appeals (DMA). These rules were introduced progressively from June through to November 1999. The table attached shows when benefits changed to the DMA procedures.

Both leaflets are currently in circulation, however, NI246 is no longer produced and should only be available on request by those customers who have appeals outstanding under the old regulations.

I hope this is helpful.

Date changed to DMA	*Benefit*
1 June 1999	Child Support
5 July 1999	Child Benefit Guardians Allowance Industrial Injuries Benefit
6 September 1999	Retirement Pension Widows Benefit Incapacity Benefit Severe Disablement Allowance Maternity Allowance
5 October 1999	Working Families Tax Credit Disabled Persons Tax Credit
18 October 1999	Jobseekers Allowance Disability Living Allowance Attendance Allowance Invalid Care Allowance
29 November 1999	Income Support Social Fund

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Winter Fuel Payments were not made before Christmas *(a)* for the UK and *(b)* by region. [113341]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

All 1999–2000 Winter Fuel Payments were issued to eligible customers by three routes direct to home address, by automated credit transfer into a bank account or to the Post Office. All payments were dispatched by Royal Mail to customers by Christmas 1999.

Approximately 85,000 payments were not collected for a variety of reasons and were returned by the Post Offices. Subsequently, these were investigated and payments made as necessary.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number of claimants and *(b)* the cost of Cold Weather Payments in Paisley, South constituency in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999. [113480]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Social Fund is a matter for Peter Mathison the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Douglas Alexander, dated 9 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about what estimate he has made of (a) the number of claimants and (b) the cost of cold weather payments in Paisley South constituency in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999.

Cold Weather Payments (CWPs) are triggered when the average temperature is recorded as, or is forecast to be, 0°C or below over seven consecutive days for a weather station area. Temperature information is collected through a network of 72 Met Office weather stations. Each weather station covers specified postcode districts.

The information is not available in the requested format. This is because data concerning CWPs is collected by weather station areas. These areas do not correspond to Benefits Agency district or constituency boundaries. The attached table details the total estimated number of recipients and estimated total cost of CWPs during 1996 to 1999 for the weather stations serving the constituency area. However, it should be noted that the large Bishopton weather station area includes other constituencies as well as Paisley South.

I hope this is helpful.

Appendix One

From this winter (1999/00) the postcodes within the Paisley South constituency were linked to Bishopton weather station. Prior to this winter, the constituency was served by Abbotsinch (Glasgow Airport) weather station, which closed last year. Schedule 1 of the Social Fund Cold Weather Payments (General) Amendment Regulations 1999, details the post codes covered by the Bishopton weather station.

Number of estimated qualifying recipients for Bishopton/Abbotsinch weather stations and estimated total cost of Cold Weather Payments (CWP)

Year	*Estimated qualifiers*	*Number of triggers*	*Total cost £*
1995–96[1]	182,660	3	4,657,830
1996–97[1]	170,835	2	2,904,195
1997–98[1]	169,399	0	0.00
1998–99[1]	165,882	0	0.00
1999–2000	165,060	0	0.00

[1] These years were covered by Abbotsinch weather station

Notes:

1. Temperatures are monitored between 1 November and 31 March, the following year
2. The estimated cost has been calculated by multiplying the number of triggers by the number of estimated qualifiers which is then multiplied by the cost per CWP (£8.50).

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Bullying

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate how many school pupils committed suicide as a result of homophobic bullying in each of the last five years. [112913]

Jacqui Smith: There is no information collected centrally on which to base such an estimate.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many unemployed recipients of jobseeker's allowance or income support have been sanctioned in each month since May 1992, aged *(a)* 18 to 24 and *(b)* 25 and over. [112752]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Sanctions were introduced in October 1996 with Jobseeker's Allowance, so sanctions information is only available from that time. Furthermore, statistics on the number and types of decisions given by Employment Service Officers on labour market questions are recorded on a quarterly rather than monthly basis, and they are not broken down into age groups.

The total numbers of sanctions imposed on claims to Jobseeker's Allowance in each quarter since the introduction of sanctions in October 1996 are:

Quarter ending	*Sanctions imposed*
31 December 1996	21,827
31 March 1997	46,192
30 June 1997	52,738
30 September 1997	53,686
31 December 1997	49,960
31 March 1998	47,105
30 June 1998	37,802
30 September 1998	39,020
31 December 1998	40,107
31 March 1999	44,000
30 June 1999	41,556
30 September 1999	38,346

Statistics on the numbers of sanctions and other decisions given by Employment Service Officers are published in a quarterly summary, the "Analysis of Sector Decision Making" (formerly known as the "Analysis of Adjudication Officers' Decisions"), copies of which are held in the Library. The latest quarter for which statistics have been published is the quarter ending 30 September 1999.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many unemployed recipients of jobseeker's allowance or income support have been sanctioned in each of the last five financial years, aged *(a)* 18 to 24 and *(b)* over 24. [112753]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* I must firstly explain that sanctions were introduced in October 1996 with Jobseeker's Allowance, so sanctions information is only available from that time. Furthermore, statistics on the number and types of decisions given by Employment Service Officers on labour market questions are not broken down into age groups.

The total numbers of sanctions imposed on claims to Jobseeker's Allowance in each operational year since the introduction of sanctions in October 1996 are:

Year ending	*Sanctions imposed*
31 March 1997	68,019
31 March 1998	203,489
31 March 1999	160,929

Statistics on the numbers of sanctions and other decisions given by Employment Service Officers are published in a quarterly summary, the "Analysis of Sector Decision Making" (formerly known as the "Analysis of Adjudication Officers' Decisions"), copies of which are held in the Library. The latest quarter for which statistics have been published is the quarter ending 30 September 1999.

Job Creation (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many new jobs have been created since 1 May 1997 in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [110130]

Ms Jowell: The information is shown in the table.

	Employment level (Thousand)	*Employment rate (Percentage)*
Shropshire		
March-May 1997	186	74.0
March-May 1999	218	78.4
September-November 1997	200	73.8
September-November 1999	222	78.3
Shrewsbury and Atcham local authority district		
March-May 1997	48	78.9
March-May 1999	48	77.6
September-November 1997	49	70.8
September-November 1999	52	81.1

As these figures are seasonally unadjusted, it is only appropriate to make comparisons over whole years. In the two years to the latest figures (September-November 1999) the number of people in employment has risen by 22,000 in Shropshire and by 3,000 in Shrewsbury and Atcham. In the two years from March-May 1997, the number in employment rose by 32,000 in Shropshire and was unchanged in Shrewsbury and Atcham.

The Labour Force Survey is a sample survey, and sampling variation is greater the smaller the estimate; all the changes shown here are well within sampling variation.

Racism

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those local education authorities in England that have adopted action plans to tackle institutional racism since publication of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry report; what those action plans propose; and what action those local education authorities have undertaken to implement those plans. [111106]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Our "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" guidance gives advice to Local Education Authorities; schools and governors about dealing with racial incidents in schools. Local Education Authorities should be able to provide assistance to schools dealing with racial harassment and bullying, within the guidelines we have issued. It is for Local Education Authorities to decide how best to support schools in addressing racism, without imposing additional burdens on them. Information on the action taken by Local Education Authorities to help schools deal with racism is not held centrally.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's Action Plan and first Annual Report set out what the Government have achieved, and action yet to be taken across the public services, to respond to the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report. In addition, this Department published a Memorandum on its response to the three recommendations of Inquiry Report which relate to education. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those local education authorities in England that have established strategies for working with the police in relation to racist incidents committed against or by pupils and students of the LEA. [110368]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* Our "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" guidance, issued in July 1999, makes clear that all Local Education Authorities should receive annual information from school governing bodies on the pattern and frequency of racist incidents in schools. It is for Local Education Authorities to decide how best to develop strategies to support schools, pupils and students in addressing racism, in the light of the information they receive each year. This would include joint working with local police forces, where this is appropriate.

British Ski Instructors in France

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the obstacles to employment of British ski instructors in France; and if he will make a statement. [113918]

Mr. Wicks: No representations have been received this skiing season. My officials are continuing to work closely with the British Association of Snowsport Instructors (BASI) and the European Commission on this matter.

TREASURY

Employment Statistics

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* women aged 55 to 60 years and *(b)* men aged 60 to 65 years were in full-time employment in the Greater London area on 1 February. [113834]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 10 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question on older people in full-time employment in Greater London on 1 February 2000. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the government's main source of labour market data on individuals. The most recent data available from the LFS is for autumn (September to November) 1999. In this quarter, the LFS estimated the number of women aged 55 to 59 in full-time employment in London as 51,000. During the same period, the number of men in full-time employment aged 60 to 64 in London was also 51,000.

People aged 16 or over are classed as in employment by the LFS if they have done at least one hour of paid work (as an employee or self-employed) in the week prior to their LFS interview or if they have a job that they are temporarily away from. People who do unpaid work in a family business and people on Government supported training and employment programmes are also included according to the International Labour Organisation convention.

The definition of whether somebody is working full or part-time is based on the respondent's self assessment.

Working Families Tax Credit

Ms Buck: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what has been the average value of the child care component of the Working Families Tax Credit for *(a)* England and *(b)* each region; [110546]

(2) if he will estimate what percentage of average actual child care costs are met by the child care component of the Working Families Tax Credit in *(a)* England and *(b)* each region. [110547]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates for the average childcare tax credit and the percentage of child care costs that this represents within awards of the Working Families Tax Credit made by the end of January 2000 are given in the table. The national average childcare tax credit at £31 is 40 per cent. higher than the average amount of extra Family Credit awarded for child care charges at the end of August 1999 at £22.

Government Office Region	*Average childcare tax credit*[1] *(£)*	*Percentage of actual child care costs*
United Kingdom	31	66
England	32	66
North East	32	67
North West	29	65
Yorkshire and the Humber	30	66
East Midlands	32	66
West Midlands	30	66
East of England	32	66
London	39	64
South East	32	65
South West	29	66
Wales	29	67
Scotland	28	68
Northern Ireland	35	66

[1] Calculated as the extra amount of Working Families Tax Credit arising from the Childcare Tax Credit for families with eligible child care costs

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been spent to date on the Childcare Tax Credit of the Working Families Tax Credit; and what is his latest estimate of expenditure in *(a)* this financial year and *(b)* in each of the next two financial years. [108761]

Dawn Primarolo: The extra amounts of Working Families Tax Credit arising from the Childcare Tax Credit in awards made by the end of January 2000 will result in expenditure of about £85 million during the 26 week period of award. It is estimated that for 2000–01, the first full year of the credit, the extra expenditure due to the Childcare Tax Credits will be about £275 million. An estimate for 2001–02 is not available.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many parents are claiming the Childcare Tax Credit in respect of children *(a)* aged under eight years and *(b)* over eight years; and what is the average payment per (i) family and (ii) child. [108760]

Dawn Primarolo: The ages of children relating to the Childcare Tax Credits in the Working Families Tax Credit are not readily available. An analysis based on the ages of all children in families receiving the Childcare Tax Credit is given in the table. These figures are for awards of the Working Families Tax Credit made by the end of January 2000.

Family composition	*Number of families with Childcare Tax Credit*
All children aged under 8	47,500
All children aged 8 or over	9,500
At least one child under 8 and at least one child aged 8 or over	17,000
Total	74,000

Families in receipt of the Childcare Tax Credit received on average an extra £44.50 per week as a result of this credit, or £32.20 per week per child.

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many families in Amber Valley are *(a)* eligible to claim and *(b)* are claiming ChildCare Tax Credit; and how many children are the subject of such claims; [109044]

(2) what estimate he has made of the average amount by which the incomes of families in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit in Amber Valley have changed as a result of being in receipt of that tax credit; [109043]

(3) how many families in Amber Valley are receiving Working Families Tax Credit who were not previously eligible for Family Credit; [109042]

(4) how many families in Amber Valley have benefited from the Working Families Tax Credit. [109041]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that 1,200 families in Amber Valley have been awarded the Working Families Tax Credit by the end of January 2000, receiving on average around £23 a week more than they would on Family Credit. A more detailed breakdown of these awards is not available because of the small size.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is his latest estimate of the take-up of the Childcare Tax Credit of the Working Families Tax Credit; [108752]

(2) how many families have so far received the Childcare Tax Credit of the Working Families Tax Credit; and how many he estimates will receive in *(a)* the course of this financial year and *(b)* in each of the next two financial years. [108763]

Dawn Primarolo: Within awards of the Working Families Tax Credit made by the end of January 2000 there were about 74,000 families in receipt of the Childcare Tax Credit. It is estimated that this figure will rise to about 125,000 for 2000–01, the first full year of the credit. An estimate for 2001–02 is not available.

Ms Buck: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the actual full-time equivalent child care costs of recipients of the child care tax credit are being met on average through the credit in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* each region. [111271]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates given are for couples who both work at least 30 hours a week and lone parents working at least 30 hours a week. These represent the average childcare tax credit within awards of the Working Families Tax Credit made by the end of January 2000, expressed as a percentage of child care costs.

Government Office Region	*Average childcare tax credit [1] as percentage of actual child care costs*
United Kingdom	64
England and Wales	64
North East	65
North West	65
Yorkshire and the Humber	65
East Midlands	65
West Midlands	66
East of England	66
London	62
South East	62
South West	63
Wales	67
Scotland	66
Northern Ireland	65

[1] Calculated as the extra amount of Working Families Tax Credit arising from the Childcare Tax Credit for families with eligible child care costs.

Parliamentary Questions

Ms Buck: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the questions tabled by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North on 14 and 15 February (ref. 110547 and 111271) relating to child care costs. [113926]

Dawn Primarolo: I have already done so.

Taxation

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the effect on the net income of each decile group of *(a)* benefit units and *(b)* households, of increasing the personal tax allowance to £10,000 per annum for all taxpayers; and if he will estimate the cost of such a policy. [110220]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated cost of increasing the personal tax allowance to £10,000 per annum for all taxpayers in 2000–01 is estimated to be £27½ billion in the full year. The table shows estimated average gains in net income.

Average gain in net income (£ per week) of gainers from increasing the personal tax allowance to £10,000 per annum for all taxpayers

Decile	*Benefit unit income*	*Household income*
Lowest	11	10
2nd	6	8
3rd	8	10
4th	12	17
5th	18	22
6th	23	28
7th	27	33
8th	31	38
9th	36	42
Highest	46	50

Notes:
1. The revenue effect is based on the 1997–98 Survey of Personal Income data projected to 2000–01 and is consistent with the November 1999 pre-Budget Report.
2. Deciles are defined in terms of equivalised net income on a benefit unit and household net income basis using the McClements scale; decile boundaries are higher for households than benefit units.

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many employers make national insurance contributions in each of the postal districts in Birkenhead. [113188]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* I regret that the information requested is not available. Data are not recorded on that basis.

Petroleum Products Smuggling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many successful prosecutions there were in 1998 and 1999 for smuggling petroleum products into Northern Ireland; and what estimate he has made of the tonnage smuggled. [113537]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Customs have made the following successful prosecutions for smuggling petroleum products into Northern Ireland.

Financial year	*Number*
1998–99	12
1999–2000[1]	11

[1] April to February

No estimate of the tonnage smuggled has been made.

Red Diesel

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from Her Majesty's Customs and Excise requesting increased funding to improve enforcement of regulations pertaining to the use of red diesel. [113606]

Mr. Timms: The question of funding for Customs and Excise for this and the Department's other responsibilities will be considered as part of the Spending Review 2000.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the efficacy of arrangements for enforcing the regulations pertaining to the use of red diesel. [113612]

Mr. Timms: Enforcing the regulations on the use of red diesel is a matter for Her Majesty's Customs and Excise. The efficacy of enforcement arrangements is subject to continuous assessment by Customs.

EU Regional Funds

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the gross budgetary cost to the Exchequer of the Treasury's funding matching available Objective 1 funding; how much EU funding would be unlocked each year over the planning period; and what the cost to UK public funds would be after taking account of the subsequent impact on the British budget rebate. [113607]

Mr. Andrew Smith: European Structural Funding is used alongside, and matched by, money already provided at the national and local level. It is a matter for regional partners to identify match funding from existing sources, both private and public. There are a wide range of existing Government programmes from which match funding can be drawn.

The total allocation to the new UK Objective 1 programmes for 2000–06 is around 4.7 billion euros. The annual allocations profile is likely to be broadly flat. It is not yet possible to determine what the resulting annual expenditure profile will be.

The effect of the UK abatement is, broadly, to refund around two thirds of the difference between the UK's gross contributions to and receipts from the EC Budget. The size of the abatement for a particular year can only be determined once overall EC expenditure for that year is known. Latest forecasts for the UK's net contributions to the EC Budget up to 2001–02 are contained in the 1999 pre-Budget Report (Cm 4479).

Prix Niki

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the *(a)* purpose and *(b)* running costs in this financial year of the European Communities' Prix Niki. [112349]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is readily available from the European Commission.

Monetary Union (Pension Provision)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress made since the 1999 British-Italian conference on considering the effect of EMU on pension provision. [112342]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is readily available from the European Commission.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Curfews

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what increase there will be in the number of offenders eligible for release under the home detention curfew scheme if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is enacted; and if he will make a statement. [112795]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 3 February 2000]:* On the assumptions we have made about the overall effect of the Bill, there would be no increase.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Board

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will wind up the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board; and if he will make a statement. [114489]

Mr. Straw: Under the original criminal injuries compensation scheme, established in August 1964, compensation was assessed by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB) on the basis of common law damages. That scheme was superseded from 1 April 1996 by a tariff-based scheme administered by two new bodies, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA) and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeals Panel (CICAP). The Board was then left with the residual task of dealing with all outstanding claims lodged before 1 April 1996. There were some 110,000 such cases.

By the end of the current financial year, the Board will have resolved over 100,000 of those cases and its work will largely be done. The Board will accordingly be wound up on 31 March 2000. Any residual old scheme cases still outstanding at that time will be transferred for resolution by legally qualified members of CICAP in accordance with the transitional provisions of the 1996 scheme. Present estimates are that around 6,000 cases will be transferred. The Panel will be set the target of clearing them within two years. The Panel is being strengthened considerably to ensure that it can cope with this additional workload without prejudicing its capacity to deal with appeals made under the 1996 scheme.

I am sure that Ministers in previous Administrations would wish to join me in extending a sincere vote of thanks to all Board members, past and present, for the care and dedication with which they have dealt with claims over the past 35 years.

Gambling Review Body

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to announce the membership of the Gambling Review Body. [114490]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Further to the reply my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 537W, I have today appointed the following people to be members of the Gambling Review Body:

Mr. David Bishop
Mr. Mihir Bose
Professor Jeffrey Gray
Mr. Peter Dean CBE
Sir John Hoddinott QPM
Mr. Anthony Mackintosh
Ms Phillipa Marks
Ms Sara Nathan
Ms Anesta Weekes QC
Mr. Jonathan Wolff.

Between them, the members will bring a wealth of experience in many areas relevant to the review, such as business, law, economics psychology, accountancy and law enforcement.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the report of the Metropolitan police on the policing of the state visit by the President of China. [113924]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Publication of this report is a matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. I understand that it will take place shortly.

DNA Database

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many individuals have their DNA recorded on the DNA national database; [113922]

(2) what reports he has received concerning inaccurate matches involving the national DNA database and DNA samples; and if he will make a statement; [113921]

(3) what recent reports he has received concerning DNA evidence matched using the DNA national database being used to correct miscarriages of justice on appeal; and if he will make a statement concerning the number of such cases, the nature of the use of the DNA national database for this purpose and his future plans for its use. [113920]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The National DNA Database holds the DNA profiles, obtained from samples of those suspected, cautioned or convicted of a recordable offence, for intelligence purposes. The Database also holds profiles obtained from crime stains left at the scenes of crime. It is managed and operated on behalf of the police by the Forensic Science Service. It currently holds over 700,000 profiles of individuals.

The Home Secretary has received no reports concerning inaccurate matches. The DNA Database reports a possible suspect to the Police for further investigation. If as a result, the DNA information is likely to be used as evidence, a further sample is taken from the suspect for analysis and a report on a match by a forensic science reporting officer.

The Home Secretary has received no reports concerning the DNA database and alleged miscarriages of justice. The DNA database would not normally be used for this purpose. If the Criminal Cases Review Commission

(CCRC) asked the Forensic Science Service to review DNA evidence in a specific case, the results would be recorded on the individual CCRC case file.

There are no plans to alter the existing role of the National DNA database. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced an additional investment of £34 million over the next two years to launch a programme to expand the National DNA Database so that it holds profiles of all active criminals, to be matched against samples taken from crime scenes. This will increase the Database's effectiveness as an intelligence tool.

Cleveland Police

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* number *(b)* name and *(c)* cost of each inquiry into Cleveland police corruption since 1992; and if he will make a statement on the outcome of these inquiries. [114100]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There have been two major inquiries since 1992 into alleged corruption with Cleveland police, known as Operations Lancet and Teak. The latest available costs of these inquiries are £2.2 million and £314,000 respectively. In Operation Lancet, the final decision as to whether any officer will face prosecution is now a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service. Papers from Operation Teak are currently under consideration by Senior Treasury Counsel.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many units of housing are currently occupied by asylum seekers; and what is the breakdown between *(a)* privately-rented homes, *(b)* charity and housing association properties, *(c)* local authority housing and *(d)* property which would not otherwise be available for housing. [113881]

Mrs. Roche: This information is not collected centrally.

Ethnic Minority Police Officers

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many ethnic minority police officers there were in each year since 1980 *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each police force. [113931]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is not possible to provide information on the number of ethnic minority officers before 1990. Figures for 1990 can be provided only on an aggregate basis, and on a force basis only at disproportionate cost.

The tables set out the number of ethnic officers in total, including officers who are seconded to the National Crime Squad (NCS), the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) and central services and show the number of ethnic minority officers by force for each year since March 1991.

Table 1: Police strength in England and Wales ethnic minority strength

	Ethnic minority strength
March 1990	1,329
March 1991	1,480
March 1992	1,645
March 1993	1,794
March 1994	1,966
March 1995	2,128
March 1996	2,277
March 1997	2,337
March 1998	2,483
March 1999	2,545
September 1999	2,607

Note:
After 1998, ethnic minority officers on secondment to NCS and NCIS are included in table 1, but are not included in force figures at table 2.

Table 2: Police strength in England and Wales 1991–99—ethnic minority police numbers

Police force	*31 March 1991*	*31 March 1992*	*31 March 1993*	*31 March 1994*	*31 March 1995*	*31 March 1996*	*31 March 1997*	*31 March 1998*	*31 March 1999*	*30 September 1999*
Avon and Somerset	23	23	23	25	27	30	30	34	33	33
Bedfordshire	40	41	30	33	32	34	12	37	36	37
Cambridgeshire	23	26	26	28	28	26	28	31	28	28
Cheshire	5	2	2	2	3	4	5	6	8	8
City of London	7	8	9	13	15	17	19	20	17	17
Cleveland	9	12	14	14	16	17	17	18	9	15
Cumbria	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	3
Derbyshire	23	27	32	32	34	32	37	37	35	37
Devon and Cornwall	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	5	6	7
Dorset	3	3	3	5	5	5	5	5	6	6
Durham	3	4	5	7	8	9	8	7	10	10
Dyfed Powys	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	1	2	3
Essex	18	22	26	27	28	28	31	36	32	36
Gloucestershire	12	12	12	14	15	13	12	12	12	12
Greater Manchester	118	126	129	130	139	154	161	164	166	167
Gwent	8	7	9	9	9	12	14	13	14	14
Hampshire	10	15	22	25	27	32	31	27	27	29
Hertfordshire	16	18	18	20	17	18	19	20	18	22
Humberside	3	6	9	12	16	15	11	13	11	13
Kent	9	11	11	12	21	19	18	34	37	33
Lancashire	27	30	30	32	39	37	33	39	39	41
Leicestershire	49	54	60	65	66	74	77	89	89	89
Lincolnshire	1	3	5	6	6	6	5	6	7	7
Merseyside	52	57	68	75	83	74	76	72	76	73
Metropolitan Police	500	563	614	671	730	801	825	861	884	907
Norfolk	0	0	0	0	0	4	8	9	12	11
North Wales	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	3	5

Table 2: Police strength in England and Wales 1991–99—ethnic minority police numbers

Police force	*31 March 1991*	*31 March 1992*	*31 March 1993*	*31 March 1994*	*31 March 1995*	*31 March 1996*	*31 March 1997*	*31 March 1998*	*31 March 1999*	*30 September 1999*
North Yorkshire	2	4	5	6	7	8	8	7	4	5
Northamptonshire	18	19	21	22	22	25	30	31	32	34
Northumbria	12	13	17	20	22	24	26	33	32	31
Nottinghamshire	51	51	57	56	59	61	61	61	60	62
South Wales	18	21	22	25	25	25	25	29	32	33
South Yorkshire	20	28	31	45	59	68	69	70	68	70
Staffordshire	18	19	25	29	28	27	27	33	32	33
Suffolk	6	6	7	8	9	8	12	13	15	14
Surrey	9	15	17	20	20	20	20	20	21	21
Sussex	10	16	15	19	16	21	22	23	23	22
Thames Valley	51	57	61	63	68	69	73	78	81	80
Warwickshire	9	9	15	19	20	20	20	23	22	18
West Mercia	17	18	22	23	24	25	26	26	25	24
West Midlands	176	192	207	232	260	279	283	294	313	318
West Yorkshire	89	89	96	102	103	115	130	133	131	128
Wiltshire	10	13	12	12	12	11	13	10	10	11
Total all forces	1,480	1,645	1,794	1,966	2,128	2,277	2,337	2,483	2,520	2,567

Racially Aggravated Assault

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been for racially aggravated assault under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [113868]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Provisional information available centrally indicates that there were 247 prosecutions for assault (as defined under section 29 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998) in magistrates courts from 30 October 1998 to 30 June 1999.

City Status Conferral

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when it was decided that towns competing for city status for the third millennium needed a population in excess of 200,000 to qualify. [113848]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No such decision has been made. Although population size is taken into account by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in submitting a recommendation to Her Majesty the Queen, the grant of city status is not a right that can be claimed by a town fulfilling certain criteria, but an honour conferred by the Sovereign by Letters Patent.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the name of the town to be awarded city status for the third millennium will be announced. [113847]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Thirty-nine applications have been received for the Millennium grant of city status from towns in the United Kingdom; each application is being considered on its individual merits. No date has been set for the announcement of the new city.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113970]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office press office does not use couriers to distribute news releases and has no record or recollection of one being used during the period detailed. Press releases are distributed via the Electronic News Distribution Service, e-mail, post and are placed on the Home Office website.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113997]

Mr. Straw: Home Office press releases are distributed in a number of different ways including electronically, by fax, e-mail and by post. All are now posted on the Home Office website. National media receive all Home Office press releases while others, depending on a range of factors such as subject and content, are distributed to the regional, local or specialist media. Identifying the distribution list of every press release since 2 May 1997 would, however, incur disproportionate costs. If the hon. Member would like to write to me about a particular news release that he has in mind, I would be happy to provide any further information that is available.

HEALTH

Shipman Inquiry

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish the Shipman inquiry under Salmon rules to allow open hearings at which the parties can be represented and cross-examined. [109118]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 8 February 2000]:* I have now placed a letter to Lord Laming of Tewin in the Library, setting out the agreed format and powers for the inquiry into the issues arising out of the case of Harold Shipman.

Epilim

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of *(a)* the side-effects of the drug Epilim, *(b)* the circumstances in which it should not be prescribed to children, *(c)* the number of cases since 1995 in which children who have been given Epilim have

developed (i) fits and (ii) other adverse reactions, *(d)* the number of cases since 1995 where Epilim has been given to pregnant women and *(e)* the number of cases since 1995 of pregnant women who have been treated with Epilim and who have then given birth to babies with birth defects; [107571]

(2) what is the stated recommended dose of the drug Epilim when administering it to (a) adults and (b) children. [107570]

Ms Stuart: As with all medicines, the safety of Epilim, the anticonvulsant sodium valproate, is continually monitored by the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) and the independent advisory body, the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) through the Yellow Card Scheme for spontaneous reporting of suspected Adverse Drug Reactions (ADRs). A number of articles have been published in the bulletin 'Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance' to draw ADRs associated with Epilim to the attention of health professionals.

23 suspected ADRs associated with the drug Epilim, all involving children between the ages of 2–11, have been reported to the MCA/CSM from the beginning of 1995 to date. Two of these cases had fits. Reporting of a suspected adverse reaction is not necessarily evidence that the medicine caused the reaction.

In the same period in the United Kingdom, 22 cases of birth defects for women exposed to the drug Epilim during pregnancy were reported to the MCA/CSM. The product information for Epilim contains detailed advice about use in pregnancy and the prescribing physician should weigh up the risks and benefits in the individual woman's case. The number of cases since 1995 where Epilim has been given to pregnant women is not available.

Epilim is contraindicated in all patients including children where there is allergy to sodium valproate, active liver disease or family history of severe liver disease.

The daily dose of the drug Epilim as stated in the Marketing Authorisation for adults and children over 20 kilograms is gradually increased until control of fits is achieved, usually to within the range 20–30 milligrams/kilograms body weight per day. For children under 20kg, the daily dose of 20 mg/kg of body weight per day may be exceeded in severe cases when plasma levels can be closely monitored. Full guidance on prescribing and monitoring is in the summary of product characteristics published in the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry Compendium of Data Sheets and Summaries of Product Characteristics.

Power Lines

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received this year and in the past three years on the health effects of power lines; and if he will make a statement. [108589]

Yvette Cooper: A number of letters have been received from hon. Members, research organisations and pressure groups and individual members of the public, concerning the possibility of health effects associated with proximity to power lines. Results of the United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study published in December 1999 found no evidence to link childhood cancer with exposure to magnetic fields from electricity supply. The Department has funded work on the impact of electric fields which will report later this year. The National Radiological Protection Board's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation keep the relevant research under review and will be publishing a comprehensive overview later this year.

MRI Scanner (Walsall)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) on how many occasions his Department has discussed a MRI scanner in Walsall with the New Opportunities Fund; [112760]

(2) when his Department gave advice to the New Opportunities Fund over the provision of a MRI scanner in Walsall. [112759]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* During the months leading up to the announcement of funding from the New Opportunities Fund for cancer equipment in September 1999, there were numerous discussions between officials at the Department and the New Opportunities Fund about where equipment for cancer should be allocated. This built on discussions between officials within the Department and the National Health Service regional offices. This regular and ongoing dialogue will have included discussions about the possibility of funding an MRI scanner in Walsall.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who makes the final decision on whether finances would be available for a MRI scanner in Walsall. [112758]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* The final decisions on whether finances would be available for a MRI scanner in Walsall were made by the Board of the New Opportunities Fund, based on the advice they received from the Department. This will have followed discussions between officials within the Department and the West Midlands Regional Office.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the petition handed in to the New Opportunities Fund on 16 February for an MRI scanner in Walsall has been received by his Department. [112821]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The petition handed into the New Opportunities Fund on 16 February was, on that same day, passed by the Chief Executive of the New Opportunities Fund, Stephen Dunmore, to the Department.

Clinical Negligence

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much each NHS trust paid to the NHS Litigation Authority's clinical negligence scheme in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; what was each trust's total budget; what proportion the clinical negligence scheme payment was of each trust's total budget in each of those years; and what are the estimated figures for 2000–01. [113151]

Ms Stuart: A table containing available information has been placed in the Library.

Ambulance Travel Times

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what standard his Department sets as the maximum acceptable travel time for an ambulance to reach the nearest accident and emergency department. [113264]

Ms Stuart: There are no standards set for travel time from incident to accident and emergency department. All ambulance services will be required to meet the response time targets set out in Health Service Circular 1999/091 "Modernisation of Ambulance Services" in 2001.

Contraceptive Drugs

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the prescriptions for emergency contraceptive drugs made during 1997–98 he estimates to have prevented unwanted pregnancies. [113164]

Yvette Cooper: In 1997, 760,000 prescriptions were issued by general practitioners or family planning clinics for emergency contraception pills. Guidance issued in October 1999 by the Faculty of Family Planning states that the overall risk of pregnancy, after a single act of unprotected sex on any day in the menstrual cycle is 2–4 per cent. but can be as high as 20–30 per cent. in the days before and just after ovulation. These figures are for all ages and include older women whose fertility is declining. An accurate estimate of the number of pregnancies expected without treatment is not possible without the menstrual and coital histories of the women concerned.

It is generally understood that use of Schering PC4 (the only hormonal product licensed for emergency contraception use in 1997) prevents 75 per cent. of potential pregnancies that would otherwise occur.

NHS Trusts

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial arrangements are being made in respect of the NHS trusts dissolved on 1 April 1999, 1 May 1999 and 1 October 1999 in connection with new NHS trusts established on those dates. [114548]

Mr. Milburn: Pursuant to the dissolution of 48 National Health Service trusts on 1 April 1999, 1 May 1999 and 1 October 1999, and their reconfiguration through the establishment of 23 new trusts on those dates, I propose to create originating capital for the new trusts equal to the net assets transferred to them and therefore to remit the outstanding debt of the dissolved trusts.

These operations will involve no overall loss to the Exchequer. Her Majesty's Treasury has today presented a minute to the House of Commons giving particulars and circumstances of the proposed remission which it has approved in principle.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113980]

Ms Stuart: As is common practice among many Government Departments, the Central Office of Information News Distribution Service issues press releases on behalf of the Department. Couriers are unlikely to be used purely to distribute press releases. It is however impossible to separate the times when couriers were used as the only practical means of sending out sensitive material which may have had news releases attached.

There were 1,656 press releases issued and the cost of this distribution was £75,365, for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113996]

Ms Stuart: The cost of compiling the lists of national, regional, local newspapers and media bodies is disproportionate. The Department ensures press releases are made available to the press via the news distribution service managed by Central Office of Information; and the Internet.

Targeted distribution will rely on the subject and content of the specific press releases.

Mr. Bruce (Cancelled Operation)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will investigate the circumstances which led to the second cancellation of a rotator cuff repair operation for a constituent, Mr. Bruce, at the Avon Orthopaedic Centre on 7 March. [114143]

Ms Stuart: Continuing high numbers of medical admissions have necessitated the postponement of a number of orthopaedic operations. Decisions about the postponement of operations are taken by clinicians on the basis of clinical priority.

The trust is taking action to maintain its elective capacity by the use of weekend operating lists, the use of local independent hospitals to enable routine surgical operations to be performed by national Health Service surgeons operating in NHS time, and buying places in private nursing homes to facilitate the discharge of medical patients.

NHS Staff

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, for each year since 1992 to date, the number of *(a)* nurses, *(b)* doctors and *(c)* consultants employed by the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital; and if he will make a statement. [114124]

Mr. Denham: The table illustrates that the number of nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff employed by the Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals National Health Service Trust declined between the years 1994 and 1997. However, numbers remain constant for 1998, and the numbers of hospital medical doctors employed within the trust steadily increased since 1994, demonstrating our commitment to increase the number of doctors and nurses working within the NHS. It should be noted that inflated figures for nursing staff in 1994 are not comparable with later years, due to a new classification system introduced in 1995 (see notes).

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): Nursing, Midwifery and hospital visiting staff, employed by Royal Shrewsbury Hospital NHS Trust, as at 30 September of each year

	Nursing, Midwifery and health visiting staff		Hospital medical staff and consultants	
	Whole-time equivalents	Numbers (headcount)	Numbers (headcount)	Of which medical consultants
1994	850	1,130	160	70
1995	750	950	170	70
1996	730	940	190	70
1997	710	900	190	70
1998	720	900	200	80

Notes:
1. The Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals NHS Trust came into being on 1 April 1994. Data from earlier years cannot be disaggregated from health authority returns.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.
3. 1994 figures include agency staff and exclude learners, 1995 to 1998 figures exclude agency staff and learners.
4. A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995, therefore information based on this classification is not comparable with earlier years.
5. Before 1996, some hospital medical staff were employed directly by the Regional Health Authority and so may not be included in these figures.

Source:
Department of Health Non Medical Workforce Census
Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE Inquiry (Costs)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the maximum amount spent to date on legal fees at the BSE Inquiry in support of an individual serving or former civil servant in *(a)* Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and *(b)* the Department of Health; and how much has been spent to date in supporting Sir Richard Southwood and his working party. [112440]

Ms Quin: All witnesses have had legal support available to them, under the procedures established by the BSE Inquiry, to assist in presenting their involvement in the BSE story to the Inquiry. To protect the privacy of individuals we consider it inappropriate to provide figures for the legal support of any individual or advisory group.

Greyhounds

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many licences have been issued for the export of racing greyhounds to Vietnam in the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [112390]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* Licences are not issued for the export of greyhounds to Vietnam or any other destination.

This Department is responsible for the issue of export health certificates to accompany dogs to Vietnam and other destinations. These are provided at the request of the Vietnamese authorities. The health certificate for the export of dogs to Vietnam provides guarantees to the Vietnamese authorities and the importer that the animals are free from signs of disease and are vaccinated against rabies. Export health certificates are signed by government appointed veterinarians. The certificates do not contain information on the breed of dogs being exported.

In the last three years two such animal health certificates for Vietnam have been issued—one for 1997 and one for 1999.

The above figures are not sub-categorised by breed. It is not therefore possible for me to state whether either of these animals were greyhounds or the purpose for which they were intended, for example racing.

This Department provides advice on request to all exporters that they must ensure that exported animals comply with the requirements of the relevant importing country. Where there is a requirement for an export health certificate to accompany a consignment of animals this advice is given.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are *(a)* the growing season for genetically modified herbicide tolerant winter oil seed rape in UK field trials and *(b)* the prohibited period for the use of the herbicide glufosinate ammonia in the UK; and on what research evidence the prohibited period for glufosinate ammonia is based. [111353]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Genetically modified herbicide tolerant winter oil seed rape is sown at the end of August and the beginning of September; the crop is harvested in the following July or early August.

Approvals for the commercial use of glufosinate ammonium on oil seed rape all prohibit its use for weed control from 30 September to 1 March. This is because data submitted do not support its use on oil seed rape during that period.

However, experimental approvals have not imposed this prohibition.

Fertiliser Regulations

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his latest assessment of the adequacy of the Fertiliser Regulations, following the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee's recommendation on the use of liquid condensate as a fertiliser on grazing land. [113041]

Ms Quin: The Fertiliser Regulations were introduced originally to complement the ban on Mammalian Meat and Bone Meal in animal feed. Their purpose is to avoid ruminant animals gaining access to a source of potentially recycled disease. We are actively considering the adequacy of these and other controls in relation to the Committee's recommendations concerning liquid condensate.

Chernobyl (Farming Land)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what acreage of farming land has restricted use as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion. [113604]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* The total area of farming land still subject to restrictions in England as a result of the Chernobyl accident is approximately 2,650 hectares (6,543 acres).

Biomass (Carbon Dioxide)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate by how much plantings of biomass would have to be increased on an annual basis *(a)* to save the equivalent of the horticulture industry's current carbon dioxide output and *(b)* to save the equivalent of two million tonnes of carbon dioxide annually, using the same basis for his calculation as that used in page 7/5 of the England Rural Development Plan 2000–06. [113363]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* I will write to the right hon. Member with the information he has requested as soon as possible and arrange to place a copy of the letter in the Libraries of the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Notre Europe

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what EU support has been provided, since its inception, to the Notre Europe organisation; and what contacts his Department has had with that organisation. [112335]

Mr. Vaz: The information is readily available from the European Commission.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussion his Department is having with the Government of Norway on the initiative the Norwegian Government are taking to help resolve the conflict in Sri Lanka; and if he will make a statement. [113431]

Mr. Vaz: The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), discussed the Norwegians' role in Sri Lanka with State Secretary Wegger Christian Strommen during the latter's visit to the United Kingdom this week. The Foreign Secretary will also have an opportunity to raise the matter when he sees Norwegian Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek during his visit to Oslo on 15 March. Our Embassy in Oslo discusses the initiative regularly with Norwegian Foreign Ministry officials.

Turkey

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with the Mayor of Hasankeyf about his proposed meeting in London; and what reasons underlay the decision to cancel that visit. [113561]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary had no discussion with the Mayor of Hasenkeyf about his proposed visit to London. The Mayor had scheduled meetings at the Department of Trade and Industry and with the Export Credits Guarantee Department (to be attended by FCO officials).

We were informed that the visit had been cancelled because the Mayor's political party had advised him to return to Turkey.

UK Affiliations

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the regional arrangements and agencies, as recognised under Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations, of which the United Kingdom is a member. [113747]

Mr. Hain: There is no recognised list of regional arrangements and agencies of the kind referred to in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113987]

Mr. Robin Cook: Most news releases (including the FCO Daily Bulletin) are distributed electronically via the COI news Distribution Service. In addition a number of newspapers and media organisations receive this material by fax. Both distribution lists are attached. Press releases also appear on the FCO website.

In addition, individual releases are faxed, on request and/or out of hours to other members of the press on an ad hoc basis. Records are not kept of these additional, ad hoc transmissions.

COI News Distribution Service Media outlets served electronically

National Press (Dailies)

- *Daily Express*
- *Daily Mail*
- *Daily Mirror*
- *Daily Star*
- *Daily Telegraph*
- *Financial Times*
- *Guardian*
- *Independent*
- *Sun*
- *The Times*

National Press (Sundays)

- *Independent on Sunday*
- *Mail on Sunday*
- *News of the World*
- *Observer*
- *People*
- *Sunday Express*
- *Sunday Mirror*
- *Sunday Telegraph*
- *Sunday Times*

Regional Press

- *Aberdeen Express* '
- *Aberdeen Journal* '
- *Belfast Telegraph* '
- *Birmingham Post* '
- *Bolton Evening News* '
- *Derby Evening Telegraph* '
- *Eastern Daily Press* '

Evening Standard
Exeter Evening Echo [1]
Exeter Express [1]
Gloucestershire Echo [1]
Gloucester Citizen [1]
Hull Daily Mail [1]
Leicester Mercury [1]
Lincolnshire Echo [1]
Liverpool Daily Post [1]
Manchester Evening News
Middlesbrough Evening Gazette [1]
Newcastle Evening Chronicle [1]
Newcastle Journal [1]
Nottingham Evening Post [1]
Plymouth Herald [1]
Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph [1]
South Wales Echo [1]
South Wales Evening Post [1]
Stoke Sentinel [1]
Western Daily Press [1]
Western Mail [1]
Yorkshire Post [1]

Broadcasting Organisations
BBC Bush House
BBC Radio News[2]
BBC Television News[2]
Channel Five TV
Channel Four News
Channel One TV
Chiltern Radio
Chinese TV Network[3]
GMTV
IRN[2]
ITN[2]
Metro Networks (Virgin Radio)
Sky TV
World Television News/British Satellite News

News Agencies
AFX News
AP Dow Jones
Associated Press
Bloomberg Business News
Exchange Telegraph
Bridge News
Market News Service
McGraw Hill[3]
Network News
News Limited of Australia
Newspoint
Press Association
Reuters
Robinsons[3]
Universal Pictorial[3]
UPI

Misc.
Accountancy Age [3]
The Economist
House Magazine
House of Commons POLIS Information System
Local Government Chronicle
Reed Business Publishing

[1] Lobby correspondents only
[2] Also cascades press releases to local broadcasting outlets
[3] Receive twice-daily summary

FCO Press Releases: Fax Distribution List (in alphabetical order)
AFX News
Agence France Presse
Al Ahram
Al Hayat
Al Wasat
Al Majalla
ANSA
Arabic News Network
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
BBC Leicester
BBC Public Affairs
Catholic Herald
Channel 5
Chinese Xin Hua News Agency
Deutsche Presse-Agentur
Dubai TV
The Economist
EFTR Associates
Emirates News Agency
European Business News
Financial Times
Foreign Press Association
Hel Financieele Dagbald Elsevier
The Independent
Iranian News Agency
Iraqi News Agency
Israel Radio
Israeli News
Kuwait News Agency
London Radio Service
MBC
Media Services Syndicate
News Agency of Nigeria
Newsweek
Overseas Trade Magazine
Parliamentary and EU News Service
Public Sector Information
Radio Free Europe
Sabah
Saudi News Agency
The Scotsman
Springer Foreign News Service
Stars and Stripes
The Sunday Times
Survival International

Syrian News Agency

Teacher Magazine

The Times

Universal Pictorial Press

Visnews (Reuters Television)

Note:

Many organisations now access the Daily Bulletin and press releases via the FCO website.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113975]

Mr. Robin Cook: Over this period, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has not distributed its news releases to media organisations by courier.

The FCO Daily Bulletin is distributed to Commonwealth High Commissions in London by courier, as part of regular deliveries of other FCO correspondence. Until September 1999 this service was provided in house. Since September 1999 these services have been contracted out.

The cost of delivering news releases in this courier service, as distinct from the costs of delivering other mail distributed with them, is not calculated. To provide a separate breakdown of the cost of delivering news releases, as a proportion of the total volume of correspondence distributed to High Commissions, would incur disproportionate costs.

Restraints (Exports)

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his letter to the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of 2 February concerning his investigation into allegations of a breach of the ban on the export of leg irons, if he will list those US authorities and their departments from whom he enlisted assistance; what form of record was written and to whom in the course of this assistance; and if he will place copies of this material in the Library. [112932]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 490W. We were grateful for the assistance of the US authorities, via the US Embassy in London, in helping us carry out investigations into the allegations in *The Independent* newspaper on 16 and 17 November. The US Embassy did not provide us with a written report.

We are not aware of any illegal conduct on the part of UK individuals or companies. Should any evidence be produced, we would of course pass it on to the appropriate investigative authorities.

Select Committees

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which select committees, other than the Foreign Affairs Committee, Ministers in his Department have *(a)* submitted memorandums to and *(b)* appeared before in the present Parliament. [112403]

Mr. Robin Cook: Our records show that in the present Parliament Ministers have submitted memorandums to the following Select Committees of the House of Commons:

Culture, Media and Sport

Defence

Environmental Audit

European Legislation/EU Scrutiny

Health

International Development

Procedure

Public Accounts

Public Administration

Scottish Affairs

Standards and Privileges, and

Trade and Industry.

Ministers have appeared before the

Defence

International Development

Trade and Industry

Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, and

European Legislation/European Scrutiny Committees.

South Africa

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made to the South African Government by Her Majesty's Government about *(a)* the visit to South Africa en route to Mozambique by members of Her Majesty's forces, *(b)* the arrangements for Her Majesty's forces personnel to leave the aircraft while at a South African airbase and *(c)* facilities to be provided for members of Her Majesty's forces to use while on this stopover in South Africa; what responses were received to such representations; and what reply was given to the South African response. [113923]

Mr. Hain: Our High Commissions in Pretoria and Maputo held extensive discussions with the South African and Mozambican authorities. I also spoke to President Mbeki's Legal Adviser. As a result, the South African Government agreed, with the approval of the Mozambican Government, that the British military team could use Hoedspruit as a rear base for its operation. We are grateful to the South African Government for the help they are giving to our team and I pay tribute to the fast and effective way in which they have responded to the disaster in Mozambique. Our teams are working closely together in the international relief effort.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress made in implementing *(a)* Stage I and *(b)* Stage II of UNMIK's general strategy for Kosovo. [113876]

Mr. Vaz: UNSCR 1244, which established the international presences in Kosovo, gave the UN Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) responsibility for: (i) performing basic civilian administrative functions; (ii) developing provisional institutions for democratic self-government; and (iii) transferring responsibilities to these provisional institutions.

UNMIK has established a civil administration in Kosovo. It secured the agreement of the Kosovo Albanian leadership to participate in Joint Interim Administrative Structures (JIAS), integrating UNMIK administration with local participation. UNMIK hopes that the Kosovo Serbs will soon agree to join the JIAS. UNMIK plans to hold municipal elections in Kosovo later this year.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in respect of each of the last eight months how many civilian police officers were requested by the head of UNMIK in Kosovo. [113872]

Mr. Hain: The UN Secretary General, who is responsible for making recommendations to the Security Council, requested in July 1999 that member states provide 3,110 police officers for the United Nations International Police. This request remained unchanged until November 1999 when the requirement was increased to 4,718.

Serbia

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the political and security situation in southern Serbia. [113870]

Mr. Hain: The political and security situation within the Presevo Valley area of southern Serbia appears to be tense. Clashes have taken place between armed groups and Serbian security forces near the administrative border with Kosovo. KFOR have warned Kosovo Albanians not to export trouble and have tightened control of the boundary with Serbia. Compiling accurate information on the situation within Serbia has been obstructed by the FRY authorities, who refused to co-operate with a 3 March visit to the area by the EU Troika.

Iraq

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the amount of money the Iraqi authorities could have spent on the purchase of medicines since sanctions started. [114122]

Mr. Hain: Sanctions have never prohibited the import of medicines into Iraq. Under the UN's "oil for food" programme, which was first proposed in 1991 but rejected by the Iraqi government for five years, over $10 billion worth of revenue has been available for the purchase of humanitarian supplies. It is for the Government of Iraq to decide how it allocates that money between the various humanitarian sectors. It has chosen, for example, to allocate $10 million to purchase bank note counting machines under the current phase of the programme. The UN Secretary-General has refused to approve this allocation.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Government have to ensure that there is adequate medicine to allow Iraqi civilians to receive the treatment needed. [114119]

Mr. Hain: The Government have always worked closely with the UN to ensure that the humanitarian programme is as effective as possible in order to ease the suffering of the Iraqi people. SCR 1284, a UK initiative, contains a raft of measures to make the programme bigger and better, including the removal of the ceiling on the amount of oil Iraq can sell to purchase humanitarian goods. But the government of Iraq is ultimately responsible for deciding how that review is to be allocated. We urge the government of Iraq to take full advantage of the opportunities SCR 1284 offers, and to put the people's needs for food and medicines first when allocating revenue, rather than allocating millions of dollars for bank note counting machines, for example.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports his Department has received of medicine brought into Iraq since sanctions started which has not been used for ordinary Iraqi civilians. [114123]

Mr. Hain: We have received reports of widespread official and black-market abuse of medical goods supplied to Iraq under the "oil for food" programme. We are aware, for example that such medicines are being sold by pharmacies in countries neighbouring Iraq. We have passed this information to the UN for further investigation.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the Government's estimate of the number of children in Iraq who are likely to lack adequate medical treatment as a result of UN sanctions. [114121]

Mr. Hain: Sanctions have never prohibited the import of medicines into Iraq. While the international community has sought to maximise the relief available to the Iraqi people, the Government of Iraq has refused to put their welfare first. For example, the latest UN report notes that one quarter of all medical goods delivered to Iraq since the "oil for food" programme began have not been distributed. Under "oil for food" the Government of Iraq decides how much oil revenue will be allocated to purchase medical goods. The UN Secretary General has repeatedly observed that Iraq needs to give greater attention to the provision of basic pharmaceuticals, primary and preventive health-care services and material support for more effective distribution.

INDEX TO THE

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 345**

SESSION 1999–2000

28th February—10th March 2000

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

REFERENCES

- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

A3
Hindhead 2–3w

A5
Accidents 194w

A10
Road works 852–3

A27
Worthing 681w

A406
Trees 596–7w

A1033
Kingston upon Hull 603w

Aberdeen
Pensioners 91–2w

Abkhazia
398w

Academic year
397w

Access funds
307w

Accident and emergency departments
143–5, 428w

Accidents
A5 194w
Chinook helicopters 34w
Military aircraft 37w, 210–1w
Public transport 188–9w
Roads 5w, 157–66, 186–8w, 197w, 453w

Acute beds
77w, 760w
Greater London 219w

Additives
Petrol 282w, 600w
Tobacco 763–4w

Adoption
408w

Advertising
Dept of Health 748w
Home Office 104w
Prostitution 665w

Advisory services
Electronic commerce 337w

Africa
Agriculture 296w
AIDS 215w
Arms trade 585–6w
British Council 276w
Children 275–6w

Agency nurses
409–10w

Aggregates
Taxation 812–3w

Agriculture
see also Farmers
15–6w, 20w
Africa 296w
Diversification 16–7w
Land use 798w
Radioactive fallout 868–9w
Shropshire 17w, 531w
Somerset 532w, 717–8w
Subsidies 17w, 245w
Taxation 267w
Trade agreements 52w

Agriculture development scheme
22w

AIDS
Africa 215w

Ainsworth, Mr Peter
Questions
Art works, Exports 5–6
Film, Grants 736w
Millennium Exhibition 8
Millennium Exhibition, Educational visits 87w
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 249w
Museums and galleries, Finance 837w
National Lottery 9
New Millennium Experience, Contracts 250–1w, 433w
New Millennium Experience, Debts 838w
New Millennium Experience, Income 248w
New Millennium Experience, Manpower 89w
New Millennium Experience, Overtime 251w
Tourism Forum 97w, 284–5w, 350–1w

Air force
Publications 653w
Recruitment 26–7w

Air misses
Heathrow Airport 331–3w

Air pollution
Pollution control 594w, 777–8w

Air routes
USA 189–90w

Air traffic
Heathrow Airport 7w

Aircraft
Fuels 671w
Violence 418–9w

Aircraft carriers
34–5w

Airport tax
817w

Airports
St Helena 452w

Albania
433w
EC aid 624w

Alexander, Mr Douglas
Questions
Arms trade, Export credit guarantees 466–7w
Balkans, Construction 465–6w
Child Support Agency, Compensation 302–3w
Cold weather payments, Paisley 848w
Developing countries, Debts 682w
Housing benefit 173–5w
Housing benefit, Abuse 175–6w
Industrial diseases, Compensation 465w
Jobseeker's allowance, Paisley 845–6w
Minimum wage 45–6w, 838w
New deal for young people 312w
New deal for young people, Paisley 150w
New deal for young people, Telephone services 577w
New deal schemes, Industrial injuries 312w

Allan, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Protection of Human Genetic Sequence Bill, 1R (08.03.00) 1007–9
Questions
UK Sport 605w

Alma-Dettinger Barracks
Sales 638w

Alternative energy
185w, 341w, 461–2w, 585w

Alternative energy—continued
Dept for Education and Employment 574w
Dept of Health 749–50w
Licensing 50w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 247w

Alternative medicine
Primary care trusts 216w

Alyn and Deeside
Pensioners 350w

Amber Valley
Working families tax credit 853w

Ambulance services
413–4w, 864–5w
East Midlands 76w

Amendments and new clauses
Rulings and statements (08.03.00) 1148

Amess, Mr David
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1296–307, 1358
Sittings in Westminster Hall
NHS, Public appointments (01.03.00) 7H–7wh
Questions
Foetal tissue 763w
NHS, Public appointments 218w
Public appointments 989

Ammunition
32w
Procurement 209–10w
Uranium 715w

Ancillary staff
NHS 139–40

Anderson, Janet, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Culture Media and Sport
Questions
BBC 98w, 251w
BBC, Finance 606–7w
British Resorts' Association 781w
Digital broadcasting, Pendle 607–8w
Digital broadcasting, Worcestershire 608w
Film 96w
Film, Foreign investment in UK 96–7w
Film, Grants 736w
Millennium Commission 734w
Millennium Exhibition 85w, 87w, 89w, 350w, 606w
Millennium Exhibition, Attendance 10–1, 284w
Millennium Exhibition, Catering 88–9w, 250w, 350w
Millennium Exhibition, Disclosure of information 83–4w
Millennium Exhibition, Educational visits 87w, 249w
Millennium Exhibition, Hire services 248w
Millennium Exhibition, Manpower 249–50w
Millennium Exhibition, Public transport 285w
Millennium Exhibition, Repairs and maintenance 88w
Millennium Exhibition, Sponsorship 83w, 85–6w, 90–1w, 605w
Millennium Exhibition, Sports 84w
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 83–8w, 90w, 248–9w, 284w
Museum of the Moving Image 733–4w
National Audit Office 251w
New Millennium Experience 89–90w
New Millennium Experience, Contracts 250–1w, 433w
New Millennium Experience, Debts 838w

***Anderson, Janet**—continued*
New Millennium Experience, Finance 250w
New Millennium Experience, Income 248w
New Millennium Experience, Overtime 251w
New Millennium Experience, Public appointments 86–7w, 89–90w
Press, Right of reply 284w
Telecommunications 101w
Telecommunications, Regulation 481–2w
Television, Licensing 92w, 350–1w, 482w, 604–5w, 735w, 780w

Anglican Church
Prayer book 80w

Anglo-French Nuclear Cooperation Council
see Franco-British Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine

Animal experiments
565–8w
EC law 447w
Harlan UK 661–2w
Porton Down 633w

Animal welfare
Greyhound racing 287–8w, 534w, 867–8w
Poultry 19w, 247w, 721w

Animals
Disease control 417w

Anthrax
Vaccination 484–5w, 781w, 826w

Antisocial behaviour orders
555w

Antitank missiles
Procurement 208w

Antrim
Further education 405w

Appointments Commission
Public appointments 784w, 825–6w

Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Questions
Members, Correspondence 410w

Areas of outstanding natural beauty
453w

Armed conflict
Kosovo 36w, 816w
Nigeria 440–1w
Sudan 505w

Armed forces
Asbestosis 653w
Cadets 325w
Catering 325w, 498w
Children 275–6w
Housing 651w
Salisbury Plain 327w
Scotland 651w
Somerset 642w
Telephone systems 327w
Vaccination 484–5w
Video conferencing 268–70w

Armed forces education allowances
37w

Arms to Iraq Inquiry
134w

Arms trade
35w, 46–7w, 343w
Africa 585–6w
Democratic Republic of Congo 502w
Export credit guarantees 49w, 466–7w, 547–8
Exports 38w
Indian subcontinent 503–4w

***Arms trade**—continued*
Indonesia 32w

Armstrong, Rt Hon Hilary, Minister of State for Local Government and Housing, Dept of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Arundel bypass (07.03.00) 152–5wh
Questions
"Audit Code of Practice" 776w
Coastal areas 855–6
Council tax 13w
Disadvantaged 591w
Disadvantaged, Young people 853–5
EC grants and loans 591w
EC grants and loans, Merseyside 418w
Local government, Pensions 453–4w
Local government finance 594w
Local government services, Cost effectiveness 592w
Local government services, East Midlands 592w
Non-departmental public bodies, Yorkshire and Humberside 595w
Non-domestic rates 12w, 778–9w
Non-domestic rates, Combined heat and power 454–5w
Non-domestic rates, Small businesses 595w
Planning, Urban areas 593w
Public bodies, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 334w
Regional assemblies 675w
Regional assemblies, Disadvantaged 851–2
Regional development agencies 590–2w
Regional government 861–2
Rough Sleepers Unit 461w
Single regeneration budget, North West region 592–3w
Sleeping rough 849–51
Social Security Administration Act 1992 667w

Army
Germany 26w

Army Base Repair Organisation
Standards 491–2w

Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency
Standards 714–5w

Army Personnel Centre
Standards 707w

Army Technical Support Agency
Standards 701–2w

Army Training and Recruiting Agency
Standards 693–5w

Art works
251–3w
Exports 5–6

Arts Council of England
Finance 91w

Arundel bypass
(07.03.00) 149–54wh

Asbestos
Industrial health and safety 670w, 830w
Industrial injuries disablement benefit 804–5w

Asbestosis
Armed forces 653w
Compensation 729w

Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Questions
Agriculture, Somerset 532w, 717–8w
Armed forces, Somerset 642w
Class sizes, Somerset 390w

***Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy**—continued*
Farms, Change of use 674w
NHS, Per capita costs 223–5w
Pollution, Yeovil 3–4w
Public transport, Accidents 188–9w
Roads, Accidents 186–8w
Social security benefits, Somerset 470w
Universities, Somerset 144w

Asia
Education 291w

Aspergers syndrome
506–7w

Assisted areas
Scotland 260–1w

Assisted places scheme
Shropshire 147w

Astra Training Services
Civil servants 397w

Asylum
see Refugees

Atherton, Ms Candy
Questions
Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment, Nancekuke 32–3w
Orchestras 430w
Terrorism 257w

Atkins, Charlotte
Questions
Art works 251–3w
Government departments, Racial discrimination 151w
Sports, Females 11–2

Atkinson, Mr David
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 91–3wh

Atkinson, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 466, 474
Questions
Regional planning and development, Conferences 525w

Atomic Weapons Establishment
641w

"Audit Code of Practice"
776w

Austin, Mr John
Questions
Health services, Elderly 140–1
NHS, Temporary employment 632w
NHS trusts, Pay 318–9w
Nurses, Retirement 631–2w
Tobacco, Additives 763–4w

Austria
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 95w
Dept for Education and Employment 313w
Foreign relations 439w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 22–3w
Overseas trade 50w, 585w

Automated credit transfer
Social security benefits 57–8w

AWE Aldermaston
Safety (01.03.00) 25–45wh

Babies
Cerebral palsy 762w

Bagshot Park
270w

Bain Commission
see Low Pay Commission

Baker, Norman
Questions
Advertising, Dept of Health 748w
Advertising, Home Office 104w
Animal experiments 565–8w
Animal experiments, Porton Down 633w
Bagshot Park 270w
Banks, Profits 156w
BBC 251w
BBC, Finance 606–7w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 786–7w
Cars, Competition 583w
Committee on Safety of Medicines 630w
Competition 131w
Duchy of Cornwall, Taxation 770w
Electronic government 686w
Farms, Furs 15w
Government Communications Headquarters 502w
Greyhound racing, Animal welfare 287–8w, 534w, 867–8w
Livestock, Exports 244w
Millennium Exhibition 7, 89w
Millennium Exhibition, Attendance 284w
Millennium Exhibition, Disclosure of information 83–4w
Millennium Exhibition, Hire services 248w
Millennium Exhibition, Sponsorship 85–6w, 606w
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 84w, 249w
National Audit Office 251w
New Millennium Experience 732w
New Millennium Experience, Public appointments 86–7w, 89–90w
NHS trusts, Private finance initiative 63–5w
Petrol, Additives 282w, 600w
Petrol, Retail trade 683–4w, 775–6w
Pets 565w
Police, Criminal injuries compensation 564w
Police, Pensions 564w
Police, Termination of employment 564w
Press releases, Home Office 103–4w
Press releases, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 39–40w
Smuggling 155w
Smuggling, Northern Ireland 855w
Smuggling, Petrol 769w
Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee 535–9w
Telecommunications 48–9w, 101w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 559–60

Baldry, Mr Tony
Debates etc.
Housing, Petitions (10.03.00) 1295
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1069
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1329–32, 1353–4
Questions
Members, Correspondence 539w
Mental health services 154

Balfour Beatty Engineering
464w

Balkans
Construction 465–6w
Defence equipment 36w

Ballard, Jackie
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 937
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1238–40
Questions
Blakenhurst Prison 823w
Criminal Records Bureau 112w
Habitual offenders 823w

Ballard, Jackie—continued
Income tax, Pensions 153w, 561w
Nurses, Training 759w
Prescribing Supply and Administration of Medicines Review Team 76w
Social Security Benefits Agency, Somerset 182–3w
Students, Fees and charges 828w

Ballots
682–3w

Bank for Reconstruction and Development of Europe
see European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

Banking Ombudsman
156w

Bankruptcy
Farmers 529w, 716w

Banks
Profits 156w

Barnes, Mr Harry
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1137
Questions
Business questions 568
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 90w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 29
State retirement pensions 758–9
World Trade Organisation 549

Barnsley
Carers (01.03.00) 66–73wh
Hernia operations 218w
Pensioners 812w

Barnsley Health Authority
(29.02.00) 10–6wh

Barristers
Training 782w

Barron, Mr Kevin
Questions
Trade promotion, Bulgaria 535–6

Battle, Mr John, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Questions
Belize, Guatemala 783w
British dependent territories 618w
China, Foreign relations 274w
China, Human rights 619w
East Timor, Refugees 505–6w
Falkland Islands 724w
St Helena 441w, 726w

Bayley, Mr Hugh, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Social Security
Questions
Asbestosis, Compensation 729w
Disability living allowance 764
Disabled, Mobility 237w
Incapacity benefit 749–50
Incapacity benefit, Medical examinations 802–4w
Income support 510w, 759–60
Income support, Lone parents 353–5w
Income support, Overseas residence 729w
Income support, Vale of Clwyd 169–70w
Industrial diseases, Medical examinations 173w
Industrial injuries disablement benefit, Asbestos 804–5w
Industrial injuries scheme, Self-employed 351–2w
Low incomes 355–6w
Maternity pay 176w

Bayley, Mr Hugh—continued
Mortgages, Interest rates 731w
New deal for disabled people 509w
Peat, Dept of Social Security 304w
Pensioners, Barnsley 812w
Pensioners, Income support 509–10w, 514–5w
Pensioners, Social security benefits 513–4w
Poverty 515w, 611w
Poverty, OECD countries 177–8w
Recycling, Dept of Social Security 234w
Social security benefits 846w
Social security benefits, Capital rules 172w, 727w
Social security benefits, Compensation 172–3w, 234–5w
Social security benefits, Disabled 177w
Social security benefits, Elderly 801w
Social security benefits, Industrial diseases 428w
Social security benefits, Rural areas 508w
Vaccination, Compensation 513w, 812w
War pensions, Mentally ill 428w
Welfare to work, Disabled 753–4

BBC
98w, 251w
Finance 606–7w

Beard, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 74–7
Questions
Sleeping rough 849–50

Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret, President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons
Debates etc.
Business statements (28.02.00) 32
Questions
Appointments Commission, Public appointments 784w, 825–6w
Business questions 563–70, 1190–9
Business statements 561–3, 1189–90
Government departments, Millennium compliance 135–6w
Parliamentary Counsel 784–5w
Press releases, President of the Council 826w

Beef
Retail trade 25–6w

Bees
Imports 530w

Begg, Miss Anne
Questions
NHS 421–2

Beggs, Mr Roy
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1252–4
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1327–8
Questions
Further education, Antrim 405w
Local government finance, Northern Ireland 480w

Beith, Rt Hon A J
Debates etc.
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 768, 807–10, 816, 833
Questions
Low flying, Northumberland 497–8w
Members, Correspondence 16w

Belize
Guatemala 783w

Bell, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 83–4
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 441
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1286–9, 1291

Bell, Mr Stuart, Second Church Estates Commissioner
Questions
Anglican Church, Prayer book 80w
Church Commissioners, Investment 81w
Church Commissioners, New deal schemes 81w
Churches, Insurance 16
Churches, VAT 81–2w
Clergy 82w
Clergy, Pay 82w
Clergy, Pensions 81w
Redundant churches 17–8

Bellwin scheme
Melton 334–5w

Benefits Agency
see Social Security Benefits Agency

Benn, Mr Hilary
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 97–100wh
Questions
Death rate, Leeds 523–4w
Education, Qualifications 138–9w
Fisheries, Grants 722–3w
General practitioners 219w
Indian subcontinent, Visas 618–20w
New deal for schools, Leeds 389–90w
NHSnet 317w
Parental leave, Dept for Education and Employment 572–3w
Pensioners, Income 165–6w
Pensioners, Income support 510w
Pensions, Post offices 613–4w
Roads, Accidents 5w, 453w
Teachers, Training 315w
Telephones, Costs 684–5w
Temporary immigrants 563w
Wave power 584–5w

Bennett, Mr Andrew F
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 871
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 87–90wh, 99wh, 105wh, 114wh, 116–7wh, 120wh
Questions
Fairgrounds, Planning permission 668–9w

Bentwood
Closures (07.03.00) 155–62wh

Bercow, Mr John
Debates etc.
Correspondence, Points of order (09.03.00) 1201
Economic policy (01.03.00) 477
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 172, 178
NHS (08.03.00) 1025
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1205
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 770–3
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 462, 469, 474
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1078, 1087–93
Telecommunications Masts (Development) Bill, 1R (01.03.00) 425–7
Questions
Albania, EC aid 624w
Art works, Exports 5

Bercow, Mr John—continued
British Museum, Dismissal 432w
British Museum, Pay 431w
Civil servants, Disabled 995
Council housing, Tenant management organisations 845–6
Cultural heritage, Europe 432–3w
Curriculum, European Communities 576–7w
Developing countries, Debts 295w
Discrimination, EC action 477w
EC budget, Fraud 539–40w
EC countries, Fines 520w
EC law, Training 420w
Economic and monetary union, Wales 233w
European Commission, Reform 498w
European Communities, Diplomatic immunity 433w
European Police Office, Pay 540w
Fishing catches, Quotas 581w
Fishing catches, Research 534w
Jean Monnet action 475w
Means tested benefits 747–8
National Audit Office 18
New deal for young people 311–2w, 470w
Orders and regulations 688w
Our Europe Association 869w
Part-time employment, Conditions of employment 339w
Peace keeping operations, EC action 326w
Pensions, EC action 516w, 856w
Press, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 499w
Prizes, EC action 856w
Racial discrimination, EC law 578w
Recycling 551
Schengen Agreement 545w
South Africa, Police 451w
Taxation 814w
UK membership of EC 499w
UK membership of EC, Exhibitions 434w
UK membership of EC, Publications 434w
UK trade with EC 516w
Working families tax credit, Scotland 1182–3

Beresford, Sir Paul
Debates etc.
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 811–3

Bermingham, Mr Gerald
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 887, 902–3, 966–7
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 718, 723–4, 726–8, 730, 734
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 445
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 251, 253, 270
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1120

Best, Mr Harold
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 942–4

Beta-interferon
146–8

Better government programme
Elderly 688w

Biodiversity
281w

Birmingham Relief Road
9w
Tolls 153w

Bishop Gilpin School
573w

Blackman, Mrs Liz
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1306, 1346–7
Questions
Regional planning and development, East Midlands 536

Blair, Rt Hon Tony, Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service
Questions
Cash dispensing 415–6
Clinton, Bill 349w
Crime prevention, Stockport 423–4
Diabetes, Medical equipment 419–20
Drugs, Abuse 1004–5
Drugs, Young people 349w
Economic regions 1003–4
Females, Equal opportunities 1000
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 563w
Government contracts 789w
Government departments, Disclosure of information 686w
Grammar schools 1004
Health centres 997–8
Heart diseases, Wales 788–9w
Heath, Edward 423
Higher civil servants, Prime Minister 265w
Hospitals, Construction 420
Hospitals, Waiting lists 416–20, 1005
Housing, Reigate 1000
Iraq 1005–6
Iraq, Sanctions 1004
James Paget Hospital 422–3
Local government finance, Cambridgeshire 1006
Long-Term Care Royal Commission 424
Mayor of London 419–21, 999–1000, 1002–3
Metropolitan Police, Manpower 998–9
Midwives 424
Mozambique, Disaster relief 419, 1001
News at Ten 423
NHS 421–2, 1001
NHS, Wales 563w
Non-departmental public bodies 789w
Official engagements, Prime Minister 265w
Official hospitality, Prime Minister 265w
Operation Horseshoe 686w
Performance and Innovation Unit 349w
Pigs 999
Refugees 422
Royal Society of St George, Correspondence 563w
Russia, Seals 828w
Schools, Buildings 1000–1
"Sharing the Nations Prosperity" 685–6w
Smoking 1003
Students, Fees and charges 828w
United Nations, Iraq 563w
Voluntary work, South Yorkshire 417–8
World Education Forum 563w

Blakenhurst Prison
823w

Blears, Ms Hazel
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 905, 909, 921, 924–6, 934, 942, 953–7
Questions
Recreation spaces 15
Regional assemblies, Disadvantaged 851
Social security benefits, Lone parents 510–1w

Blind
see Sight impaired

Blizzard, Mr Bob
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 126–7wh
Questions
Coastal areas 855
Community hospitals 216w
Income support, North West region 755
James Paget Hospital 422–3
Kenya, Schools 298w
Pensioners, Income support 509–10w
Ports, Safety 834w

Blood transfusions
75w

Bloody Sunday Tribunal of Inquiry
269w

Blunt, Mr Crispin
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 40, 110
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 877
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1139–41
Questions
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency 35w
Housing, Reigate 1000
Kosovo, Education 415
M25, Porous asphalt 9w, 597–8w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 28
Railways, Safety 595w
Social security benefits, Abuse 508w
Sports, Females 12
Taxation 815w

Boateng, Rt Hon Paul, Minister of State, Home Office
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Prisons, Drugs (29.02.00) 20–4wh
Questions
Blakenhurst Prison 823w
Body searches 383w
Court welfare officers, Training 421w
Full Sutton Prison, Race relations 547w
Habitual offenders 823w
Home detention curfews 448–9w, 571–2w
National Probation Service for England and Wales 449w
Preston Prison 255w
Prison accommodation 546w
Prison Service, Race relations 547w
Prisoners, Body searches 442w
Prisoners, Disabled 106–7w
Prisoners, Foreigners 254w
Prisoners, Questionnaires 254w
Prisoners, Race relations 254w
Prisoners, Racial discrimination 546w
Prisoners, Suicide 442w, 546w
Prisons, Construction 447w
Prisons, Crimes of violence 544w
Prisons, Greater London 374w
Prisons, Pest control 548w
Prisons, Publications 254–5w, 443–4w
Prisons, Sanitation 255w
Prisons, Standards 543w
Prisons, Telephones 547–8w
Project Quantum 441–2w
Romanian Orphanage Trust 553w
Sexual offences, Rehabilitation 443w
Snelling, Christopher 539w
Young offenders, Secure accommodation 444–6w

Body dysmorphic disorder
226w

Body searches
383w
Prisoners 442w

Boscombe Down
RAF strike command 709–10w

Boswell, Mr Tim
Questions
Access funds 307w
Further education, East Midlands 473–4w
Further education, Student numbers 793–4w
Higher education, Finance 136–7w
Higher education, Student numbers 138w, 314–5w
Prisoners, Disabled 106–7w
Remploy 309w
Students, Finance 473w
Supported employment programme 307w
Taxation 1184–5
Training and enterprise councils, Finance 479w

Bottomley, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 458–9
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 875
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1292
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1215, 1233, 1238, 1268–71, 1277
Roads, Points of order (29.02.00) 166
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Prisons, Drugs (29.02.00) 17–22wh
Questions
Prisoners, Body searches 442w
Roads, Accidents 162–3
Students, Fees and charges 394w

Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Questions
A3, Hindhead 2–3w
Durham Health Authority, Waiting lists 72w
Hospitals, Waiting lists 76w, 1005
Influenza 750–1w
Midwives 424
Public appointments 990

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy
403w, 786–7w
France 530w, 716w

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Creutzfeld Jakob Disease Inquiry
719–20w, 867w

Bradley, Mr Keith, Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Deputy Chief Whip)
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 375

Bradshaw, Mr Ben
Questions
Government departments, Manpower 527w

Brady, Mr Graham
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 257, 284, 300, 302–4, 309
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 774
Questions
Ammunition 32w
Business questions 1199
Education, Finance 790w
Excise duties, Tobacco 561w
Football, EC law 431w

Brady, Mr Graham*—*continued
Harold Shipman Inquiry 862w
Labour market 341w
New deal for young people 312w
NHS, Ringfenced funding 788w
Press releases, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 837–8w
Press releases, Dept of Health 865–6w
Press releases, Dept of Social Security 845–6w
Press releases, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 832–3w
Press releases, Dept of Trade and Industry 839–40w
Press releases, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 870–3w
Press releases, Home Office 861–2w
Press releases, Lord Chancellor's Dept 836w
Press releases, Ministry of Defence 827w
Press releases, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 825w
Press releases, President of the Council 826w
Regional government 861–2
Regional selective assistance, North West region 543
Royal Society of St George, Correspondence 563w
Social security benefits, Abuse 508w
Surgery 149
Tax burden 1174–5
Zimbabwe, Overseas aid 292–3w

Brake, Mr Tom
Debates etc.
Breasts, Plastic surgery (03.03.00) 738–41, 744
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1317–20, 1330
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 58–60wh, 65wh
Parks (02.03.00) 95–7wh, 118wh
Questions
Breasts, Plastic surgery 410–1w
Climate Change Convention 341–2w
Developing countries, Nuclear power stations 215–6w
Environment protection 273w
Nuclear power 273–4w, 280–1w
Peat, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 26w

Brand, Dr Peter
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 130–2wh, 137wh
Questions
Epilepsy 229–30w
Livestock, Exports 26w
Nurses, Manpower 73w
Police, Health insurance 105w

Brazier, Mr Julian
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 40–1, 55, 57, 92–5
Questions
Poverty, Children 746

Brazil
Minesweepers 483w

Breast cancer
222w

Breasts
Plastic surgery 410–1w, (03.03.00) 738–44

Breed, Mr Colin
Questions
Areas of outstanding natural beauty 453w

Breed, Mr Colin*—*continued
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 403w
Children, Day care 578w
General practitioners 758w
Integrated administration and control system 798w
Maternity services, Rural areas 748w
New deal for schools 306w
Part-time employment, Farmers 313–4w
Pigs 534w, 718w, 800w
Public transport, Rural areas 4w
Regional development agencies 590–2w
Schools, Urban areas 144w
Social services, Rural areas 73–4w
Sure start programme, Rural areas 311w

Brinton, Mrs Helen
Questions
General practitioners, Insurance 625–6w
Health centres 997–8
Riot control weapons 753w
Riot control weapons, Mentally ill 287w

Bristol
Ear nose and throat 222–3w

British Broadcasting Corporation
see BBC

British Cheque Cashers Association
811w

British citizenship
Mentally incapacitated 112–3w

British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme
47w

British Council
274w
Africa 276w

British dependent territories
618w

British Library
605–6w

British Museum
Dismissal 432w
Pay 431w

British Nuclear Fuels
464w
Correspondence 421w
Public appointments 422w

British Resorts' Association
781w

British Waterways Board
External financing limits 284w

Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 580–1
Questions
Business questions 566, 1193–4
Housing benefit, Abuse 755–6
Manufacturing industries 1172–3
Manufacturing industries, Technology 538
Millennium Exhibition 8
New Millennium Experience 89w, 732w
River Thames, Death 373w
Sleeping rough 850

Brown, Rt Hon Gordon, Chancellor of the Exchequer
Questions
Euro 1181–2
Manufacturing industries 1172–4
Unemployment, Conwy 1171–2

Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Questions
Agriculture 15–6w, 20w

Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas*—*continued
Agriculture development scheme 22w
Beef, Retail trade 25–6w
EC Agriculture Council 244–5w
Gardening leave, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 23w
Modernising government programme, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 285w
Sheep, Ritual slaughter 23w

Brown, Mr Russell
Debates etc.
Childbirth, Registration (10.03.00) 1364–6
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1356–8

Browne, Mr Desmond
Debates etc.
Whisky, Exports (29.02.00) 399–402
Questions
Arms trade 46–7w
Children, Employment 214w
Civil servants, Disabled 994–5
Developing countries, Trade agreements 211–2w
Drugs, Developing countries 270–1w
Equal pay 393w
Water charges, Consumer protection 419–20w
Working families tax credit, Scotland 1182

Browning, Mrs Angela
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1066–73, 1076, 1080, 1086
Questions
Iron and steel, Trade competitiveness 546
Regional planning and development, East Midlands 537
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 557–8, 683w

Bruce, Mr Ian
Debates etc.
Correspondence, Points of order (09.03.00) 1200
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 306–7
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 767, 781, 785, 791, 804–5, 813–9, 826, 834
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1072, 1075–6, 1085–6, 1090–1, 1097–100, 1106
Questions
Business questions 1197–8
Coastal areas 855–6
Government departments, Correspondence 995–6
Internet 546–7

Bruce, Mr Malcolm
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 485, 512
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 456–7
Questions
Local government, Pay 521w
Pigs 24–5w
Winter fuel payments, Scotland 167–9w

BSE
see Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Creutzfeld Jakob Disease Inquiry

Buck, Ms Karen
Debates etc.
Protected tenancies (02.03.00) 656–8
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1235, 1272
Questions
Child care tax credit 854w
Greater London Authority, Elections 779w
Housing benefit 682w

Buck, Ms Karen*—*continued
Prostitution, Advertising 665w
Racially aggravated offences 664–5w
Rented housing, Unemployment 8w
Working families tax credit 852w

Building Societies (Transfer Resolutions) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (03.03.00) 737

Bulgaria
Trade promotion 535–6

Burden, Mr Richard
Questions
Fisheries, Grants 578w
Local government, Pensions 453–4w
Regional aid 544

Burgon, Mr Colin
Questions
Museums and galleries, Young people 98w
Social security benefits, Elderly 801w
Television, Licensing 735w

Burnett, Mr John
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 899, 927, 965
Economic policy (01.03.00) 488
Energy Efficiency Bill, 2R adjourned (10.03.00) 1361
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 593–4
Questions
Monetary compensatory amounts 245–6w

Burns, Mr Simon
Debates etc.
Ministerial statement intervention (07.03.00) 877
NHS (08.03.00) 1018, 1033–5, 1038–43, 1045
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 880
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1299, 1304, 1310–5
Questions
Refugees, Chelmsford 378w

Burstow, Mr Paul
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 506
Questions
Computers, Ministry of Defence 210w, 270w
MMR vaccine 79w, 752w
National Lottery Distribution Fund 93w
Social Security Benefits Agency, Information services 750–1

Burton
National Lottery 100w

Burundi
Peace negotiations 434w, 725–6w

Bus services
Rural areas 14w, 778w
Shropshire 778w
Tourism 831w

Buses
281w

Business
Regulation 555–6

Business motions
(01.03.00) 526, 532

Business statements
(28.02.00) 32, 561–70, 1189–99

Butler, Mrs Christine
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 872

Butterfill, Mr John
Questions
Interest rates 816w
Mayor of London 419

Byers, Rt Hon Stephen, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1073–82
Questions
Business, Regulation 556
Cars, Competition 583w
Cash dispensing 589w
Community development 583–4w
Drugs, Developing countries 270–1w
Economic and monetary union 340–1w
Economic and monetary union, Dept of Trade and Industry 343w
Export credit guarantees 271–2w
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Reviews 547–8
Manufacturing industries, Technology 537–9
Milk Marque 554
Newspaper press 468w
Overseas trade, Austria 585w
Press releases, Dept of Trade and Industry 839–40w
Prices 50w, 683w, 840–1w
Public bodies, Dept of Trade and Industry 423w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 555–60, 683w, 839w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000, Legislative process 555–6
World Trade Organisation 548–9

Cabinet Office
Catering 264w
Gardening leave 151w
Information officers 609w
Public bodies 526–7w, 576w
Recycling 609w

Cable, Mr Vincent
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 186–93wh
Questions
Arms trade, Export credit guarantees 49w
Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Creutzfeld Jakob Disease Inquiry 719–20w, 867w
Cash dispensing 525w, 589w, 840w
Electronic government 689w
Export credit guarantees 185w, 271–2w
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Finance 424w
Learning disability 72–3w
Manufacturing industries, Technology 538–9
Mortgages 517w
Tax avoidance 1179–80
Taxation, Local government 519–20w
Telephone services, Computers 468–9w
Trade agreements, Agriculture 52w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 839w

Caborn, Rt Hon Richard, Minister for Trade, Dept of Trade and Industry
Questions
Arms trade 343w
Arms trade, Export credit guarantees 49w, 466–7w
Balkans, Construction 465–6w
EC grants and loans 134w, 342w, 425–6w
EC grants and loans, Merseyside 467–8w
Export credit guarantees 185w, 272w
Export credit guarantees, Turkey 342–3w
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Finance 424w
Flowers, Imports 468w

Caborn, Rt Hon Richard—continued
Government offices for the regions, Dept of Trade and Industry 839w
Ilisu dam 45w, 423w, 464w, 583w
Innovation 339w
Overseas trade, Austria 50w
Overseas trade, Latin America 684w
Radioactive materials, Exports 421–2w
Trade agreements, Agriculture 52w
Water supply, South Africa 464w

Cadets
Armed forces 325w

Cambridgeshire
Local government finance 1006

Campbell, Mrs Anne
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 478, 513–5
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Prisons, Drugs (29.02.00) 20wh
Questions
Business questions 1198–9
NHS, Per capita costs 626–7w
Sleeping rough 850
Taxation 1185

Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 34, 36
Mozambique, Points of order (06.03.00) 766
Questions
Army Base Repair Organisation, Standards 491–2w
Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency, Standards 714–5w
Army Personnel Centre, Standards 707w
Army Technical Support Agency, Standards 701–2w
Army Training and Recruiting Agency, Standards 693–5w
Defence Analytical Services Agency, Standards 646–7w
Defence Animal Centre, Performance standards 708w
Defence Bills Agency, Standards 706–7w
Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency, Standards 644w
Defence Communications Services Agency, Standards 487–8w
Defence Dental Agency, Standards 645w
Defence Estate Organisation, Standards 690w
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, Standards 691–3w
Defence Medical Training Organisation, Standards 710–1w
Defence Secondary Care Agency, Standards 495–6w
Defence Transport and Movements Executive, Standards 703–5w
Defence Vetting Agency, Standards 711–3w
Disposal Sales Agency, Standards 635–6w
Duke of York's Royal Military School, Standards 633–5w
Hydrographic Office, Standards 485–6w
Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre, Standards 700–1w
Logistic Information Systems Agency, Standards 645–6w
Medical Supplies Agency, Standards 488–9w
Meteorological Office, Standards 698–700w
Military exercises, Costs 31–2w
Military Survey, Standards 705–6w
Ministry of Defence Police, Standards 713–4w

Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies—continued
Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation, Standards 708w
Naval Bases and Supply Agency, Standards 637–8w
Naval Manning Agency, Standards 493–5w
Pay and Personnel Agency, Standards 496–7w
Queen Victoria School, Standards 490–1w
RAF Logistics Support Services, Standards 492–3w
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment, Standards 690–1w
RAF Training Group, Standards 486–7w
Service Children's Education, Standards 695–7w
Ships Support Agency, Standards 490w
Specialist Procurement Services, Standards 636–7w

Campbell-Savours, Mr Dale
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 275, 284, 293–4
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 771, 794, 801
Questions
Electronic commerce 539–40
"International Development Select Committee on the Future of Sanctions" 295w
Manufacturing industries 1173
Mozambique, Disaster relief 30–1
National Audit Office 18–9
Prices 841w
Social security benefits, Abuse 752–3

Canavan, Mr Dennis
Questions
China, Human rights 299w, 619w
Iran, Political prisoners 621w

Cancer
Children 743w
Exservicemen 34w
Health services 752–3w, 787–8w
Hertfordshire 747w
Screening 746w

Cann, Mr Jamie
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 90–2

Cannabis
Decriminalisation (09.03.00) 1202

Capital rules
Social security benefits 172w, 727w

Caplin, Mr Ivor
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 304, 331
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 875
Questions
Housing, Capital investment 858–9

Career structure
Police 125w

Carers
Barnsley (01.03.00) 66–73wh
Telephone services 74w

Carers and Disabled Children Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
Money res* (06.03.00) 837

Carlisle
Jobcentres 392w

Cars
Competition 583w

Casale, Mr Roger
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 52

Cash, Mr William
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 479, 483
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 222–6, 232, 237–8, 241–8
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1075

Cash dispensing
415–6, 525w, 589w, 840w

Cash limits
Northern Ireland Office 405–6w

Cataracts
Surgery 150–2, 222w

Catering
Armed forces 325w, 498w
Cabinet Office 264w
Millennium Exhibition 88–9w, 250–1w, 350w
Ministry of Defence 35w
Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 39w

Caton, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 611, 629
Questions
Remploy, Dept for Education and Employment 148w
Remploy, Dept for International Development 213w
Remploy, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 22w

Cattle tracing system
720w

Cawsey, Mr Ian
Questions
Pigs 999
Seas and oceans, Nature conservation 18w

Cellular phones
Electronic surveillance 544w

Cerebral palsy
788w
Babies 762w

Chancellor of the Exchequer
see Treasury

Change of use
Farms 674w

Channel tunnel railway line
860–1

Chapman, Mr Ben
Questions
Air force, Recruitment 26–7w
British Council 274w
Chevening scholarships programme 397–8w
China, Foreign relations 274w
China, Poverty 214w
Gamma hydroxybutyrate 107w, 373–4w
Heritage Lottery Fund, Finance 91w
Magistrates, Training 659w
Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group 800w
Television, Licensing 351w

Chapman, Sir Sydney
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 879
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1322–5
Questions
Civil servants, Secondment 991–2

Chapman, Sir Sydney—continued
Clergy, Pay 82w
Heath, Edward 423
Housing benefit, Abuse 763–4
Palace of Westminster, Pest control 479–80w
Parliament, Disabled 796–7w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 555

Charter of Pardon 1508
58w

Chaytor, Mr David
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1302
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Bentwood, Closures (07.03.00) 158–60wh
Questions
Atomic Weapons Establishment 641w
British Nuclear Fuels 464w
British Nuclear Fuels, Correspondence 421w
Business, Regulation 556
Climate change levy 1183
Dental services, Cosmetics 69w
GCE 740w
GCE A level, Computers 573w
Hospitals, Greenhouse effect 744–5w
Income support 510w
Radioactive materials, Exports 421–2w, 582w
Radioactive materials, Germany 424w, 464–5w
Radioactive materials, Japan 422w, 499w
Radioactive materials, Switzerland 582w
Russia, Plutonium 615w
Schools, Greenhouse effect 790w
Secondary education, Assessments 573w
Sellafield 422w

Chechnya
503w

Chelmsford
Refugees 378w

Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment
Nancekuke 32–3w

Chemical and biological warfare
647–8w, 708–9w

Chevening scholarships programme
397–8w

Chideock bypass
675w

Chidgey, Mr David
Questions
Restraint equipment, Export controls 873w

Child Abuse in North Wales Judicial Inquiry
39w, 231w, 287w

Child benefit
842w
Widowed people 303w

Child care tax credit
852–4w

Child Support Agency
Compensation 302–3w
Information technology 614w

Childbirth
762–3w
Death 761–2w
Registration (10.03.00) 1364–70

Children
Africa 275–6w
Armed forces 275–6w
Cancer 743w

Children—continued
Corporal punishment 60w
Day care 578w
Employment 214w
Households 522–3w
Maintenance 352w, 512–3w
Meningitis 759w
Poverty 330w, 745–7
Residence orders 765–6w

China
Foreign relations 274w
Human rights 299w, 619w
Orphans 624w
Poverty 214w
State visits 858w

Chinook helicopters
Accidents 34w

Chiropody
Staffordshire 74w

Chope, Mr Christopher
Questions
Accident and emergency departments 143–4
Airport tax 817w
Austria, Foreign relations 439w
Austria, overseas trade 50w, 585w
Crime, Greater London 449–50w
Departmental coordination 993–4
Dorset Police, Manpower 665w
EC grants and loans 550
Nature conservation, Dorset 670w
Newspaper press 468w
Prices 50w, 683w, 840w
State earnings related pension scheme 512w
Television, Licensing 4, 482w, 604–5w
Tree felling, Licensing 581–2w, 723w

Chronically sick
Primary care groups 80w

Church Commissioners
Investment 81w
New deal schemes 81w

Churches
Insurance 16
VAT 81–2w

Circumcision
Females 214–5w, 450–1w

Citizenship
Curriculum 310–1w

City of London (Ward Elections) Bill 1998/99
Debates etc.
Order for further consideration read (01.03.00) 407, (08.03.00) 989

Civil disorder
Zimbabwe 726w

Civil Procedure Rule Committee
Public appointments 261–2w

Civil servants
Astra Training Services 397w
Disabled 994–5
Northern Ireland Office 205w
Secondment 991–3

Civil service
Location 373w

Civilians
Ministry of Defence 429w

Clapham, Mr Michael
Questions
Asbestos, Industrial health and safety 670w, 830w
Asbestos, Industrial injuries disablement benefit 804–5w

***Clapham, Mr Michael**—continued*
Asbestosis, Armed forces 653w
Asbestosis, Compensation 729w
Labour market 813w

Clappison, Mr James
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 891, 907, 938–42
Questions
Crime, Greater London 450w
Curriculum, Citizenship 310–1w
New Local Government Network 305w
Secondary education, Per capita costs 144w
Teachers, Information technology 737w
Teachers, Recruitment 477w

Clark, Rt Hon Dr David
Questions
Lake Windermere 199w

Clark, Mr Paul
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 873
Questions
Illegal immigrants, Fixed penalties 662–3w
Pinochet, Augusto 357–71w

Clarke, Mr Charles, Minister of State, Home Office
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 965–9
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 787, 825–35
Questions
Antisocial behaviour orders 555w
Child Abuse in North Wales Judicial Inquiry 287w
Cleveland Constabulary, Inquiries 859w
Crime 125–6w
Crime, Greater London 449–50w
Criminal Records Bureau 112w
Dorset Police, Manpower 665w
Drug treatment and testing orders 128w
Drugs, Abuse 663w
EC budget, Fraud 539–40w
EC justice and home affairs 665–6w
Electronic surveillance 572w
Electronic surveillance, Cellular phones 544w
Essex Police, Manpower 553–5w
Essex Police, Metropolitan Police 555w
European Police Office, Pay 540w
Gamma hydroxybutyrate 107w, 373–4w
Genetics, Databases 118w, 858–9w
Hampshire Constabulary, Manpower 126–7w
Hillsborough Stadium Evidence Inquiry, Disclosure of information 108w
Immobilisation of vehicles, Regulation 254w
Leicestershire Police, Manpower 666w
Metropolitan Police, Health services 373w
Metropolitan Police, Housing 447w
Metropolitan Police, Manpower 289w
Metropolitan Police, Recruitment 112w
Paedophilia 571w
Police, Buildings 125w
Police, Career structure 125w
Police, Consultants 126w
Police, Criminal injuries compensation 564w
Police, Ethnic groups 123–4w, 860–1w
Police, Freemasonry 123w
Police, Health insurance 105w
Police, Kingston upon Thames 116–7w
Police, Manpower 121–5w
Police, Pensions 564w, 571w
Police, Ports 104w
Police, Recruitment 374w, 564–5w

***Clarke, Mr Charles**—continued*
Police, Rural areas 118–9w
Police, Termination of employment 564w
Police, Vehicles 550–3w
Police stations, Closures 118w
Pornography, Internet 128w
Prison visitors 114–5w
Prisoners, Disabled 113w
Prisons, Discipline 113–4w
Prisons, Females 107w
Prisons, Nurses 113w
Prostitution, Advertising 665w
Public safety radio communications project 119–20w
Racially aggravated offences 664w, 861w
Rape 664w
Reel, Ricky 130w
Riot control weapons, Mentally ill 287w
River Thames, Death 373w
Schengen Agreement 545w
Segregation of prisoners 113w
Special constables, Manpower 117w
State visits, China 858w
Touting, Sports 570w
Trials 820–1w
Trials, Costs 446–7w
War crimes, Criminal investigation 548–9w
West Mercia Constabulary 127w

Clarke, Rt Hon Tom
Questions
Civil servants, Disabled 995
Poverty, EC action 411–2

Clarke, Mr Tony
Questions
Roads, Safety 282–3w

Class sizes
Hereford 396–7w
Newcastle upon Tyne 140–1w
Primary education 145w, 304–5w, 396–7w
Shrewsbury 304–5w
Somerset 390w

Cleft palate
415–6w, 765w

Clelland, Mr David, An Assistant Whip
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 45

Clergy
82w
Pay 82w
Pensions 81w

Cleveland Constabulary
Inquiries 859w

Clifton-Brown, Mr Geoffrey
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 335, 353, 356–8, 360–3, 366, 368, 390–2
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1106
Questions
Immigration, Correspondence 107w
Millennium Exhibition 6–7
NHS, Public private partnerships 221w
Redundant churches 17–8
World Bank, Poverty 291w

Climate Change Convention
341–2w, 681w

Climate change levy
813w, 1183–4

Clinical negligence scheme
864w

Clinical Standards Advisory Group
414–5w

Clinton, Bill
349w

Closed circuit television
Portadown 203w

Clwyd, Ann
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 582, 595
Questions
Ilisu dam 464w
Jubilee line 186w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 24–5, 710w
NHS, Wales 40w
Poultry, Animal welfare 19w, 247w
Social Security Benefits Agency, Information services 751
Water supply, South Africa 464w

Clyde submarine base
651–2w
Radiation exposure 638–40w

Coaker Mr Vernon
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 492, 494
Questions
Drugs, Health education 687w
Dyslexia 306w
Education, Finance 9–10w
Fares, Sight impaired 417w
Kosovo, Education 414–5
National Foundation for Youth Music 92w
News at Ten 423
Textiles, East Midlands 552

Coal
Mining 603w

Coastal areas
855–6

Cohen, Mr Harry
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 105–6
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 791–4, 830
Questions
Arms trade 35w
Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 870w
Defence equipment, Balkans 36w
Government contracts 789w
Greater London Authority, Elections 195w
Iraq, Oil 617–8w
Kosovo, Armed conflict 36w
London Ambulance Service 74w
London Underground, Public private partnerships 331–2w
London Underground, Rolling stock 5w
Serbia, Overseas aid 452w
Surgery 148
Water supply, Greater London 5–6w

Cold weather payments
Paisley 848w

Coleman, Mr Iain
Questions
Education, Refugees 314w
Working families tax credit, Greater London 152w

Collins, Mr Tim
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 702
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 392–5

Colman, Mr Tony
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 243–6wh, 254wh, 258–9wh
Questions
Bishop Gilpin School 573w
British citizenship, Mentally incapacitated 112–3w
New deal for disabled people 471w
Planning permission, Greater London 600–1w
UK trade with EC, South East region 156w

Colvin, Michael
Death (28.02.00) 1

Combined heat and power
671–2w
Non-domestic rates 454–5w

Commission for Integrated Transport
see Integrated Transport Commission

Commission for Racial Equality
382–3w

Commission of the European Communities
see European Commission

Committee on Safety of Medicines
630w

Common agricultural policy
Herefordshire 798w

Community development
583–4w

Community hospitals
216w

Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Service
see National Probation Service for England and Wales

Companies
Fund raising 554

Company cars
Safety 601w

Company liquidations
551–2

Competition
131w, 340w
Cars 583w
Supermarkets 47w

Comptroller and Auditor General
see National Audit Office

Computers
GCE A level 573w
Home Office 544w
Ministry of Defence 210w, 270w
Social security benefits 812w
Teachers 574–5w
Telephone services 468–9w

Computers within reach programme
576w

Conditions of employment
338w
Dept of Social Security 170–2w
Dept of Trade and Industry 52–7w
Ministry of Defence 27–8w
Part-time employment 339w

Connarty, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1309
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 198–201wh, 203–4wh, 206–7wh

Connarty, Mr Michael—continued
Questions
Electronic commerce, Advisory services 337w

Connex Rail
Standards 673w

Conservation
Energy (10.03.00) 1296–389

Consultants
Dept for International Development 796w
Home Office 118w, 385–6w
Hospitals 217w
Northern Ireland Office 203w
Police 126w

Consumer protection
Water charges 419–20w

Consumers
339w
Debts 155w

Contact orders
41–2w

Contraceptives
865w
Fees and charges 762w

Contracts
Employment zones 308–9w
New Millennium Experience 250–1w, 433w

Contracts for services
Education 315w

Control of Hedgerows in Residential Areas Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (29.02.00) 167–9

Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide
870w

Conwy
Unemployment 1171–2

Cook, Frank
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 63–6

Cook, Rt Hon Robin, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Questions
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages 435w
Gaddafi, Colonel 131–2w
Government Communications Headquarters 502w
Official visits 134–5w
Press releases, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 870–3w
Select committees 873–4w
Visits abroad, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 135w

Cooper, Ms Yvette, Minister for Public Health, Dept of Health
Debates etc.
Sickle cell diseases (06.03.00) 840–4
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Barnsley Health Authority (29.02.00) 13–6wh
Questions
Advertising, Dept of Health 748w
Alternative energy, Dept of Health 749–50w
Alternative medicine, Primary care trusts 216w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 786–7w

Cooper, Ms Yvette—continued
Breast cancer 222w
Cancer, Children 743w
Cancer, Health services 787–8w
Cancer, Hertfordshire 747w
Cancer, Screening 746w
Cerebral palsy, Babies 762w
Childbirth 762–3w
Contraceptives 865w
Drugs, Labelling 760w
Electromagnetic fields, Health hazards 863–4w
Fertility, Health services 785–6w
Fertility, Medical treatments 69w
Fluoride 754w
Foetal tissue 763w
General practitioners, Fees and charges 762w
Genetically modified organisms, Crops 743–4w
Heart diseases, Health services 752–3w
Hernia operations 218w
Higher civil servants, Dept of Health 748w
Hospitals, Greenhouse effect 744–5w
Hospitals, Pest control 762w
Hospitals, Worcestershire 745w
Human Genetics Commission, Finance 755w
Hysterectomy, Surrogate motherhood 754w
Influenza 747w, 750–1w
Irritable bowel syndrome, Fluoride 753w
Kidderminster Hospital 745–6w
Magnetic resonance imagers, Walsall 864w
Maternity services, Rural areas 748w
Medical Devices Agency, Standards 788w
Methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus 232w
Midwives 137–9, 757w
Miscarriage 763w
MMR vaccine 79w, 752w
Newtown Hospital 745w
NHS, Publicity 754–5w
NHS, Ringfenced funding 788w
Osteoporosis, Health education 755w
Patients, Leicestershire 760–1w
Peat, Dept of Health 749w
Plants, Dept of Health 748w
Public bodies, Dept of Health 757–8w
Recycling, Dept of Health 751w
Research, Dept of Health 749–50w
Riot control weapons 753w
Royal Bolton Hospital, Paediatrics 743w
Smoking 220w
Sure start programme 794w
Sure start programme, Rural areas 311w
Tobacco, Additives 763–4w
Tuberculosis 70–1w, 755–6w
Tuberculosis, Hereford 756–7w
Tuberculosis, Vaccination 315–7w, 764w
Vaccination 759w

Corbett, Mr Robin
Questions
Millennium Exhibition 8

Corbyn, Mr Jeremy
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 42
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 577–8
Pinochet, Augusto, Points of order (01.03.00) 482
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 50–3wh
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 143wh
Questions
Arms trade, Africa 585–6w
Chechnya 503w
Council housing, Greater London 590w
Democratic Republic of Congo, Arms trade 502w

Corbyn, Mr Jeremy—continued
Democratic Republic of Congo, Peace negotiations 502–3w
Housing benefit, Abuse 757
Housing benefit, Greater London 805–7w
Indian Ocean, Storms 528w
Indian subcontinent, Arms trade 503–4w
International Criminal Court 503w
Mozambique, Debts written off 525w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 28–9, 329w, 406–7w, 796w
Mozambique, Soil erosion 623–4w
Pinochet, Augusto 386w
Police, Vehicles 550–3w
Redundant churches 17
Roads, Accidents 163–4
Social security benefits 800–1w
Social security benefits, Abuse 808w
Sri Lanka, Peace negotiations 503w
War crimes, Criminal investigation 548–9w
Whittington Hospital 223w

Cormack, Sir Patrick
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1119
Questions
Business questions 570

Corporal punishment
Children 60w

Corston, Jean
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 904, 910–4
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1254–8
Questions
Business questions 1193
Cash limits, Northern Ireland Office 405–6w

Cosmetics
Dental services 69w

Cotter, Mr Brian
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1077, 1081–3
Questions
Small businesses, Loan guarantee scheme 344w

Council housing
Greater London 590w
North West region 192–4w
Property transfer 598–9w, 675–81w
Refugees 540–1w
Tenant management organisations 845–6

Council of Ministers
435–9w

Council tax
13w

Council tax benefits
180w

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (03.03.00) 664

Court orders
Evictions 420–1w

Court welfare officers
264w
Training 421w

Courts
Closures 654–9w

Cousins, Mr Jim
Questions
Abkhazia 398w
Class sizes, Newcastle upon Tyne 140–1w
Consumers, Debts 155w
Defence capabilities initiative 33w
Education, Tyne and Wear 148w
Housing benefit, Abuse 756–7
Intervention Board 402–3w
Limited liability, Partnerships 47w
North Sea Decommissioning Group 50–1w
Personal income, North East region 154–5w
Police, Training 275w
Population, Newcastle upon Tyne 154w
Pre-school education, Newcastle upon Tyne 145–6w
School meals, Newcastle upon Tyne 143w
Social security benefits, Compensation 234–5w
Special education, Newcastle upon Tyne 148–9w
Voluntary organisations, Finance 58w

Cox, Mr Tom
Questions
Agriculture, Land use 798w
Agriculture, Radioactive fallout 868–9w
Animal experiments, EC law 447w
EC grants and loans 134w
Employment, Greater London 851–2w
Excise duties, Motor vehicles 266w
Free school meals, Greater London 475w
Higher civil servants, Dept for International Development 213w
Higher civil servants, Dept of Health 748w
Higher civil servants, Dept of Social Security 170w
Higher civil servants, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 4–5w
Higher civil servants, Home Office 253–4w
Higher civil servants, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 20w
Higher civil servants, Northern Ireland Office 204w
Higher civil servants, Prime Minister 265w
Higher civil servants, Scotland Office 469w
House of Commons, Security 609–10w
Immigration, Appeals 666w
Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Manpower 545w
International Labour Organisation, Treaties 725w
Leasehold 599w
Midwives 138
Minimum wage 466w
Paedophilia 571w
Parliament, Disabled 796–7w
Prison visitors 114–5w
Prisoners, Disabled 113w
Prisoners, Foreigners 254w
Prisoners, Questionnaires 254w
Prisoners, Race relations 254w
Prisoners, Suicide 442w
Prisons, Construction 447w
Prisons, Discipline 113–4w
Prisons, Females 107w
Prisons, Greater London 374w
Prisons, Nurses 113w
Prisons, Publications 254–5w, 443–4w
Prisons, Sanitation 255w
Refugees, Greater London 569w
Segregation of prisoners 113w
Sexual offences, Rehabilitation 443w
Smuggling, Drugs 521w
Sri Lanka 724–5w
Sri Lanka, Peace negotiations 869w

Cox, Mr Tom—continued
State retirement pensions, Greater London 427w
Terrorism, Northern Ireland 404w
Zana, Layla 398w

Cranston, Mr Ross, Solicitor-General
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto, Ministerial statements (02.03.00) 589–95
Questions
Barristers, Training 782w
Fraud, Immunity from prosecution 463w
Homicide, Appeals 462–3w
Human rights, Legislative drafting 562w
Judicial review 335–6w
Pinochet, Augusto 336–7w
Racially aggravated offences 664–5w
Recycling, Solicitor-General 2w

Crausby, Mr David
Questions
Dental services 407–8w
Dental services, Fees and charges 58w
Disabled, Scotland Office 469w
Ethnic groups, Scotland Office 469w
General practitioners, Attendance 76w
Housing benefit 180w
Irritable bowel syndrome, Fluoride 753w
Lorries, Roads 10w
Magistrates, Public appointments 149w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 1001
New deal for 50 plus 147w
Recycling, Cabinet Office 609w
Recycling, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 96w
Recycling, Dept for Education and Employment 391w
Recycling, Dept for International Development 211w
Recycling, Dept of Health 751w
Recycling, Dept of Social Security 234w
Recycling, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 6w
Recycling, Home Office 116w
Recycling, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 17w
Recycling, Ministry of Defence 36–7w
Recycling, Northern Ireland Office 404w
Recycling, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 38w
Recycling, Solicitor-General 2w
Royal Bolton Hospital, Paediatrics 743w
Smoke alarms 107–8w

Creutzfeldt-Jakob dementia
France 530w, 716w

Crime
125–6w
Drugs 149–50w
Greater London 449–50w

Crime prevention
Stockport 423–4

Crimes against the person
Hospitals 73w
Social workers 73w

Crimes of violence
Prisons 544w

Criminal injuries compensation
Police 564w

Criminal Injuries Compensation Board
857w

Criminal investigation
Torture 548–9w
War crimes 548–9w

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R (07.03.00) 886–980
Questions
374–7w

Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998
Questions
257w

Criminal records
Doctors 747w

Criminal Records Bureau
112w

Crops
Genetically modified organisms 16w, 532w, 743–4w, 799–800w

Crown Committee
see Prescribing Supply and Administration of Medicines Review Team

Cryer, Mrs Ann
Questions
Civilians, Ministry of Defence 429w

Cryer, Mr John
Questions
Disadvantaged, Young people 853–4

Cultural heritage
Europe 432–3w

Cumbria
New deal schemes 388w

Cummings, Mr John
Questions
British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme 47w
Mineworkers' pension scheme 586w
Post offices, Easington 467w

Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack
Questions
British Nuclear Fuels, Public appointments 422w

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Debates etc.
Control of Hedgerows in Residential Areas Bill, 1R (29.02.00) 167–8
Questions
Developing countries, Debts 412–3
Health services, Elderly 140–1
National Lottery 8–9
NHS trusts, Equipment 411–3w

Curriculum
Citizenship 310–1w
European Communities 576–7w
Politics 479w

Curtis-Thomas, Ms Claire
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1067, 1093–7
Questions
Driving tests 195w

Dalyell, Mr Tam
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 33
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 442, 444, 446, 457
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 277
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 588, 594
Questions
Business questions 566
Diego Garcia 504w
Drugs, Abuse 687w
Drugs, Labelling 760w
Forth rail bridge 857–8

Dalyell, Mr Tam—continued
Genetically modified organisms, Crops 16w
Incapacity benefit 749
Iraq, Sanctions 616w, 1004
Kosovo, Armed conflict 816w
Kosovo, Mines 498w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 30
Northern Ireland government 480w
Nursing homes, Post-operative care 231–2w
Open government 378w
Sombrero Island, Satellites 278w
Trade promotion, Bulgaria 536
United Nations, Iraq 563w

Dance
Teachers 14–5

Darling, Rt Hon Alistair, Secretary of State for Social Security
Questions
EC social policy 176–7w
Housing benefit, Abuse 755–8
Poverty, Children 745–7
Social security benefits, Abuse 751–3, 755–6

Dartmoor National Park
Quarrying 674–5w

Darvill, Mr Keith
Debates etc.
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 810–1, 817
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1094
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 53–5wh

Databases
Genetics 118w, 858–9w
Home Office 822w

Davey, Mr Edward
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 486–7
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 181–6, 201–2, 204, 209–10, 219, 222, 224, 228–39, 258, 260, 273, 325–8, 354–6, 387–9, 393
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1116, 1126
Questions
Buses 281w
Police, Kingston upon Thames 116–7w

Davey, Mrs Valerie
Questions
British dependent territories 618w

Davidson, Mr Ian
Debates etc.
Minimum wage, Scotland (08.03.00) 1162–4
Questions
Defence, Shipping 640w
Falkland Islands 724w
Winter fuel payments 847w
Written questions, Ministry of Defence 35w

Davies, Rt Hon Denzil
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 593
Wales (02.03.00) 629–34, 636
Questions
EC justice and home affairs 665–6w
Heart diseases, Wales 788–9w
Income support, Overseas residence 729w
New deal for lone parents, Wales 730w
NHS, Wales 563w
Taxation, EC action 562w

Davies, Mr Geraint
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1016, 1023, 1027
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1068, 1070, 1074, 1083
Questions
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Reviews 548
Planning, Urban areas 593w
Tax burden 1179

Davies, Mr Quentin
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 45–55
Sittings in Westminster Hall
AWE Aldermaston, Safety (01.03.00) 33–5wh, 37wh, 42–3wh
Questions
Defence equipment, Procurement 36w
Tactical reconnaissance armoured combat equipment requirement 30w

Davis, Rt Hon David
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 950–3
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 179–81, 183–4, 186, 204, 213–5, 219, 222–3, 230, 234, 239–40, 269–78, 310–2, 316–23, 325–7, 343–9, 370–1, 378, 380–1, 385–7, 389
Questions
Meetings, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 26w
National Audit Office 19–20

Davis, Rt Hon Terry
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 34–5, 69–71

Dawson, Mr Hilton
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1250–2, 1279
Questions
Astra Training Services, Civil servants 397w
Children, Corporal punishment 60w
Departmental coordination 994
Kosovo, Education 415

Day, Mr Stephen
Questions
Economic regions 1003–4

Day care
Children 578w

Dean, Mrs Janet
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 723, 726–8, 730
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 671–2
Questions
Chiropody, Staffordshire 74w
General practitioners, Negligence 230w
Home economics 794w
National Lottery, Burton 100w
Schools, Staffordshire 148w
Vaccination, Compensation 812w

Death
Childbirth 761–2w
Colvin, Michael (28.02.00) 1
Hertfordshire 226w
River Thames 373w

Death rate
Leeds 523–4w

Debts
Consumers 155w
Developing countries 157w, 293w, 295w, 412–4, 682w
New Millennium Experience 838w

Debts written off
Mozambique 525w

Decriminalisation
Cannabis (09.03.00) 1202

Defence
Shipping 207–8w, 640w

Defence Analytical Services Agency
Standards 646–7w

Defence Animal Centre
Performance standards 708w

Defence Bills Agency
Standards 706–7w

Defence capabilities initiative
33w

Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency
Standards 644w

Defence Communications Services Agency
Standards 487–8w

Defence Dental Agency
Standards 645w

Defence equipment
Balkans 36w
Procurement 36w
USA 28–30w

Defence Estate Organisation
Standards 690w

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency
35w
Standards 691–3w
USA 483–4w

Defence Export Services Organisation
Finance 643–4w

Defence Medical Training Organisation
Standards 710–1w

Defence Pay and Personnel Agency
see Pay and Personnel Agency

Defence Secondary Care Agency
Standards 495–6w

Defence Transport and Movements Agency
Standards 703–5w

Defence Transport and Movements Executive
Standards 703–5w

Defence Vetting Agency
Standards 711–3w

"Defence White Paper 1999"
(28.02.00) 33–126

Democratic Republic of Congo
Arms trade 502w
Overseas aid 299w
Peace negotiations 275w, 502–3w
UN resolutions 725w

Demonstrations
Kosovo 398–400w

***Denham, Mr John**, Minister of State, Dept of Health*
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1054, 1058–61
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 136–40wh
Pathology, Pay (08.03.00) 223wh, 226–30wh

***Denham, Mr John**—continued*
Questions
Acute beds 77w, 760w
Acute beds, Greater London 219w
Agency nurses 409–10w
Beta-interferon 146–8
Blood transfusions 75w
Body dysmorphic disorder 226w
Breasts, Plastic surgery 410–1w
Cataracts, Surgery 222w
Cleft palate 415–6w, 765w
Clinical Standards Advisory Group 414–5w
Community hospitals 216w
Death, Hertfordshire 226w
Dentistry, Pensions 323–4w
Doctors, Criminal records 747w
Durham Health Authority, Waiting lists 72w
Epilepsy 77w
Eyes, Diseases 625w
General Medical Council 219w
General practitioners 219w
General practitioners, Attendance 76w
General practitioners, Insurance 625–6w
General practitioners, Negligence 230w
General practitioners, Oxfordshire 758w
Harefield Hospital 765w
Health visitors, Greater London 628–9w
Hernia operations, Barnsley 218w
Hospital beds 77–8w
Hospital beds, Leicestershire 220w
Hospital wards, Gender 760w
Hospitals, Closures 322w, 631w
Hospitals, Consultants 217w
Hospitals, Crimes against the person 73w
Hospitals, Waiting lists 76w, 219–20w, 751w
Infant mortality, Hertfordshire 225w
Locums 324w
Lynton Hospital 629w
Medical profession, Manpower 69–70w
Midwives 323w
National Institute for Clinical Excellence 226–7w
NHS, Ancillary staff 139–40
NHS, Finance 65–7w, 626w
NHS, Manpower 319–20w
NHS, Per capita costs 78–80w, 223–5w, 626–7w, 630w
NHS, Temporary employment 632w
NHS, Vacancies 319w
NHS trusts, Administration 229w
NHS trusts, Equipment 411–3w
NHS trusts, Greater London 627–8w
NHS trusts, Pay 318–9w
NHS trusts, Private finance initiative 63–5w
NHS trusts, Shropshire 71w
NHS trusts, Worcestershire 628w
Northamptonshire Health Authority, Finance 221w
Nurses, Manpower 73w
Nurses, Retirement 631–2w
Nurses, Training 759w
Oldchurch Hospital, Hospital beds 408w
Ophthalmic services, Pensioners 229–30w
Primary care groups 62w, 220w
Primary care groups, Chronically sick 80w
Primary care trusts 62–3w
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Hospital beds 77w
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Manpower 866–7w
Shropshire Health Authority, Finance 318w
Surgery, Administrative delays 70w, 322w
Surgery, Waiting lists 70w

***Denham, Mr John**—continued*
Whittington Hospital 223w

Dental services
317w, 407–9w
Cosmetics 69w
Fees and charges 58w
Mercury 78w, 318w
Metals 58–60w
Pregnant women 221–2w
Research 78w
Shropshire 226w, 407w
Waiting lists 407w
Wansdyke 230w

Dentistry
221w, 223w
Pensions 323–4w

Departmental coordination
993–4

Deportation
Refugees 446w

Deprivation indicators
13w

Dept for Culture Media and Sport
Austria 95w
Economic and monetary union 432w
Forest products 98–9w
Press releases 837–8w
Public bodies 431–2w
Public expenditure 430w
Recycling 96w
Research 97w
Secondment 100w

Dept for Education and Employment
Alternative energy 574w
Austria 313w
Economic and monetary union 235w
Equal opportunities 386–7w
Government offices for the regions 792w
Maternity leave 387–8w
Parental leave 572–3w
Peat 390–1w
Public expenditure 737w
Recycling 391w
Remploy 148w

Dept for International Development
Consultants 796w
Economic and monetary union 216w
Grants 213w
Higher civil servants 213w
Peat 213w
Procurement 829w
Public bodies 527–8w
Recycling 211w
Remploy 213w
USA 624w

Dept of Health
Advertising 748w
Alternative energy 749–50w
Higher civil servants 748w
Peat 749w
Plants 748w
Press releases 865–6w
Public bodies 757–8w
Recycling 751w
Research 749–50w

Dept of Social Security
Conditions of employment 170–2w
Economic and monetary union 237w
Higher civil servants 170w
Internet 234w
Maternity leave 170–2w
Peat 304w
Press releases 845–6w
Public bodies 427w
Recycling 234w
Research 182w

Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Economic and monetary union 333w
Environmental impact assessment 671w
Gardens 454w
Higher civil servants 4–5w
Meetings 673w
Ministerial policy advisors 600w
Peat 13w
Press releases 832–3w
Public bodies 334w
Public expenditure 418w
Recycling 6w
Serco 10w

Dept of Trade and Industry
Conditions of employment 52–7w
Economic and monetary union 343w
Government offices for the regions 839w
Press releases 839–40w
Public bodies 423w
Public expenditure 586w

Developing countries
see also Heavily indebted poor countries inititative 410–1
Debts 157w, 293w, 295w, 412–4, 682w
Drugs 270–1w
Education 293–4w
Nuclear power stations 215–6w
Security 294–5w
Trade agreements 211–2w
Water supply 298w

Development banks
407–9

Devon
Information technology 339w
Nuclear shelters 128–9w

Devonport Dockyard
Radiation exposure 640w

Diabetes
Medical equipment 419–20

Diego Garcia
504w

Diesel fuel
Excise duties 158w, 855–6w

Digital broadcasting
Pendle 607–8w
Worcestershire 608w

Diplomatic immunity
European Communities 433w

Diplomatic service
India 616w

Disability aids
808

Disability living allowance
764

Disabled
Civil servants 994–5
Mobility 237w
Parking (28.02.00) 131–6, 834w
Parliament 796–7w
Prisoners 106–7w, 113w
Public transport 593w
Scotland Office 469w
Social security benefits 177w
Welfare to work 753–4

Disabled person's tax credit
159–60w

Disabled students allowances
144–5w

Disadvantaged
591w, 687–8w, 996–7
Financial services 560–1w

Disadvantaged—continued
Regional assemblies 851–2
Sports 1–3, 11
Young people 853–5

Disaster relief
528w
Mozambique 21–31, 296w, 329w, 406–7w, 419, 498w, 621–3w, 710w, 781–2w, 796w, 874w, 1001

Discipline
Prisons 113–4w

Discrimination
EC action 477w

Disease control
Animals 417w

Diseases
Eyes 625w

Dismissal
British Museum 432w

Dismore, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 706
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 676, 678–88, 697
Questions
Civil Procedure Rule Committee, Public appointments 261–2w
Companies, Fund raising 554
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 548w
Industrial injuries scheme, Self-employed 351–2w
Internet, Dept of Social Security 234w
Iran, Political prisoners 439w
National Insurance Commissioners 42–3w, 179w
NHS Pensions Agency 507w
Project Quantum 441–2w
Roads, Accidents 166
Social security benefits, Appeals 179w
Spoliation Advisory Panel 13–4, 93–5w

Disposable income
518w

Disposal Sales Agency
Standards 635–6w

Dobbin, Mr Jim
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1325–7
Questions
Academic year 397w
Accident and emergency departments 428w
Council housing, Property transfer 598–9w
Education action zones 147w
Educational maintenance allowance 470w
Government departments, Information technology 526w
Millennium Exhibition 7
New deal for young people 147w
Social security benefits, Abuse 612–3w
Sure start programme 794w
Telecommunications, Regulation 481–2w

Doctors
Criminal records 747w

Donaldson, Mr Jeffrey M
Questions
Fertility, Medical treatments 480–1w

Doncaster
Hernia operations 218w

Donnelly, Alan
461w

Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1247–50
Questions
Health services, Elderly 142

Dorset
Nature conservation 670w
Tree felling 723w

Dorset Police
Manpower 665w

Drew, Mr David
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1312
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 252–6wh
Questions
Alternative energy 185w, 341w
Alternative energy, Licensing 50w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, France 530w, 716w
Business questions 1196–7
Electroconvulsive therapy 764w
Indonesia, Hawk aircraft 504w
Livestock, Imports 25w
Nigeria, Armed conflict 440–1w
Poverty, EC action 411
Self-employed, Tax avoidance 425w
Tax avoidance, Self-employed 523w, 772w

Driving
House of Commons 610w

Driving tests
195w
Young people 163

Driving under influence
Drugs 164
EC action 603w

Drown, Ms Julia
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 246–8wh
Questions
Consultants, Dept for International Development 796w
Debts, Developing countries 157w
Overseas aid 795–6w, 829w
Procurement, Dept for International Development 829w
Tax avoidance 1180
Technical assistance 795w

Drug treatment and testing orders
128w

Drugs
228–9w
Abuse 406w, 663w, 687w, 990–1, 1004–5
Crime 149–50w
Developing countries 270–1w
Driving under influence 164
Health education 687w
Iraq 875–6w
Labelling 760w
NHS 228w
Prices 217w, 227–8w
Prisons (29.02.00) 17–24wh
Side effects 862–3w
Smuggling 521w
Young people 349w

Duchy of Cornwall
Taxation 770w

Duke of York's Royal Military School
Standards 633–5w

Duncan, Mr Alan
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1102–4

***Duncan, Mr Alan**—continued*
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 191–2wh, 199–203wh
Questions
Electronic commerce 540

Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 33–4, 41, 62

Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 899
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 245, 252
Parliamentary Press Gallery, Points of order (02.03.00) 596
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 770–1
Questions
Midwives 138–9
Roads, Accidents 162
Serco, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 10w
Serco, Ministry of Defence 210w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 558–9

Durham Health Authority
Waiting lists 72w

Dyslexia
306w

***Eagle, Angela**, *Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Social Security*
Questions
Child benefit 842w
Child benefit, Widowed people 303w
Child Support Agency, Compensation 302–3w
Child Support Agency, Information technology 614w
Cold weather payments, Paisley 848w
Conditions of employment, Dept of Social Security 170–2w
Economic and monetary union, Dept of Social Security 237w
Higher civil servants, Dept of Social Security 170w
Housing benefit 173–6w, 180w, 614w, 682w, 805–6w, 809–10w, 843–5w
Housing benefit, Abuse 508–9w, 513w, 762–4, 805w
Housing benefit, Applications 301w
Housing benefit, Greater London 805–7w
Housing benefit, Local authorities 302w
Housing benefit, Social rented housing 726–7w
Housing benefit, Students 509w
Housing benefit, Young people 236–7w
Income support, Stockton on Tees 169w
Independent Tribunal Service 182w
Internet, Dept of Social Security 234w
Jobseeker's allowance, Paisley 845–6w
Local authorities, Legal profession 841w
Lone parents, Unemployment 180w
Maintenance, Children 352w, 512–3w
Means tested benefits 747–8
National Insurance Commissioners 179w
New deal for lone parents 356–7w, 730w
New deal for lone parents, Wales 730w
ONE programme 512w
Personal income 728–9w
Personal income, Shropshire 180–1w
Social Security Act 1992 613w
Social security benefits 352–3w
Social security benefits, Abuse 807–8w

***Eagle, Angela**—continued*
Social security benefits, Appeals 179w, 847w
Social security benefits, Computers 812w
Social security benefits, Lone parents 510–1w
Social security benefits, Personal records 842–3w
Social security benefits, Widowed people 301–2w
Social Security Benefits Agency, Information services 750–1
Social Security Benefits Agency, Scotland 514w
Social Security Benefits Agency, Somerset 182–3w
Welfare to work 511w
Winter fuel payments 727–8w, 804w, 847w

Eagle, Maria
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 456

Ear nose and throat
Bristol 222–3w

Early retirement
Mining 48w
Teachers 477w

Easington
Post offices 467w

East Midlands
Ambulance services 76w
Further education 473–4w
Local government services 592w
Regional planning and development 536–7
Textiles 552

East Timor
Human rights 505w
Refugees 505–6w

EC action
Discrimination 477w
Driving under influence 603w
Motor vehicles 51w
Peace keeping operations 326w
Pensions 516w, 856w
Poverty 411–2
Prizes 856w
Taxation 562w

EC Agriculture Council
244–5w

EC aid
292w, (06.03.00) 837
Albania 624w

EC budget
Fraud 539–40w

EC Commission
see European Commission

EC Cons Doc 10497/99
(06.03.00) 837

EC Cons Doc 10705/99
(06.03.00) 837

EC Cons Doc 11203/99
(06.03.00) 837

EC countries
Fines 520w

EC Finance Council
344–5w

EC grants and loans
134w, 342w, 425–6w, 549–50, 591w, 856w
Merseyside 418w, 467–8w
Wales 39w

EC justice and home affairs
665–6w

EC law
Animal experiments 447w
Football 431w
Racial discrimination 578w
Training 420w

EC social policy
176–7w

Economic and monetary union
233w, 340–1w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 432w
Dept for Education and Employment 238w
Dept for International Development 216w
Dept of Social Security 237w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 333w
Dept of Trade and Industry 343w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 434–5w
Home Office 661w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 579–81w
Ministry of Defence 483w
Public sector 233w
Scotland 233w
Wales 233w

Economic policy
Opposition days (01.03.00) 476–526

Education
Asia 291w
Contracts for services 315w
Developing countries 293–4w
Finance 9–10w, 790w
Kosovo 414–5
Leicestershire 141–3w, 309w
Qualifications 138–9w
Refugees 314w
Standards 146w, 395–6w
Tyne and Wear 148w

Education action zones
147w

Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2000
Debates etc.
(09.03.00) 1285

Educational maintenance allowance
393–4w, 470–1w, 791w
Stoke on Trent 136w

Educational visits
Millennium Exhibition 87w, 249w

Edwards, Mr Huw
Questions
Ambulance services 413–4w
Millennium Exhibition, Attendance 10–1
Sports, Safety 92w
Tax allowances 160w
Theatre, Wales 41w

Efford, Mr Clive
Debates etc.
Energy Efficiency Bill, 2R adjourned (10.03.00) 1360–2
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1354
Questions
Climate Change Convention 681w

Elderly
Better government programme 688w
Health services 140–3
Social security benefits 801w

Elections
Greater London Authority 195w, 460w, 779w
Iran 439–40w

Elections—continued
Local government 568–9w

Electroconvulsive therapy
764w

Electromagnetic fields
Health hazards 863–4w

Electronic commerce
539–40
Advisory services 337w

Electronic government
686w, 689w

Electronic surveillance
572w
Cellular phones 544w

Elgin Marbles
482w

Ellman, Mrs Louise
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1341–2
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 93–5wh
Questions
Accident and emergency departments 144–5
Disadvantaged 688w
EC grants and loans, Merseyside 418w, 467–8w
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine 293w
New businesses 540–1

Embassies
274w

Emergency services
Fuels 524w

Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Debates etc.
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 669–70, 673

Employment
Children 214w
Greater London 851–2w
Sports 607w

Employment Service
Assets 391w

Employment zones
Contracts 308–9w

Energy
Conservation (10.03.00) 1296–389

Energy Conservation (Housing) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (10.03.00) 1363

Energy Efficiency Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R adjourned (10.03.00) 1360–2

Engineering
Teachers 137w

English Heritage
Grants 734w

English Sports Council
National Lottery 837w

Ennis, Mr Jeff
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Carers, Barnsley (01.03.00) 66–9wh
Questions
Carers, Telephone services 74w
Hernia operations 218w
Hernia operations, Barnsley 218w
Lorries, Inspections 593w

Ennis, Mr Jeff—continued
Pensioners, Barnsley 812w
Television, Licensing 604w

Entry clearances
Indian subcontinent 783–4w

Environment Agency
Fees and charges 454w

Environment protection
273w

Environmental Audit Select Committee
(03.03.00) 737

Environmental impact assessment
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 671w

Epilepsy
77w, 229–30w

Equal opportunities
Dept for Education and Employment 386–7w
Females 1000

Equal pay
393w
Scotland 797w

Escalators
London Underground 278–9w

Essex
NHS (01.03.00) 74–80wh

Essex Police
Manpower 553–5w
Metropolitan Police 555w

Etherington, Bill
Questions
Fluoride 754w

Ethics
Overseas trade 297–8w

Ethnic groups
Home Office 103w
Kosovo 402w
Police 123–4w, 860–1w
Scotland Office 469w
Unemployment 740–2w

Euro
1181–2

Europe
Cultural heritage 432–3w

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
Russia 526w

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages
435w

European Children's Trust
Romania 624–5w

European Commission
Reform 498w

European Communities
see also EC headings
Curriculum 576–7w
Diplomatic immunity 433w

European fighter aircraft
31w

European Police Office
Pay 540w

Eurostar
10–1w

Evans, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1128–30, 1142, 1148–51, 1154–60
Wales (02.03.00) 605–12, 619–20
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1305
Questions
Developing countries 410–1
Disadvantaged, Young people 855
Zimbabwe, Overseas aid 293w

Evictions
Court orders 420–1w

Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Questions
Ammunition, Uranium 715w
Armed forces, Housing 651w
Excise duties, Fuels 561w
HMS Spartan 651w
Mining, Scotland 421w

Exchange rates
(08.03.00) 163–85wh, 817w

Excise duties
Diesel fuel 158w, 855–6w
Fuels 524w, 561w
Motor vehicles 266w
Petrol alternatives 345w
Tobacco 561w

"Executive Agencies Report 1999"
608–9w

"Executive Non-departmental Public Bodies 1999"
608–9w

Exercise Dimming Sun
327w

Exhibitions
UK membership of EC 434w

Explosives
Export controls 587w

Export controls
Explosives 587w
Restraint equipment 873w

Export credit guarantees
185w, 271–2w
Arms trade 49w, 466–7w, 547–8
Turkey 342–3w

Export Credits Guarantee Dept
Finance 424w
Reviews 547–8

Exports
Arms trade 38w
Art works 5–6
Livestock 26w, 244w
Pigs 529–30w
Radioactive materials 421–2w, 582w
Sheep 529w
Whisky (29.02.00) 399–406
Zimbabwe 132w

Exservicemen
Cancer 34w

External financing limits
British Waterways Board 284w

Extradition Act 1989
Questions
357–71w

Eyes
Diseases 625w

Faber, Mr David
Questions
English Sports Council, National Lottery 837w

Fabricant, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 299–302, 305–8, 328–30, 332–3, 335, 338, 340, 361–6, 368
NHS (08.03.00) 1011
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 774–6, 779, 786–8, 814, 819–22, 829
Questions
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 86w
Social security benefits, Abuse 760–1
Teachers, Engineering 137w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000, Legislative process 555–6

Fairgrounds
Planning permission 668–9w

Falkland Islands
724w

Fallon, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 173, 194–9, 206, 214
Questions
Internet, Fees and charges 813w
Millennium Exhibition, Repairs and maintenance 88w
Parking offences, Greater London 195–6w
Refugees, Housing 111w
Roads, Noise 848

Families
Immigration rules (01.03.00) 81–6wh

Family courts
42w

Family credit
Abuse 730–1w

Family planning
Northern Ireland 834–5w

Far East
Prisoners of war (09.03.00) 1286–94

Fares
Sight impaired 417w

Farmers
see also Agriculture
Bankruptcy 529w, 716w
Markets 246–7w
Part-time employment 313–4w
Suicide 25w, 580w

Farms
Change of use 674w
Furs 15w
Shropshire 18–9w, 248w

Fearn, Mr Ronnie
Questions
British Resorts' Association 781w
Bus services, Tourism 831w
Millennium Commission 734w
Millennium Exhibition 87w
Museum of the Moving Image 733–4w
Museums and galleries, Fees and charges 733w
National Lottery 836w
Trafalgar Square 673w, 734–5w

Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000
Questions
533w

Females
Circumcision 214–5w, 450–1w
Equal opportunities 1000
Overseas aid 528w
Prisons 107w
Females—continued
Sports 11–3

Fertilisers
Grazing land 868w

Fertility
Health services 785–6w
Medical treatments 69w, 480–1w
Northern Ireland 480–1w

Festivals and special occasions
Scotland 731–2w

Field, Rt Hon Frank
Questions
British Cheque Cashers' Association 811w
Child benefit 842w
Hillsborough Stadium Evidence Inquiry, Disclosure of information 108w
Home care services 414w
Homicide, Scotland 348w
Households, Children 522–3w
Housing benefit 805–6w, 809–10w, 844–5w
Housing benefit, Abuse 509w, 513w, 805w, 808w
Housing benefit, Applications 301w
Income support, Lone parents 353–5w
Job security 345–6w
Jobseeker's allowance 845w
Jobseeker's allowance, Abuse 235–6w
Local authorities, Legal profession 841w
Low incomes 355–6w
Low pay 346–7w
Millennium Exhibition 85w, 350w
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 84w, 87w
National insurance contributions 345w, 855w
National insurance contributions, Personal records 521–2w
National Insurance Contributions Office, Security 809w, 811w
Pensioners, Income 514w
Personal income 348w
Social security benefits 352–3w
Social security benefits, Abuse 611w, 752, 807–8w, 810–2w, 843w
Social security benefits, Computers 812w
Social security benefits, Personal records 809w, 842–3w
Social security benefits, Post offices 841–2w
Suicide 153w
Television, Licensing 351w
Weekly benefit savings scheme 808–9w

Fifteen minutes rule
Rulings and statements (07.03.00) 900

Film
96w
Foreign investment in UK 96–7w
Grants 736w
Taxation 815w

Financial markets
Disclosure of information 815w

Financial services
Disadvantaged 560–1w

Fines
EC countries 520w

Fire extinguishers
Housing (08.03.00) 215–22wh

Fire services
Vehicles 129w

Firearms
Northern Ireland 199–200w

First North Western Trains
335w

Fisher, Mr Mark
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 946–50

Fisheries
Grants 578w, 722–3w

Fishing
Salmon 581w

Fishing catches
Quotas 581w
Research 534w

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Fire extinguishers, Housing (08.03.00) 215–9wh

Fitzsimons, Lorna
Questions
Females, Equal opportunities 1000
Schools, Racial discrimination 577w

Fixed penalties
Illegal immigrants 662–3w

Flags
Northern Ireland 207w

Flight, Mr Howard
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 485
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 172–9, 185, 196, 198, 207, 213, 233, 237, 262–5, 323–5, 396–7
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Arundel bypass (07.03.00) 149–52wh
Questions
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Russia 526w
Life insurance, Taxation 766w
Overseas investment, Indonesia 766w
Stakeholder pensions 759
Taxation 1186

Flint, Caroline
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 256–62wh
Questions
Conditions of employment, Dept of Social Security 170–2w
Conditions of employment, Dept of Trade and Industry 52–7w
Conditions of employment, Ministry of Defence 27–8w
Maternity leave, Dept for Education and Employment 387–8w
Maternity leave, Scotland Office 348–9w
NHS, Ancillary staff 139–40

Flood control
531w, 579–80w

Flowers
Imports 468w

Fluoride
754w
Irritable bowel syndrome 753w

Flynn, Paul
Debates etc.
Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill, 1R (09.03.00) 1202
Wales (02.03.00) 601, 605, 624, 649
Questions
Arts Council of England, Finance 91w
Business questions 567, 1190–1
Child benefit, Widowed people 303w
Clergy, Pensions 81w
Democratic Republic of Congo, Peace negotiations 275w
Income support 759–60

***Flynn, Paul**—continued*
Local government finance, Wales 330w
Pensioners, Income 161–3w, 426–7w
Pensioners, Income support 514–5w

Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD
648–50w

Foetal tissue
763w

Follett, Barbara
Questions
Gold and foreign exchange reserves 430w
Taxation, Reform 233w

Food Labelling Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R adjourned (03.03.00) 701–36

Football
EC law 431w

Football Task Force
82–3w

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Economic and monetary union 434–5w
Press 499w
Press releases 870–3w
Public bodies 501w
Visits abroad 135w

Foreign investment in UK
Film 96–7w

Foreign relations
Austria 439w
China 274w

Foreigners
Prisoners 254w

Forest Bank Prison
823w

Forest products
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 98–9w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 21–2w, 246w
Northern Ireland Office 835–6w

Forth, Mr Eric
Debates etc.
Business questions, Points of order (02.03.00) 596
Business questions intervention (02.03.00) 570
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 221
Mozambique, Points of order (03.03.00) 663
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 584
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 875
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1118, 1122–4
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 460, 463, 465, 470, 527–9
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1298–303, 1305–6, 1311, 1318, 1323–5, 1338–40, 13542, 1345
Written questions, Points of order (09.03.00) 1201–2
Questions
Business questions 1195–6

Forth rail bridge
857–8

Foster, Mr Don
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 869
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1323–4
Questions
Agriculture, Subsidies 245w

***Foster, Mr Don**—continued*
Grants, Dept for International Development 213w
Grants, Home Office 104–5w
Millennium Exhibition 606w
Sleeping rough 850–1
Transport, Schools 832w

***Foster, Mr Michael Jabez**, (Hastings and Rye)*
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 445
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 871
Questions
Disadvantaged, Young people 853–4
Low pay 814w
Television, Licensing 736w

***Foster, Mr Michael John**, (Worcester)*
Debates etc.
School Crossings (Amendment) Bill, 1R (01.03.00) 424
Questions
Cataracts, Surgery 222w
NHS trusts, Worcestershire 628w
Unemployment, Worcester 767w

***Foulkes, Mr George**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development*
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1134
Questions
Albania, EC aid 624w
China, Orphans 624w
Consultants, Dept for International Development 796w
Developing countries 410–1
Developing countries, Debts 682w
Economic and monetary union, Dept for International Development 216w
Group of Eight 795w
Kosovo, Health services 292w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 796w
Mozambique, Overseas aid 796w, 828–9w
Mozambique, Soil erosion 623–4w
Overseas aid 409–10, 795–6w, 829w
Poverty, EC action 411–2
Procurement, Dept for International Development 829w
Romania, European Children's Trust 624–5w
Technical assistance 795w
USA, Dept for International Development 624w

Foundation schools
736–7w

Fox, Dr Liam
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1010–8, 1022, 1024, 1026, 1050–1, 1060–1
Oral question time intervention (29.02.00) 148
Questions
Accident and emergency departments 145
Cataracts, Surgery 151–2

Foxes
Pest control 196–7w

France
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 530w, 716w
Creutzfeldt-Jakob dementia 530w, 716w
Nuclear submarines 484w

***France**—continued*
Pollution 13–4w

Franco-British Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine
482–3w, 499–500w

Fraser, Mr Christopher
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1076, 1100–1
Questions
Millennium Exhibition, Public transport 285w
Post offices 340w
Regional development agencies 590w

Fraud
EC budget 539–40w
Immunity from prosecution 463w

Free school meals
475–6w, 575w
Greater London 475w

Freemasonry
Police 123w

Freight
Railways 198w, 778w

Fuel poverty
552–3

Fuels
Aircraft 671w
Emergency services 524w
Excise duties 524w, 561w

Full Sutton Prison
Race relations 547w

Fund raising
Companies 554

Furs
Farms 15w

Further education
Antrim 405w
East Midlands 473–4w
Student numbers 793–4w

Further Education Funding Council for England
474–5w

Future large aircraft
31w, 208w
Government assistance 542

Fyfe, Maria
Questions
Developing countries, Debts 413–4
Minimum wage 338w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 28
Nelson, Rosemary 560w

G8
see Group of Eight

Gaddafi, Colonel
131–2w

Gale, Mr Roger
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 876
Questions
Business questions 1197
Mozambique, Disaster relief 27–8
Romania, European Children's Trust 624–5w
Romanian Orphanage Trust 553w

Gambling Review Body
857–8w

Gamma hydroxybutyrate
107w, 373–4w

Gapes, Mr Mike
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 47, 95–7
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 783–6
Questions
Acute beds, Greater London 219w
Franco-British Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine 482–3w, 499–500w
Hospital beds 153
Nuclear submarines, France 484w

Gardening leave
Cabinet Office 151w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 23w

Gardens
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 454w

Gardiner, Mr Barry
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 301
Questions
Business questions 568
Health visitors, Greater London 628–9w
India, Visas 441w
Surgery 149
Tax burden 1177

Garnier, Mr Edward
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 897, 900–10, 926, 932, 967
NHS (08.03.00) 1018–9
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 592–3
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1299–300, 1308–9, 1336–41, 1354
Questions
Courts, Closures 654–9w
Railways, Standards 596w
USA 43–4w

Gas and Electricity Consumer Council
Disclosure of information 425w

GCE
740w

GCE A level
Computers 573w

GCHQ
see Government Communications Headquarters

Gender
Hospital wards 760w

General Certificate of Secondary Education
740w
Shipping 740w

General Medical Council
219w

General practitioners
219w, 758w
Attendance 76w
Fees and charges 762w
Insurance 625–6w
Negligence 230w
Northern Ireland 481w
Oxfordshire 758w
Wigan and Bolton Health Authority 76w

General Security Agreement 1961
708w

Genetically modified organisms
Crops 16w, 532w, 743–4w, 799–800w
Labelling 722w
Maize 722w, 779w
Oilseed rape 667w, 868w

Genetics
(08.03.00) 1007–9
Databases 118w, 858–9w

George, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Parking, Disabled (28.02.00) 136
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 473–5, 527
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 188
Questions
Charter of Pardon 1508 58w
Disability aids 80w
EC grants and loans 549–50, 591w
General Certificate of Secondary Education, Shipping 740w
Hospital beds 152–3
Incapacity benefit 749–50
Public expenditure, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 430w
Public expenditure, Dept for Education and Employment 737w
Public expenditure, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 418w
Public expenditure, Dept of Trade and Industry 586w

George, Mr Bruce
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 55–9
Questions
Select committees 828w, 873–4w

Germany
Army 26w
Radioactive materials 424w, 464–5w

Gerrard, Mr Neil
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Immigration rules, Families (01.03.00) 81–4wh
Questions
Immigration, Administration 545w
Sports, Disadvantaged 11

Gibb, Mr Nick
Questions
New businesses 541
21st Century Faxes 468w
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 683w

Gibraltar
R2 Renaissance cruise liner 504–5w

Gibson, Dr Ian
Debates etc.
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1289
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1307–10
Questions
Biodiversity 281w
Performance and Innovation Unit 349w
Stakeholder pensions 515w

Gill, Mr Christopher
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1015
Questions
Aircraft carriers 34–5w
Business questions 1194–5
Climate change levy 813w
Defence equipment, USA 28–30w
Dental services 317w
Dental services, Shropshire 226w
Dental services, Waiting lists 407w

Gill, Mr Christopher—continued
Hospitals, Worcestershire 745w
Housing benefit 175–6w
Kidderminster Hospital 745–6w
Newtown Hospital 745w
Skiing, Qualifications 851w
Tactical reconnaissance armoured combat equipment requirement 207w

Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Questions
Africa, AIDS 215w
Africa, British Council 276w
Albania 433w
Armed forces, Children 275–6w
Burundi, Peace negotiations 434w
Democratic Republic of Congo, Overseas aid 299w
Kosovo, Demonstrations 398–400w
Kosovo, Ethnic groups 402w
Kosovo, Judiciary 400w
Kosovo, Peace keeping operations 399–400w
Kosovo, Police 276w, 399w
Millennium Exhibition, Manpower 249–50w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 22–4
National Institute for Clinical Excellence 226–7w
Overseas aid 298–9w
Poverty, EC action 412
Russia 133–4w
Sankoh, Foday 132–3w
Sierra Leone, Peace keeping operations 276–7w
UNMIK 401w
Zimbabwe, Civil disorder 726w
Zimbabwe, Exports 132w
Zimbabwe, Homicide 132w
Zimbabwe, Overseas aid 215w

Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1309, 1313, 1320–2
Questions
Electronic government 686w
Fuel poverty 552–3
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 556–7

Global Cultural Diversity Congress
288–9w, 378–82w, 402w, 424w, 428w, 450w, 548w, 563w, 575w, 817–8w

Gloucestershire
National Lottery 95–6w

Glufosinate ammonium
532w, 868w

GM Communications Unit
150–1w

Godman, Dr Norman A
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 440, 457–8
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 465, 470–4, 529
Questions
Marine Accident Investigation Branch 334w
New deal schemes, Scotland 395w, 474w
Shipbuilding 344w
Social Security Benefits Agency, Scotland 514w

Godsiff, Mr Roger
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 129–30wh

Goggins, Mr Paul
Questions
Air routes, USA 189–90w
Disabled, Mobility 237w
Grammar schools, Greater Manchester 737–9w
Means tested benefits 748
Medical Devices Agency, Standards 788w
Multinational companies 291w
"Sharing the Nations Prosperity" 685–6w
Stakeholder pensions 841w
Unemployment, Costs 816w

Gold and foreign exchange reserves
430w

Golding, Mrs Llin
Questions
Young offenders, Secure accommodation 444–6w

Gordon, Eileen
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1334–6

Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 428–9

Gorman, Teresa
Members' suspension (01.03.00) 428–59

Government
Pakistan 501w

Government Communications Headquarters
502w

Government contracts
789w

Government departments
Audit 151–2w
Correspondence 995–6
Disclosure of information 686w
Information technology 526w
Manpower 527w
Millennium compliance 135–6w
Racial discrimination 151w
South West region 527w

Government offices for the regions
Dept for Education and Employment 792w
Dept of Trade and Industry 839w

Government Resources and Accounts Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
Rem stages (29.02.00) 170, 198

Graham, Mr Thomas
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 51

Grammar schools
1004
Greater Manchester 737–9w

Gray, Mr James
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 717
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 341
NHS (08.03.00) 1019–20
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 94wh, 100–4wh, 107wh, 112wh, 116wh, 119wh
Questions
Housing, Capital investment 859
Plants, Dept of Health 748w

Grazing land
Fertilisers 868w

Greater London
Acute beds 219w
Council housing 590w
Crime 449–50w
Employment 851–2w
Free school meals 475w
Health visitors 628–9w
Hospitals 631w
Housing (01.03.00) 46–65wh
Housing benefit 805–7w
Job creation 1186–8
MMR vaccine 79w, 752w
NHS trusts 627–8w
Parking offences 195–6w
Planning permission 600–1w
Police stations 116–8w
Prisons 374w
Refugees 569w
State retirement pensions 427w
Water supply 5–6w
Working families tax credit 152w

Greater London Authority
Elections 195w, 460w, 779w

Greater Manchester
Grammar schools 737–9w
Paediatrics 743w

Greece
Medals 429–30w

Green, Mr Damian
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 870
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1347–51
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 108–12wh, 115–6wh
Questions
Motor vehicles, EC action 51w
Wind power 51w

Greenham and Crookham Commons Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (29.02.00) 137, (07.03.00) 845

Greenhouse effect
Hospitals 744–5w
Schools 790w

Greenway, Mr John
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1116, 1129, 1134–6
Questions
Sports, Disadvantaged 2–3

Greyhound racing
Animal welfare 287–8w, 534w, 867–8w

Grieve, Mr Dominic
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 896, 906
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1130
Questions
Smuggling 156w
Students, Fees and charges 715w

Griffiths, Jane
Debates etc.
Sickle cell diseases (06.03.00) 838–40

Griffiths, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 901, 903

Griffiths, Mr Nigel—continued
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 180
Questions
Developing countries, Debts 295w
Drugs, Abuse 1004–5
Recycling 595w

Grocott, Mr Bruce
Questions
Business questions 1191–2

Grogan, Mr John
Questions
Hospitals, Wakefield 217–8w

Group of Eight
795w

Guatemala
Belize 783w

Guided weapons
Jaguar aircraft 653w

Guillotine
(08.03.00) 1114–61

Gulf War
see Iraq–Kuwait conflict

Gummer, Rt Hon John
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1115, 1120, 1135–7

Habitual offenders
823w

Haemophilia
Hepatitis (07.03.00) 121–40wh

Hague, Rt Hon William
Questions
Hospitals, Waiting lists 416–7
Mayor of London 420–1, 1002–3
Metropolitan Police, Manpower 998–9

Hain, Mr Peter, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Questions
Africa, British Council 276w
Armed forces, Children 275–6w
British Council 274w
Burundi, Peace negotiations 434w, 725–6w
Chevening scholarships programme 397–8w
Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 870w
Democratic Republic of Congo, Arms trade 502w
Democratic Republic of Congo, Peace negotiations 275w, 502–3w
Democratic Republic of Congo, UN resolutions 725w
East Timor, Human rights 505w
Economic and monetary union, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 434–5w
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 402w
India, Diplomatic service 616w
Indian subcontinent, Arms trade 503–4w
Indonesia, Hawk aircraft 504w
International Criminal Court 503w
International Labour Organisation, Treaties 725w
Iran, Elections 439–40w
Iran, Political prisoners 439w, 619–21w
Iraq, Drugs 875–6w
Iraq, Oil 617–8w
Iraq, Sanctions 616w
Japan, Radioactive materials 499w
Kosovo, Police 276w, 399w, 500–1w, 875w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 874w

Hain, Mr Peter*—*continued
Nigeria, Armed conflict 440–1w
Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty 135w
Pakistan, Government 501w
Public bodies, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 501w
Restraint equipment, Export controls 873w
Sankoh, Foday 132–3w
Serbia 875w
Sierra Leone, Peace keeping operations 276–7w
Sombrero Island, Satellites 278w
Sri Lanka 724–5w
Sri Lanka, Human rights 277w
Sri Lanka, Peace negotiations 503w
Sudan, Armed conflict 505w
UN Commission on Human Rights 501–2w
Zimbabwe, Civil disorder 726w
Zimbabwe, Exports 132w
Zimbabwe, Homicide 132w

Hall, Mr Patrick
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 875–6

Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Questions
Grammar schools 1004

Hammond, Mr Philip
Debates etc.
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 671, 676–7, 684, 689–90, 698
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 132–6wh, 138wh
M25 (29.02.00) 2–8wh
Questions
Health services, Elderly 142–3
Primary care groups 62w
Taxation 1184–5

Hampshire Constabulary
Manpower 126–7w, 665w

Hancock, Mr Mike
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 37, 43, 49, 51–2, 106–9
Economic policy (01.03.00) 497, 499–503, 521–2
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 127–9wh, 139–40wh
Questions
Ammunition, Procurement 209–10w
Cancer, Children 743w
Chinook helicopters, Accidents 34w
Electromagnetic fields, Health hazards 863–4w
European fighter aircraft 31w
Harris Corporation 633w
Housing, Capital investment 860
Independent Panel on Vaccines Interactions Research 826–7w
Mental health services 154–5
Military aircraft, Accidents 37w, 210–1w

Hanson, Mr David, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 627, 634, 651–5
Questions
Local government finance, Wales 330w
NHS, Wales 40w
Non-domestic rates, Wales 330–1w
Poverty, Children 330w

Harefield Hospital
765w

Harlan UK
Animal experiments 661–2w

Harmondsworth Detention Centre
569–70w

Harold Shipman Inquiry
862w

Harris, Dr Evan
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 234wh, 260–6wh
Questions
Refugees, Council housing 540–1w
Research, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 97w
Research, Dept of Social Security 182w
Research, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 14–5w
Research, Northern Ireland Office 205w
Research, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 41w
Research, Treasury 151w

Harris Corporation
633w

Harvey, Mr Nick
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 515–20
NHS (08.03.00) 1022, 1027–32
Questions
Agency nurses 409–10w
Explosives, Export controls 587w
Fertility, Health services 785–6w
Health services, Elderly 141–2
Hospitals, Closures 76–7w, 322w, 631w
Hospitals, Waiting lists 751w
Locums 324w
Lynton Hospital 629w
Medical examinations 321w
Medical profession, Manpower 69–70w
NHS, Manpower 319–20w
NHS, Vacancies 319w
Surgery, Administrative delays 322w

Hawk aircraft
Indonesia 504w
Zimbabwe 504w

Hawkins, Mr Nick
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 954, 961–5
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1135–6, 1140–1, 1151–4, 1160–1
Questions
Alma-Dettinger Barracks, Sales 638w
Channel tunnel railway line 860–1
Mozambique, Disaster relief 874w
National Lottery 9
Snelling, Christopher 539w

Hayes, Mr John
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 480
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 280, 290–4, 301, 306, 330, 333–6
NHS (08.03.00) 1045–9, 1051–3
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1152, 1157
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 471–3, 475

Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Questions
Non-domestic rates, Combined heat and power 454–5w

Heald, Mr Oliver
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 254, 261
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 772, 794, 803, 808, 822–5, 828, 830–1
Questions
Consultants, Home Office 118w
Crime 125–6w
Electronic surveillance 572w
Genetics, Databases 118w, 858–9w
Police, Buildings 125w
Police, Career structure 125w
Police, Consultants 126w
Police, Ethnic groups 123–4w
Police, Freemasonry 123w
Police, Manpower 121–5w
Police, Rural areas 118–9w
Police stations, Closures 118w
Public safety radio communications project 119–20w
Social security benefits, Abuse 508–9w
Special constables, Manpower 117w
State visits, China 858w
World Trade Organisation 548–9

Healey, Mr John
Questions
Beta-interferon 146
Drugs, Abuse 663w
ONE programme 512w

Health
Grants 506w

Health centres
997–8

Health education
Drugs 687w
Osteoporosis 755w

Health hazards
Electromagnetic fields 863–4w

Health insurance
Police 105w

Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R (03.03.00) 664–700

Health services
Cancer 752–3w, 787–8w
Elderly 140–3
Fertility 785–6w
Heart diseases 752–3w
Kosovo 292w
Metropolitan Police 373w
Wakefield 78–9w

Health visitors
Greater London 628–9w

Hearing aids
69w, 74–5w

Heart diseases
Health services 752–3w
Wales 788–9w

Heath, Mr David
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 111–2
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 249–50, 294–6
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1293–4

Heath, Mr David—continued
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1141–2, 1158
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 469, 530
Questions
Income support 760
NHS 1001
Overseas aid 409–10
Regional aid 544–5
Social security benefits, Rural areas 508w
Taxation, Aggregates 812–3w

Heath, Edward
423

Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Debates etc.
Parliamentary papers, Points of order (09.03.00) 1200
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Exchange rates (08.03.00) 180–3wh
Questions
Climate change levy 1183–4
TransTec, Northern Ireland 205–6w

Heathrow Airport
671w
Air misses 331–3w
Air traffic 7w

Heavily indebted poor countries initiative
292w

Henderson, Mr Doug
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 80–3

Hepatitis
Haemophilia (07.03.00) 121–40wh

Hercules aircraft
781w

Hereford
Class sizes 396–7w
Tuberculosis 756–7w

Herefordshire
Common agricultural policy 798w

Heritage Lottery Fund
Finance 91w

Hernia operations
218w
Barnsley 218w
Doncaster 218w

Hertfordshire
Cancer 747w
Death 226w
Infant mortality 225w

Hesford, Mr Stephen
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1049–52

Hewitt, Ms Patricia, Minister of State, Dept of Trade and Industry
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1105–7
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Bentwood, Closures (07.03.00) 158wh, 160–2wh
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 203–8wh
Questions
Climate Change Convention 341–2w
Electronic commerce 539–40
Electronic commerce, Advisory services 337w
Information technology, Devon 339w
Internet 546–7
Motor vehicles, Recycling 582–3w
New businesses 540–1

Hewitt, Ms Patricia—continued
Recycling 550–1
Regional planning and development, East Midlands 536–7
Small businesses, Loan guarantee scheme 344w
Small businesses, Stakeholder pensions 463–4w
Telecommunications 48–9w
Telephone services, Computers 468–9w
Telephones, Costs 684–5w
21st Century Faxes 468w
Venture capital, Information technology 340w

Higher civil servants
Dept for International Development 213w
Dept of Health 748w
Dept of Social Security 170w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 4–5w
Home Office 253–4w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 20w
Northern Ireland Office 204w
Prime Minister 265w
Scotland Office 469w

Higher education
Finance 136–7w
Overseas students 138w
Student numbers 138w, 314–5w

Hijacking
Stansted Airport 289–91w, 663–4w

Hill, Mr Keith, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Debates etc.
Parking, Disabled (28.02.00) 132–6
Questions
A3, Hindhead 2–3w
A5, Accidents 194w
A27, Worthing 681w
A406, Trees 596–7w
A1033, Kingston upon Hull 603w
Birmingham Relief Road 9w
Bus services, Rural areas 14w, 778w
Bus services, Tourism 831w
Buses 281w
Channel tunnel railway line 860–1
Chideock bypass 675w
Company cars, Safety 601w
Connex Rail, Standards 673w
Driving tests 195w
Driving tests, Young people 163
Driving under influence, Drugs 164
Driving under influence, EC action 603w
Eurostar 10–1w
Fares, Sight impaired 417w
First North Western Trains 335w
Forth rail bridge 857–8
Gardens, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 454w
Greater London Authority, Elections 195w, 460w, 779w
Integrated Transport Commission 591w
Jubilee line 186w
Ladbroke Grove junction, Railway signals 454w
London Research Centre 198w
London Underground 589–90w
London Underground, Escalators 278–9w
London Underground, Ministers 589w
London Underground, Public private partnerships 331–2w
London Underground, Rolling stock 5w
Lorries, Inspections 593w
Lorries, Roads 10w, 597w
M25, Porous asphalt 9w, 597–8w

Hill, Mr Keith—continued
Marine Accident Investigation Branch 334w
Mayor of London, Publicity 334w
Meetings, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 673w
Ministerial policy advisors, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 600w
Motor vehicles, Registration 601w
Motorcycles, Licensing 283w
National Rail Summit 603w
Oil, Pollution 13–4w
Parking, Disabled 834w
Parking offences, Greater London 195–6w
Petrol, Additives 282w
Ports, Safety 834w
Press releases, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 832–3w
Public expenditure, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 418w
Public transport, Accidents 188–9w
Public transport, Disabled 593w
Public transport, Rural areas 4w, 667w
Rail Property 670w
Railway network, Wales 6w, 778w, 832w
Railway network, Worcestershire 596w
Railways, Freight 778w
Railways, Land 670w
Railways, Northern region 418w
Railways, Safety 198w, 460w, 594–5w, 830w
Rapid transit systems 594w
Road traffic, Research 458w
Road works 455–60w
Roads, Accidents 5w, 157–66, 186–8w, 197w, 453w
Roads, North Yorkshire 190–2w
Roads, Safety 282–3w, 601–4w
Serco, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 10w
Shipping 776w
Strategic Rail Authority, Wales 199w
Thameslink 417–8w, 833–4w
Trafalgar Square 673w
Transport, Costs 455w
Transport, Schools 832w
Virgin Rail, Standards 12w
Walking 856–7

Hillsborough Stadium Evidence Inquiry
Disclosure of information 108w

Hinchliffe, Mr David
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1030, 1032–40, 1048
Questions
Epilepsy 77w, 230w
Health services, Elderly 143

Hindhead
A3 2–3w

Hire services
Millennium Exhibition 248w

Historic buildings
VAT 769w

Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England
see English Heritage

HM Prison Service
see Prison Service

HMS Cambridge
653–4w

HMS Spartan
651w

HMS Vigilant
327–8w

***Hodge, Ms Margaret**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education and Employment*
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 231–6wh, 266–70wh
Questions
Children, Day care 578w
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 575w
New deal for disabled people 471w
New deal for lone parents 312–3w
Outdoor education 308w
Pre-school education 314w
Racial discrimination, EC law 578w
Remploy 309w
Remploy, Dept for Education and Employment 148w
Supported employment programme 307w

***Hoey, Miss Kate**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Culture Media and Sport*
Questions
English Sports Council, National Lottery 837w
Football, EC law 431w
Football Task Force 82–3w
National Lottery 603–4w, 836w
National Lottery, Burton 100w
National Lottery, Gloucestershire 95–6w
National Lottery, Tewkesbury 735w
National Lottery Distribution Fund 93w
Rugby Football League 15–6
Sports 97–8w
Sports, Disadvantaged 1–3, 11
Sports, Employment 607w
Sports, Females 11–3
Sports, Housing estates 100w
Sports, Internet 607w
Sports, Safety 92w
Sports, Schools 779w
Sports, Young people 780w
UK Sport 605w

Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 890, 895–6, 906, 908, 915, 919, 924, 933, 940, 957–9
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 442, 444–7
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 594–5
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1117–8, 1122–3, 1131–2, 1136–7
Questions
Beta-interferon 146–7

Home care services
414w

Home detention curfews
448–9w, 571–2w, 857w

Home economics
794w

Home Office
Advertising 104w
Computers 544w
Consultants 118w, 385–6w
Databases 822w
Economic and monetary union 661w
Ethnic groups 103w
Grants 104–5w
Higher civil servants 253–4w
Information officers 383–5w, 556w, 821–2w
Press releases 103–4w, 861–2w
Public bodies 447–8w
Recruitment 556w

***Home Office**—continued*
Recycling 116w

Homelessness
Finance 419w

Homicide
Appeals 462–3w
Scotland 348w
Zimbabwe 132w

Hood, Mr Jimmy
Questions
EC Agriculture Council 244–5w
EC Finance Council 344–5w

***Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey**, Secretary of State for Defence*
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 87
Questions
Bloody Sunday Tribunal of Inquiry 269w
Defence capabilities initiative 33w
Defence equipment, Balkans 36w
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency 35w
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, USA 483–4w
Disaster relief, Mozambique 329w, 498w, 782w
European fighter aircraft 31w
Franco-British Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine 482–3w
Military attaches 326w
Minesweepers, Brazil 483w
Nuclear submarines, France 484w
Peace keeping operations, EC action 326w
Select committees 828w
Trident 38w

Hope, Mr Phil
Questions
Criminal Injuries Compensation Board 857w
Gambling Review Body 857–8w
Pensions 801–2w
Pensions, Publicity 512w
Pinochet, Augusto 286w
Public safety radio communications project 287w

Hopkins, Mr Kelvin
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 706
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 672–5, 682, 685
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1306, 1340, 1343–4
Questions
Disadvantaged 687–8w
Jazz, Finance 91w
Walking 856–7

Hops
Subsidies 720w

Horam, Mr John
Questions
Childbirth, Death 761–2w
Clinical negligence scheme 864w

Horserace Betting Levy Board
371–2w

Horserace Totalisator Board
371–2w

Hospital beds
77–8w, 152–3
Leicestershire 220w
Oldchurch Hospital 408w
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital 77w
Shropshire 77–8w

Hospital wards
Gender 760w

Hospitals
Closures 76–7w, 322w, 631w
Construction 420
Consultants 217w
Crimes against the person 73w
Greater London 631w
Greenhouse effect 744–5w
Pest control 762w
Private sector 149–50
Waiting lists 76w, 217w, 219–20w, 416–20, 751w, 1005
Wakefield 217–8w
Worcestershire 745w

House of Commons
Driving 610w
Security 609–10w

House of Commons Commission
44w

Households
Children 522–3w

Housing
8w, 832w
Armed forces 651w
Capital investment 858–60
Fire extinguishers (08.03.00) 215–22wh
Greater London (01.03.00) 46–65wh
Metropolitan Police 447w
Norfolk (08.03.00) 209–14wh
Petitions (10.03.00) 1295
Refugees 111w, 543–4w, 818–9w, 859–60w
Reigate 1000
VAT 815–6w

Housing benefit
173–6w, 180w, 614w, 682w, 805–6w, 809–10w, 843–5w
Abuse 175–6w, 508–9w, 513w, 755–8, 762–4, 805w, 808w
Applications 301w
Greater London 805–7w
Local authorities 302w
Social rented housing 726–7w
Students 509w
Young people 236–7w

Housing estates
Sports 100w

Housing improvement
Shrewsbury 197w

Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 914–7
Questions
Russia, Seals 828w

***Howarth, Mr Alan**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Culture Media and Sport*
Questions
Art works 251–3w
Art works, Exports 5–6
Arts Council of England, Finance 91w
British Library 605–6w
British Museum, Dismissal 432w
British Museum, Pay 431w
Cultural heritage, Europe 432–3w
Dance, Teachers 14–5
Elgin Marbles 482w
English Heritage, Grants 734w
Heritage Lottery Fund, Finance 91w
Jazz, Finance 91w
Museums and galleries, Fees and charges 98w, 733w
Museums and galleries, Finance 837w

***Howarth, Mr Alan**—continued*
Museums and galleries, Young people 98w
National Foundation for Youth Music 92w
Orchestras 430w
Spoliation Advisory Panel 13–4, 93–5w
Trafalgar Square 734–5w

***Howarth, Mr George**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office*
Questions
Family planning, Northern Ireland 834–5w
Fertility, Medical treatments 480–1w
General practitioners, Northern Ireland 481w
Road signs, Northern Ireland 782–3w

Howarth, Mr Gerald
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 98–9, 102–5
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 430–1, 452–6
Mozambique, Points of order (03.03.00) 663
NHS (08.03.00) 1019
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 583
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1207–8, 1212, 1215, 1225, 1234, 1236, 1244, 1255–6, 1258–64
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1067
Questions
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Reviews 547–8
NHS, Ancillary staff 140

***Howells, Dr Kim**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Trade and Industry*
Debates etc.
Phoenix companies (07.03.00) 984–8
Questions
Arms to Iraq Inquiry 134w
Arms trade 46–7w
Arms trade, Africa 585–6w
Companies, Fund raising 554
Competition 340w
Conditions of employment, Dept of Trade and Industry 52–7w
Consumers 339w
EC grants and loans 549–50
Explosives, Export controls 587w
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 424w
Kensington Mortgage Company 587w
Limited liability, Partnerships 47w
Mortgages, Fees and charges 587–8w
Motor vehicles, EC action 51w
Petrol, Retail trade 683–4w
Public expenditure, Dept of Trade and Industry 586w
Regional aid 543–5
Supermarkets, Competition 47w

Hoyle, Mr Lindsay
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 90, 112–3
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Bentwood, Closures (07.03.00) 156–8wh
Questions
Developing countries, Water supply 298w
Development banks 409
Future large aircraft 31w, 208w
Military aircraft 211w
RAF Logistics Support Services 715w
Rugby Football League 15–6
VAT, Housing 815–6w
Welfare to work, Disabled 753–4

***Hughes, Ms Beverley**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions*
Sittings in Westminster Hall
M25 (29.02.00) 6–9wh
Parks (02.03.00) 112–8wh
Questions
Areas of outstanding natural beauty 453w
Bellwin scheme, Melton 334–5w
Coal, Mining 603w
Deprivation indicators 13w
Education, Finance 9–10w
Higher civil servants, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 4–5w
Local government, Reform 199w
Local Government Act 1988 197–8w
Local government finance 279–80w
Non-domestic rates 11w
Parish councils, Regulation 196w
Peat, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 13w
Recycling, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 6w
Regional planning and development, West Sussex 11–2w
Sustainable development 7–8w

***Hughes, Mr Kevin Michael**, An Assistant Whip*
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 512–3

Hughes, Mr Simon
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 889, 909, 912, 922–8, 967–8
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 579
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1205–6, 1209–10, 1221–2, 1237–42, 1279
Refugees, Points of order (06.03.00) 765, 835–6
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 769–70, 776, 786–91, 800, 829
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1118–21, 1131, 1139, 1150, 1155
Questions
Acute beds 77w
Clergy 82w
Drugs, Crime 149–50w
Ethnic groups, Home Office 103w
Millennium Exhibition, Sports 84w
Police, Manpower 123w
Refugees 818–9w
Sierra Leone, Overseas aid 294w
Sports, Housing estates 100w

Human Genetics Commission
Finance 755w

Human rights
China 299w, 619w
East Timor 505w
Legislative drafting 562w
Sri Lanka 277w

Hunter, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 97–9
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1334
Questions
Anthrax, Vaccination 781w, 826w
Armed forces, Vaccination 484–5w
Civil service, Location 373w

***Hunter, Mr Andrew**—continued*
Hampshire Constabulary, Manpower 126–7w
Hysterectomy, Surrogate motherhood 754w
Millennium Exhibition 83w
Police, Pensions 571w
Vaccination 759w

Hurst, Mr Alan
Questions
Parish councils, Regulation 196w

***Hutton, Mr John**, Minister of State, Dept of Health*
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Carers, Barnsley (01.03.00) 69–73wh
Questions
Adoption 408w
Asperger's syndrome 506–7w
Carers, Telephone services 74w
Cataracts, Surgery 150–2
Child Abuse in North Wales Judicial Inquiry 231w
Children, Corporal punishment 60w
Chiropody, Staffordshire 74w
Dental services 317w, 407–9w
Dental services, Cosmetics 69w
Dental services, Fees and charges 58w
Dental services, Mercury 78w, 318w
Dental services, Metals 58–60w
Dental services, Pregnant women 221–2w
Dental services, Research 78w
Dental services, Shropshire 226w
Dental services, Waiting lists 407w
Dental services, Wansdyke 230w
Dentistry 221w, 223w
Disability aids 80w
Electroconvulsive therapy 764w
Epilepsy 229–30w
Health, Grants 506w
Hearing aids 69w, 74–5w
Home care services 414w
Hospitals, Wakefield 217–8w
Institutional care 318w, 408w
Integrate Services 506w
Integrate Services, Warrington 322–3w
Learning disability 72–3w
Long-Term Care Royal Commission 321w
Medical examinations 321w
Mental health services 154–6
Mental health services, Fees and charges 75–6w
Nursing homes, Post-operative care 231–2w
Ophthalmic services, Pensioners 232w
Orthopaedics 70w
Social services, Rural areas 73–4w
Social Services Inspectorate, Lancashire County Council 60–1w
Voluntary organisations, Finance 58w

Hydroelectric power
280–1w

Hydrographic Office
Standards 485–6w

Hysterectomy
Surrogate motherhood 754w

Iddon, Dr Brian
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1354–6
Questions
Climate change levy 813w
Drugs, Abuse 990–1
Housing 832w
Housing benefit 843–4w
Mental health services 155–6
New deal for disabled people 509w

Ilisu dam
45w, 278w, 423w, 464w, 583w

Illegal immigrants
Fixed penalties 662–3w

Illsley, Mr Eric
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Barnsley Health Authority (29.02.00) 10–3wh

Immigration
Administration 545w
Administrative delays 255–7w, 544w
Appeals 666w
Correspondence 107w

Immigration and Nationality Directorate
Manpower 545w

Immigration rules
Families (01.03.00) 81–6wh
Students 127w

Immobilisation of vehicles
Regulation 254w

Immunity certificates
42w

Immunity from prosecution
Fraud 463w

Import controls
Israel 266–7w, 768–9w

Imports
Bees 530w
Flowers 468w
Livestock 25w
Poultry 23–4w, 243w, 721–2w

Incapacity benefit
749–50
Medical examinations 802–4w
Paisley 845–6w

Income support
510w, 759–60, 845w
Abuse 235–6w
Lone parents 353–5w
North West region 754–5
Overseas residence 729w
Pensioners 509–10w, 514–5w
Stockton on Tees 169w
Vale of Clwyd 169–70w

Income tax
159w
Pensions 153w, 561w

Independent Panel on Vaccines Interactions Research
826–7w

Independent taxation
774w

Independent Tribunal Service
182w

India
Diplomatic service 616w
Visas 441w

Indian Ocean
Storms 528w

Indian subcontinent
Arms trade 503–4w
Entry clearances 783–4w
Visas 618–20w

Indonesia
Arms trade 32w
Hawk aircraft 504w
Overseas investment 766w

Industrial diseases
Compensation 428w, 465w, 588–9w
Medical examinations 173w
Mining 421w

Industrial diseases—continued
Social security benefits 428w

Industrial health and safety
Asbestos 670w, 830w

Industrial injuries
New deal schemes 312w

Industrial injuries disablement benefit
Asbestos 804–5w

Industrial injuries scheme
Self-employed 351–2w

Infant mortality
Hertfordshire 225w

Inflammatory bowel disease
219w

Inflation
771w, 815w

Influenza
747w, 750–1w

Information officers
Cabinet Office 609w
Home Office 383–5w, 556w, 821–2w

Information services
Social Security Benefits Agency 750–1

Information technology
Child Support Agency 614w
Devon 339w
Government departments 526w
Teachers 737w
Venture capital 340w

***Ingram, Rt Hon Adam**, Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office*
Questions
Civil servants, Northern Ireland Office 205w
Closed circuit television, Portadown 203w
Consultants, Northern Ireland Office 203w
Fees and charges, Northern Ireland Office 202w
Firearms, Northern Ireland 199–200w
Flags, Northern Ireland 207w
Forest products, Northern Ireland Office 835–6w
Further education, Antrim 405w
Higher civil servants, Northern Ireland Office 204w
Investment, Northern Ireland Office 200w
Local government finance, Northern Ireland 480w
Maghaberry Prison, Publications 480w
Maze Prison 403w
Nelson, Rosemary 403–4w, 560w
Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999 204–5w
Peat, Northern Ireland Office 204w
Police, Northern Ireland 204w
Police, Parliamentary questions 200w
Police Federation of England and Wales 559w
Prisoners' release, Northern Ireland 206w
Public bodies, Northern Ireland Office 559w
Rathgael Training School 1–2w
Recycling, Northern Ireland Office 404w
Research, Northern Ireland Office 205w
Terrorism, Northern Ireland 200–3w, 404w
TransTec, Northern Ireland 205–6w
Weapons, Northern Ireland 404–5w

Innovation
339w

Inquiry into Issues Raised by the Case of Harold Shipman
see Harold Shipman Inquiry

Institutional care
318w, 408w

Insurance
Churches 16
General practitioners 625–6w

Integrate Services
506w
Warrington 322–3w

Integrated administration and control system
798w

Integrated Transport Commission
591w

Intelligence services
Regulation (06.03.00) 767–837

Interest rates
816w
Mortgages 731w

Intergovernmental Conference 2000
616–7w

International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
see World Bank

International Criminal Court
503w

"International Development Select Committee on the Future of Sanctions"
295w

International Labour Organisation
Treaties 725w

International Monetary Fund
152w
Public appointments 525w

International Stock Exchange
see Stock Exchange

Internet
(08.03.00) 186–208wh, 546–7
Dept of Social Security 234w
Fees and charges 813w
Pornography 128w
Sports 607w

Intervention Board
402–3w

Intimidation
Schools 848–9w

Iran
Elections 439–40w
Political prisoners 439w, 619–21w

Iraq
1005–6
Drugs 875–6w
Oil 617–8w
Sanctions 616w, 1004
United Nations 563w

Iraq-Kuwait conflict
Uranium 652–3w

Iron and steel
Trade competitiveness 545–6

Irritable bowel syndrome
Fluoride 753w

Isle of Sheppey
Special education 308w

Israel
Import controls 266–7w, 768–9w

Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Questions
Investment, Northern Ireland Office 200w
Mortgages, Interest rates 731w
Plant power 869w

Jack, Rt Hon Michael*—*continued
Social Services Inspectorate, Lancashire County Council 60–1w

Jackson, Ms Glenda
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 586
Protected tenancies (02.03.00) 658–9

Jackson, Helen
Questions
Conditions of employment 338w

Jaguar aircraft
Guided weapons 653w

James Paget Hospital
422–3

Japan
Radioactive materials 51–2w, 422w, 499w

Jazz
Finance 91w

Jean Monnet action
475w

Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1114–7, 1123–4
Questions
A10, Road works 853
A1033, Kingston upon Hull 603w
Company cars, Safety 601w
Driving under influence, EC action 603w
Essex Police, Manpower 553–5w
Essex Police, Metropolitan Police 555w
Greater London Authority, Elections 460w
House of Commons, Driving 610w
London Underground, Escalators 278–9w
Ministerial policy advisors, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 600w
Motor vehicles, Recycling 582–3w
Motor vehicles, Registration 601w
National Rail Summit 603w
Railways, Safety 460w
Road traffic, Research 458w
Road works 455–60w
Roads, Accidents 157–61
Roads, Safety 601–4w
Telecommunications, Radiation exposure 599–600w
Transport, Costs 455w
Tuberculosis, Vaccination 764w

Jenkins, Mr Brian
Debates etc.
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 675–7, 680, 686, 689
Questions
Armed forces, Cadets 325w
"Executive Non-departmental Public Bodies 1999" 608–9w

Job creation
Greater London 1186–8
Shropshire 850w

Job security
345–6w

Jobcentres
Carlisle 392w

Jobseeker's allowance
845w, 849–50w
Abuse 235–6w
New deal schemes 392–3w
Paisley 845–6w

Johnson, Mr Alan*, *Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Trade and Industry
Questions
Ballots 682–3w
Cash dispensing 840w
Company liquidations 551–2
Conditions of employment 338w
Future large aircraft, Government assistance 542
Labour market 341w
Low Pay Commission 48w
Minimum wage 45–6w, 338w, 466w, 838w
Minimum wage, Wales 185w
Minimum wage, Young people 338w
Part-time employment, Conditions of employment 339w
Post offices 340w
Post offices, Easington 467w
Self-employed, Tax avoidance 425w
Shipbuilding 344w
Textiles 341w
Textiles, East Midlands 552
Trade union recognition 337w
Wages councils 48w
Working hours 343–4w

Johnson, Miss Melanie*, *Economic Secretary to the Treasury
Debates etc.
Childbirth, Registration (10.03.00) 1366–70
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 170–2, 211, 260–2, 341–4, 368–70, 397–8
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Exchange rates (08.03.00) 183–5wh
Questions
Banking Ombudsman 156w
Banks, Profits 156w
Cash dispensing 525w
Consumers, Debts 155w
Death rate, Leeds 523–4w
Debts, Developing countries 157w
Debts written off, Mozambique 525w
EC Finance Council 344–5w
Economic and monetary union 233w
Economic and monetary union, Public sector 233w
Economic and monetary union, Wales 233w
Employment, Greater London 851–2w
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Russia 526w
Financial markets, Disclosure of information 815w
Gold and foreign exchange reserves 430w
Households, Children 522–3w
Income tax, Pensions 561w
Inflation 771w, 815w
Interest rates 816w
International Monetary Fund 152w
International Monetary Fund, Public appointments 525w
Internet, Fees and charges 813w
Job creation, Greater London 1186–8
Job security 345–6w
Labour market 813w
Life insurance, Taxation 766w
Low pay 346–7w, 771–2w
Mortgages 517–8w
National debt 774w
National income, Statistics 515–6w
Overseas investment, Indonesia 766w
Pay, Wales 158–60w
Pensions, EC action 516w
Personal income 348w
Personal income, North East region 154–5w

Johnson, Miss Melanie*—*continued
Population, Newcastle upon Tyne 154w
Public bodies, Treasury 519w
Regional planning and development, Conferences 525w
Secondment, Treasury 524–5w
Stock Exchange 265–6w
Suicide 153w
Taxation, Local government 519–20w
Telecommunications 814w
UK trade with EC 516w, 816w
Unemployment 813w
Unemployment, Ethnic groups 740–2w
Unemployment, Shrewsbury 767–8w
Unemployment, Worcester 767w

Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 71–3
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 664–6, 669, 682, 684–5, 688, 700
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 129–30wh, 133wh
Questions
Hospitals, Private sector 149–50

Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre
Standards 700–1w

Jones, Rt Hon Barry
Questions
Magistrates' courts, Wales 330w
Manufacturing industries 1173–4
Minimum wage, Wales 185w
New deal schemes, Wales 41w
Post offices, Wales 40–1w
Poverty, Children 330w
Road traffic, Wales 39w
Strategic Rail Authority, Wales 199w
Teachers, Wales 685w
Television, Licensing 350w
Unemployment 813w

Jones, Ms Fiona
Questions
Local government services, East Midlands 592w

Jones, Helen M
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 919
NHS (08.03.00) 1014–6
Questions
Cerebral palsy 788w
Council housing, Tenant management organisations 845
Health, Grants 506w
Integrate Services 506w
Integrate Services, Warrington 322–3w
Midwives 323w, 757w
Television, Licensing 4–5

Jones, Ms Jenny
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 584
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1328–9
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 143wh

Jones, Mr Jon Owen
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 608, 637, 646–8

Jones, Dr Lynne
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 888, 892, 954, 956

Jones, Dr Lynne*—*continued
Questions
Disaster relief, Mozambique 781–2w
Family credit, Abuse 730–1w
Immunity certificates 42w
Mental health services 154
Occupational pensions 181w
ONE programme, Mentally ill 791–2w

Jones, Mr Martyn David
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 604–5

Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa, Minister for the New Deal, Dept for Education and Employment
Questions
Austria, Dept for Education and Employment 313w
Discrimination, EC action 477w
Employment Service, Assets 391w
Employment zones, Contracts 308–9w
Equal pay 393w
Equal pay, Scotland 797w
Jean Monnet action 475w
Job creation, Shropshire 850w
Jobcentres, Carlisle 392w
Jobseeker's allowance 849–50w
New deal for 50 plus 147w
New deal for young people 147w, 311–2w, 388w, 470w, 472–4w, 577–8w
New deal for young people, Expenditure 388w
New deal for young people, Paisley 150w
New deal for young people, Shropshire 392w
New deal for young people, Telephone services 577w
New deal schemes, Cumbria 388w
New deal schemes, Industrial injuries 312w
New deal schemes, Jobseeker's allowance 392–3w
New deal schemes, Research 471–2w
New deal schemes, Scotland 395w, 474w
New deal schemes, Statistics 426w
New deal schemes, Vale of York 311w
New deal schemes, Wales 311–2w
ONE programme, Mentally ill 791–2w
Part-time employment, Farmers 313–4w
Social security benefits 800–1w
Social security benefits, Somerset 470w

Jubilee line
186w

Judges
262–3w
Performance appraisal 263–4w
Training 263w

Judicial review
335–6w

Judiciary
Kosovo 400w

Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 873
Questions
London Underground 589–90w
Millennium Exhibition 7
National Lottery 732–3w

Keeble, Ms Sally
Questions
Tax burden 1177
Tax burden, Small businesses 813w

Keetch, Mr Paul
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 48, 66–9, 86

Keetch, Mr Paul*—*continued
Questions
Air force, Publications 653w
Cancer, Health services 787–8w
Class sizes, Primary education 396–7w
Common agricultural policy, Herefordshire 798w
Education, Standards 395–6w
Evictions, Court orders 420–1w
Excise duties, Petrol alternatives 345w
Hercules aircraft 781w
Jaguar aircraft, Guided weapons 653w
Minesweepers, Brazil 483w
Minimum wage, Young people 338w
Nimrod aircraft, Procurement 641–3w
RAF strike command, Boscombe Down 709–10w
Tuberculosis 755–6w
Tuberculosis, Hereford 756–7w

Kelly, Ms Ruth
Questions
Maternity pay 176w
Prisons, Crimes of violence 544w
Prisons, Standards 543w
Schools, Intimidation 848–9w
Working families tax credit 770w

Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles
Debates etc.
Oral question time intervention (08.03.00) 1002
Questions
Hospitals, Waiting lists 418–9
Mayor of London 999–1000

Kennedy, Jane, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Chancellor's Dept
Questions
Contact orders 41–2w
Court welfare officers 264w
Courts, Closures 654–9w
Evictions, Court orders 420–1w
Family courts 42w
Immigration, Appeals 666w
Immunity certificates 42w
Judges 262–3w
Judges, Training 263w
National Insurance Commissioners 42–3w
Public bodies, Lord Chancellor's Dept 481w
Residence orders, Children 765–6w

Kensington Mortgage Company
587w

Kent County Council Bill (HL) 1998/99
Debates etc.
2R order read (02.03.00) 535, (09.03.00) 1171

Kenya
Schools 298w

Key, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 113–6
Questions
Antitank missiles, Procurement 208w
Armed forces, Catering 498w
Armed forces, Telephone systems 327w
Armed forces, Video conferencing 268–70w
Arms trade, Exports 38w
Chemical and biological warfare 647–8w
Defence Export Services Organisation, Finance 643–4w
Disaster relief, Mozambique 498w
General Security Agreement 1961 708w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict, Uranium 652–3w
Kosovo, Peace keeping operations 638w

Key, Mr Robert*—*continued
Security, Ministry of Defence 328–9w
Standards, Ministry of Defence 32w

Khabra, Mr Piara S
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1223–5

Kidderminster Hospital
745–6w

Kidney, Mr David
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 959–61
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1314
Questions
Cataracts, Surgery 150–1
Channel tunnel railway line 860
Child Support Agency, Information technology 614w
Contact orders 41–2w
Eurostar 10–1w
Family courts 42w
Maintenance, Children 352w, 512–3w
Non-domestic rates 11w
Parentline 108–9w
Parlt Counsel 784–5w
Public transport, Rural areas 667w
Regional aid 543–4
Roads, Accidents 163
Small businesses, Stakeholder pensions 463–4w
Working families tax credit 152w

King, Mr Andy
Debates etc.
Oral question time intervention (29.02.00) 150

King, Ms Oona
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 55–7wh
Questions
Burundi, Peace negotiations 725–6w
Democratic Republic of Congo, UN resolutions 725w
Fertility, Medical treatments 69w
Indian subcontinent, Entry clearances 783–4w
Local education authorities, Racial discrimination 850–1w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 419
Smoking 220w

King, Rt Hon Tom
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 41, 46, 59–63
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 798–802, 831
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1121–2

Kingston upon Hull
A1033 603w

Kingston upon Thames
Police 116–7w

Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 220–1, 247–8
NHS (08.03.00) 1013, 1016, 1021, 1031, 1033, 1044
Questions
Housing benefit, Abuse 508w

Kirkwood, Mr Archy
Questions
Business questions 566–7
House of Commons Commission 44w
Means tested benefits 748
NHS, Ancillary staff 139

Kosovo
Armed conflict 36w, 816w
Construction 133w
Demonstrations 398–400w
Education 414–5
Ethnic groups 402w
Health services 292w
Judiciary 400w
Mines 498w
Peace keeping operations 133w, 399–400w, 638w
Police 276w, 399w, 500–1w, 615–6w, 875w
Refugees 819w

Kumar, Dr Ashok
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1244, 1251
Questions
Cleveland Constabulary, Inquiries 859w
Pensioners, Social security benefits 513–4w
Social security benefits 846w

Labelling
Drugs 760w
Genetically modified organisms 722w

Labour market
341w, 813w

Ladbroke Grove junction
Railway signals 454w

Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Questions
Harlan UK, Animal experiments 661–2w
Refugees 556–7w
Venture capital, Information technology 340w

Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 878
Questions
Disadvantaged, Young people 854–5
Hospitals, Waiting lists 420

Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1115
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 462–3
Questions
Income support, North West region 755
NHS, Publicity 754–5w
Tax burden 1174

Lake Windermere
199w

Laming Inquiry
see Harold Shipman Inquiry

Lancashire County Council
Social Services Inspectorate 60–1w

Land
Railways 670w

Land use
Agriculture 798w

Landfill tax
830w

Lansley, Mr Andrew
Questions
Civil servants, Secondment 992–3
Drugs, Abuse 406w
Drugs, Young people 349w
Gardening leave, Cabinet Office 151w
Information officers, Cabinet Office 609w

Latin America
Overseas trade 684w

Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Questions
Audit, Government departments 151–2w
International Monetary Fund 152w

Laxton, Mr Bob
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1306
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 189wh, 197–9wh

Lead pipes
Thames Water 5–6w
Water supply 599w

Learning and skills councils
238w

Learning disability
72–3w

Leasehold
599w

Leeds
Death rate 523–4w
New deal for schools 389–90w
Pensioners 510w
Roads 453w

Legal profession
Local authorities 841w

Legislative drafting
Human rights 562w

Legislative process
Utilities Bill 1999/2000 555–6

Leicestershire
Education 141–3w, 309w
Hospital beds 220w
Patients 760–1w

Leicestershire Police
Manpower 666w

Leigh, Mr Edward
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 585
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 463, 466
Questions
New Millennium Experience 89w
Social security benefits, Abuse 751–2
Tax burden 1174–6

Lepper, Mr David
Questions
Film 96w
Iran, Political prisoners 619–20w
Pinochet, Augusto 336–7w
Rail Property 670w
Railways, Land 670w

Leslie, Mr Christopher
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 481, 490–1, 505
Questions
First North Western Trains 335w
Motorcycles, Licensing 283w
Recycling 551

Letwin, Mr Oliver
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 489–97, 506, 509–10, 515, 520
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 703, 705, 707, 709, 712, 721–2, 728–31
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 179–80, 182, 184–5, 188, 190, 194–5, 199–215, 217–30, 234–41, 243–4, 247, 249, 252, 272–5, 278–84, 346, 349–55, 358, 360–3, 365–6, 369–71, 374–8, 381–5
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 683
Questions
Chideock bypass 675w
Dartmoor National Park, Quarrying 674–5w
Harefield Hospital 765w
Hijacking, Stansted Airport 663–4w

Levitt, Mr Tom
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 449
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1116
Questions
Gas and Electricity Consumer Council, Disclosure of information 425w
Hearing aids 69w
New deal for disabled people 509w

Lewis, Mr Ivan
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 315

Lewis, Dr Julian
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 77, 93, 96–7
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 376
Peers, Points of order (09.03.00) 1202
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 587–8
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1292
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1208, 1213–4, 1231–4, 1251, 1274
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 771, 774
Wales (02.03.00) 598, 607, 609, 644–5
Questions
Disadvantaged 997
Social security benefits, Abuse 755–6
Television, Licensing 4

Lewis, Mr Terry
Questions
Ladbroke Grove junction, Railway signals 454w

***Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen**, Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, Dept of Trade and Industry*
Questions
Alternative energy 185w, 341w, 585w
Alternative energy, Licensing 50w
British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme 47w
British Nuclear Fuels 464w
British Nuclear Fuels, Correspondence 421w
British Nuclear Fuels, Public appointments 422w
Fuel poverty 552–3
Gas and Electricity Consumer Council, Disclosure of information 425w

Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen—continued
Industrial diseases, Compensation 465w, 588–9w
Iron and steel, Trade competitiveness 545–6
Mineworkers' pension scheme 48w, 586w
Mining, Industrial diseases 421w
Mining, Pensions 337–8w
Mining, Scotland 421w
North Sea Decommissioning Group 50–1w
Nuclear power, Research 775w
Nuclear safeguards 339w
Petrol, Retail trade 684w, 775–6w
Radioactive materials, Exports 582w
Radioactive materials, Germany 424w, 464–5w
Radioactive materials, Japan 51–2w, 422w
Radioactive materials, Switzerland 582w
Regional selective assistance, North West region 542–3
Sellafield 422w
Trade promotion, Bulgaria 535–6
Wave power 584–5w
Wind power 51w

Lidington, Mr David
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1246, 1272–8
Questions
Cleft palate 415–6w
Clinical Standards Advisory Group 414–5w
Commission for Racial Equality 382–3w
Databases, Home Office 822w
Driving under influence, Drugs 164
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 288–9w, 378–82w, 402w, 424w, 428w, 450w, 563w, 575w, 817–8w
Home detention curfews 448–9w, 571–2w, 857w
Immigration rules, Students 127w
Information officers, Home Office 821–2w
London Underground, Ministers 589w
Metropolitan Police, Health services 373w
National Probation Service for England and Wales 449w
NHS, Per capita costs 79–80w, 630w
NHS Direct 629–30w
NHS Direct, Finance 61w
NHS Direct, Standards 61w
Refugees 109–11w, 541–2w
Refugees, Costs 819w
Refugees, Housing 543–4w, 818–9w
Refugees, Kosovo 819w
Refugees, Northamptonshire 542w
Refugees, Scotland 541–2w
Refugees, Social security benefits 542w
Refugees, Yugoslavia 543w
Trials 820–1w

Life insurance
Taxation 766w

Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 874
Questions
Cancer, Hertfordshire 747w
Cancer, Screening 746w
Death, Hertfordshire 226w
Foundation schools 736–7w
Hospitals, Consultants 217w
Infant mortality, Hertfordshire 225w
Social security benefits, Abuse 761
Surgery, Administrative delays 70w

Limited liability
Partnerships 47w

Linton, Mr Martin
Questions
"Audit Code of Practice" 776w

Lisbon Summit (EC)
617w

Literacy
304w

Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
293w

Livestock
Exports 26w, 244w
Imports 25w
Transport 285–6w

Livsey, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 604, 616–22, 628, 652, 655
Questions
Court welfare officers 264w
Court welfare officers, Training 421w
Driving tests 195w

Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1206–7, 1225–9, 1245

Llwyd, Mr Elfyn
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 603, 608, 624–9, 633, 637, 643
Questions
Agriculture 20w
Dental services, Mercury 78w, 318w
Dental services, Pregnant women 221–2w
Dental services, Research 78w
Farmers, Bankruptcy 529w
Farmers, Suicide 25w, 580w
Meat 20–1w
Water, Nitrates 20w

Loan guarantee scheme
Small businesses 344w

Local authorities
Housing benefit 302w
Legal profession 841w

Local education authorities
Racial discrimination 850–1w

Local government
Elections 568–9w
Pay 521w
Pensions 453–4w
Reform 199w
Taxation 519–20w

Local Government Act 1988
Questions
197–8w

Local government finance
279–80w, 594w
Cambridgeshire 1006
Northern Ireland 480w
Wales 330w

Local government services
Cost effectiveness 592w
East Midlands 592w

Location
Civil service 373w

Lock, Mr David*, *Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Dept
Questions
Civil Procedure Rule Committee, Public appointments 261–2w
EC law, Training 420w
Judges, Performance appraisal 263–4w
Magistrates, Training 659w

Lock, Mr David—continued
Press releases, Lord Chancellor's Dept 836w
USA 43–4w

Locums
324w

Logistic Information Systems Agency
Standards 645–6w

London
see Greater London

London Ambulance Service
74w

London Local Authorities Bill (HL) 1996/97
Debates etc.
Order for consideration read (09.03.00) 1171

London Research Centre
198w

London Rough Sleepers Unit
see Rough Sleepers Unit

London Underground
589–90w
Escalators 278–9w
Ministers 589w
Public private partnerships 331–2w
Rolling stock 5w

Lone parents
Income support 353–5w
Social security benefits 510–1w
Unemployment 180w

Long-Term Care Royal Commission
321w, 424

Lord Chancellor's Dept
Press releases 836w
Public bodies 481w

Lorries
Inspections 593w
Roads 10w, 597w

Loughton, Mr Tim
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Arundel bypass (07.03.00) 150wh, 153wh
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 60–3wh
Questions
A27, Worthing 681w
Antisocial behaviour orders 555w
Council housing, Property transfer 675–81w
Donnelly, Alan 461w
Museums and galleries, Fees and charges 98w
Overseas trade, Latin America 684w
Pinochet, Augusto 661w
Regional assemblies 675w
Regional assemblies, Disadvantaged 851–2
Regional planning and development, West Sussex 11–2w
Rough Sleepers Unit 461w
Rural areas, Poverty 673–4w
Telecommunications 814w

Love, Mr Andrew
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 46–9wh
Questions
A406, Trees 596–7w
Breast cancer 222w
Drugs, Side effects 862–3w
Job creation, Greater London 1186–7
Schools, Admissions 471w
Sierra Leone, Peace keeping operations 277w
Sri Lanka, Human rights 277w

Love, Mr Andrew*—*continued
UNCTAD 297w

Low flying
38w
Northumberland 497–8w

Low incomes
355–6w

Low pay
346–7w, 771–2w, 814w

Low Pay Commission
48w

Luff, Mr Peter
Questions
Africa, Agriculture 296w
Digital broadcasting, Worcestershire 608w
Railway network, Worcestershire 596w
State retirement pensions 761–2

Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 890, 895–6, 910, 944–6
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 702, 708–9, 711–2, 715
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 436–8
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 873
Questions
Computers, Home Office 544w
Members, Correspondence 373w

Lynton Hospital
629w

M25
(29.02.00) 2–9wh
Porous asphalt 9w, 597–8w

McAvoy, Mr Thomas, Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 937
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 191

McCabe, Mr Stephen
Questions
Animals, Disease control 417w
Foxes, Pest control 196–7w
Hearing aids 74–5w
Public appointments 989–90
Virgin Rail, Standards 12w

McCafferty, Ms Chris
Questions
Females, Circumcision 214–5w, 450–1w

McCartney, Rt Hon Ian, Minister of State, Cabinet Office
Questions
Better government programme, Elderly 688w
Drugs, Abuse 406w, 687w, 990–1
Drugs, Crime 149–50w
Drugs, Health education 687w
Electronic government 686w, 689w
"Executive Non-departmental Public Bodies 1999" 608–9w
Government departments, Information technology 526w

McCartney, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 446
Questions
Civil servants, Northern Ireland Office 205w

McDonnell, Mr John
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 141–6wh
Questions
Aspergers syndrome 506–7w
Full Sutton Prison, Race relations 547w
Harmondsworth Detention Centre 569–70w
Hospitals, Greater London 631w
India, Diplomatic service 616w
Motor vehicles, Waste disposal 667–8w
NHS trusts, Greater London 627–8w
Prison Service, Race relations 547w
Prisoners, Racial discrimination 546w
Prisons, Telephones 547–8w
Royal Irish Regiment, Photographs 327w

McFall, Mr John
Debates etc.
Whisky, Exports (29.02.00) 402

McIntosh, Miss Anne
Debates etc.
Sex Discrimination (Amendment) (No 2) Bill, 1R (07.03.00) 884–5
Social security benefits, Petitions (01.03.00) 533–4
Questions
Armed forces, Catering 325w
Armed forces education allowances 37w
Churches, VAT 81–2w
Class sizes, Primary education 145w
Disaster relief, Mozambique 782w
Future large aircraft, Government assistance 542
Incapacity benefit 749
Income tax 159w
Kosovo, Health services 292w
Millennium Exhibition, Sponsorship 83w
New deal schemes, Vale of York 311w
Pigs 718–9w
Public safety radio communications project 120w
Pupils, Migration 140w
Roads, Accidents 164–5
Roads, North Yorkshire 190–2w
Supermarkets, Competition 47w
Surgery, Waiting lists 70w
Walking 857
Weapons, Northern Ireland 404–5w

MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Questions
Prisoners' release, Northern Ireland 206w

McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Questions
Electronic government 686w

Mackinlay, Mr Andrew
Questions
Belize, Guatemala 783w
Gibraltar, R2 Renaissance cruise liner 504–5w
Independent Tribunal Service 182w
Methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus 232w

Maclean, Rt Hon David
Debates etc.
Energy Efficiency Bill, 2R adjourned (10.03.00) 1362
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1301–2, 1317, 1339
Questions
Council tax 13w
New deal for lone parents 312–3w
New deal for young people 388w, 577–8w
New deal for young people, Expenditure 388w
New deal schemes, Cumbria 388w
Non-domestic rates 12w

Maclean, Rt Hon David*—*continued
Non-domestic rates, Wales 41w, 330–1w
Tax burden 157w

Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 454–5
Questions
Assisted areas, Scotland 260–1w
Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 533w
Regional selective assistance, Scotland 261w
Sports, Females 12–3

McLoughlin, Mr Patrick
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1020
Questions
Business questions 569–70
Driving tests, Young people 163

McNamara, Mr Kevin
Questions
Bloody Sunday Tribunal of Inquiry 269w
Body searches 383w
Closed circuit television, Portadown 203w
Heart diseases, Health services 752–3w
HMS Vigilant 327–8w
Judicial review 335–6w
Maghaberry Prison, Publications 480w
Nelson, Rosemary 403–4w
Police, Northern Ireland 204w
Police Federation of England and Wales 559w
Primary care groups, Chronically sick 80w
Road signs, Northern Ireland 782–3w
Royal Irish Regiment, Photographs 327w
Terrorism, Northern Ireland 200–2w
Turkey, Official visits 869–70w

MacShane, Mr Denis
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 483–4
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 314–5
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 580
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1115, 1120
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Exchange rates (08.03.00) 169–77wh, 182wh, 185wh
Suspension of sittings, Westminster Hall sittings points of order (29.02.00) 1wh
Questions
Disposable income 518w
Iron and steel, Trade competitiveness 545
Modernising government programme, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 285w
NHS, Public appointments 218w
Personal income 728–9w
Taxation 1185–6
Working families tax credit 817w

Mactaggart, Fiona
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 903, 921
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 877
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1246, 1255, 1260, 1262, 1271–2, 1281
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 148wh
Questions
Disadvantaged 688w
Internet 547
Mozambique, Disaster relief 25–6
Poverty, Children 745

McWalter, Mr Tony
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 947, 952, 958
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 705, 707, 712, 720–4, 728, 730–1
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 687, 698
Questions
Dance, Teachers 14
EC aid 292w
Judges 262–3w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 29–30
Parking, Disabled 834w
Pigs, Republic of Ireland 247–8w

Maghaberry Prison
Publications 480w

Maginnis, Mr Ken
Questions
Police, Parliamentary questions 200w

Magistrates
Public appointments 149w
Training 659w

Magistrates' courts
Wales 330w

Magnetic resonance imagers
Walsall 864w

Mahon, Mrs Alice
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 84–8

Maintenance
Children 352w, 512–3w

Maize
Genetically modified organisms 722w, 779w

Malins, Mr Humfrey
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 889–90, 931–4

Mallaber, Judy
Questions
New deal schemes, Statistics 426w
Working families tax credit, Amber Valley 853w

Malnutrition
70–1w

Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Questions
Cash limits, Northern Ireland Office 405–6w
Northern Ireland Act 2000 560w
Northern Ireland Executive 559–60w
Northern Ireland government 480w

Manufacturing industries
1172–4
Technology 537–9

Marek, Dr John
Questions
Railway network, Wales 6w, 778w, 832w
St Helena 441w, 451–2w, 726w
St Helena, Airports 452w

Marine Accident Investigation Branch
334w

Markets
Farmers 246–7w

Marsden, Mr Gordon
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 263
Questions
British Library 605–6w
Church Commissioners, New deal schemes 81w
Income support, North West region 754–5

Marsden, Mr Paul
Questions
A5, Accidents 194w
Agriculture, Shropshire 531w
Agriculture, Subsidies 17w
Assisted places scheme, Shropshire 147w
Blood transfusions 75w
Bus services, Rural areas 778w
Class sizes, Primary education 304–5w
Farms, Shropshire 18–9w, 248w
Gardens, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 454w
Hospital beds 77–8w
Housing improvement, Shrewsbury 197w
Iran, Political prisoners 621w
Job creation, Shropshire 850w
Lone parents, Unemployment 180w
Ministerial policy advisors, Rural areas 149w
New deal for young people, Shropshire 392w
NHS Direct, Shropshire 227w
NHS trusts, Administration 229w
NHS trusts, Shropshire 71w
Ophthalmic services, Pensioners 229–30w, 232w
Peat, Dept for Education and Employment 390–1w
Peat, Dept for International Development 213w
Peat, Dept of Health 749w
Peat, Dept of Social Security 304w
Peat, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 13w
Peat, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 19–20w, 723–4w
Peat, Ministry of Defence 325w, 827–8w
Peat, Northern Ireland Office 204w
Pensioners, Income 163–5w
Personal income, Shropshire 180–1w
Poverty, OECD countries 177–8w
Railways, Safety 830w
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Hospital beds 77w
Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Manpower 866–7w
School meals 143w
Secondary education, Standards 394–5w
Shropshire Health Authority, Finance 318w
Social security benefits, Disabled 177w
Social security benefits, Widowed people 301–2w
Unemployment, Shrewsbury 767–8w
West Mercia Constabulary 127w

Marshall-Andrews, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 887, 891, 893–4, 911, 916–22, 926, 933, 936, 967–8
Questions
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill 1999/2000 374–5w
Millennium Exhibition, Sponsorship 90–1w
New Millennium Experience 90w

Marshall-Andrews, Mr Robert—continued
New Millennium Experience, Finance 250w
Trials, Costs 446–7w

Martlew, Mr Eric
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1043–6
Questions
Channel tunnel railway line 861
Hospitals, Construction 420
Jobcentres, Carlisle 392w
Overseas trade, Ethics 297–8w
Railways, Northern region 418w

Maternity leave
Dept for Education and Employment 387–8w
Dept of Social Security 170–2w
Scotland Office 348–9w

Maternity pay
176w

Maternity services
Rural areas 748w

Mates, Mr Michael
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Haemophilia, Hepatitis (07.03.00) 121–6wh, 135–6wh, 139wh

Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Questions
Kosovo, Construction 133w
Kosovo, Peace keeping operations 133w
Kosovo, Police 500–1w, 615–6w, 875w
Serbia 875w
Stability Pact 615w
UNMIK 400–1w, 615w, 874–5w

May, Mrs Theresa
Questions
Educational maintenance allowance 470–1w
Heathrow Airport, Air misses 331–3w
Heathrow Airport, Air traffic 7w
Sixth form education, Student numbers 790–1w

Mayor of London
419–21, 999–1000, 1002–3
Publicity 334w

Maze Prison
403w

Meacher, Rt Hon Michael, Minister for the Environment, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Questions
Air pollution, Pollution control 594w, 777–8w
Asbestos, Industrial health and safety 670w, 830w
Biodiversity 281w
Combined heat and power 671–2w
Environment Agency, Fees and charges 454w
Environment protection 273w
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 779w
Genetically modified organisms, Oilseed rape 667w
National parks, South Downs 862
Nuclear power 273–4w, 280–1w
Pollution, Yeovil 3–4w
Recycling 595w
Recycling, Packaging 831w
Roads, Noise 848–9
Seeds 831w
Water charges, Consumer protection 419–20w

Means tested benefits
747–8

Meat
20–1w

Medals
Greece 429–30w

Medical Devices Agency
Standards 788w

Medical equipment
Diabetes 419–20

Medical examinations
321w
Incapacity benefit 802–4w
Industrial diseases 173w

Medical profession
Manpower 69–70w

Medical Supplies Agency
Standards 488–9w

Medical treatments
Fertility 69w, 480–1w

Medicines Control Agency
788w

Medway Council Bill (HL) 1998/99
Debates etc.
2R order read (02.03.00) 535, (09.03.00) 1171

Meetings
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 673w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 26w

Mellor Task Force
see Football Task Force

Melton
Bellwin scheme 334–5w

Members
Correspondence 16w, 373w, 410w, 539w

Members' suspension
Gorman, Teresa (01.03.00) 428–59

Meningitis
Children 759w

Mental health services
154–6
Fees and charges 75–6w

Mentally ill
ONE programme 791–2w
Riot control weapons 287w
War pensions 428w

Mentally incapacitated
British citizenship 112–3w

Mercury
Dental services 78w, 318w

Merron, Ms Gillian
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1315–7
Questions
Consumers 339w
Hijacking, Stansted Airport 289–91w
Manufacturing industries, Technology 538

Mersey Tunnels Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (02.03.00) 535, (09.03.00) 1171

Merseyside
EC grants and loans 418w, 467–8w
Pensioners 351w

Metals
Dental services 58–60w

Meteorological Office
Standards 698–700w

Methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus
232w

Metropolitan Police
Essex Police 555w
Health services 373w
Housing 447w
Manpower 289w, 423, 998–9
Recruitment 112w

Michie, Mrs Ray
Questions
Coastal areas 856

Midwives
137–9, 323w, 424, 757w

Migration
Pupils 140w

***Milburn, Rt Hon Alan**, Secretary of State for Health*
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1014, 1018–27
Questions
Harold Shipman Inquiry 862w
Health services, Elderly 140–3
Hospital beds 152–3
NHS Pensions Agency 507w
NHS trusts 865w
Surgery 148–9

Military aircraft
see also Low flying
211w
Accidents 37w, 210–1w
Costs 782w

Military attaches
326w

Military exercises
Costs 31–2w
Nuclear weapons 326w

Military Survey
Standards 705–6w

Milk
Prices 533w

Milk Marque
554

Millennium Commission
734w

Millennium compliance
Government departments 135–6w

Millennium Exhibition
6–8, 83w, 85w, 87w, 89w, 350w, 606w
Attendance 10–1, 284w
Catering 88–9w, 250–1w, 350w
Disclosure of information 83–4w
Educational visits 87w, 249w
Hire services 248w
Manpower 249–50w
Public transport 285w
Repairs and maintenance 88w
Sponsorship 83w, 85–6w, 90–1w, 606w
Sports 84w
Tickets 83–8w, 90w, 248–9w, 284w
Wales 10–1, 85w, 284w

Millennium Experience
see New Millennium Experience

Miller, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 315
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 878
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1304

***Miller, Mr Andrew**—continued*
Questions
Roads, Accidents 161

Mines
Kosovo 498w

Minesweepers
Brazil 483w

Mineworkers' pension scheme
48w, 586w

Minimum wage
45–6w, 338w, 466w, 838w
Scotland (08.03.00) 1162–70
Wales 185w
Young people 338w

Mining
Coal 603w
Early retirement 48w
Industrial diseases 421w
Pensions 337–8w
Scotland 421w

Ministerial policy advisors
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 600w
Rural areas 149w

Ministerial statements
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 571–88, 589–95
Planning (07.03.00) 863–80

Ministers
London Underground 589w

Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food
Alternative energy 247w
Austria 22–3w
Economic and monetary union 579–81w
Forest products 21–2w, 246w
Gardening leave 23w
Higher civil servants 20w
Meetings 26w
Modernising government programme 285w
Peat 19–20w, 26w, 723–4w
Public bodies 581w
Recycling 17w
Remploy 22w
Research 14–5w

Ministry of Defence
Catering 35w
Civilians 429w
Computers 210w, 270w
Conditions of employment 27–8w
Economic and monetary union 483w
Peat 325w, 827–8w
Press releases 827w
Public bodies 429w
Recycling 36–7w
Scotland 650–2w
Security 328–9w
Serco 210w
Standards 32w
Written questions 35w, 482w, 654w

Ministry of Defence Police
Standards 713–4w

Miscarriage
763w

Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (09.03.00) 1202

Mitchell, Mr Austin
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Exchange rates (08.03.00) 163–70wh, 179wh
Questions
Banking Ombudsman 156w

Mitchell, Mr Austin*—*continued
Intergovernmental Conference 2000 616–7w
Lisbon Summit (EC) 617w
Shipping 776w
VAT, Historic buildings 769w

MMR vaccine
79w, 752w
Greater London 79w, 752w

Mobile phones
see Cellular phones

Mobility
Disabled 237w

Modernising government programme
689w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 285w

Moffatt, Laura
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 99–102
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 876
Questions
Army, Germany 26w
Immigration, Administrative delays 255–7w
Pakistan, Government 501w

Monetary compensatory amounts
245–6w, 534w, 797–8w

Monitoring
Radiation exposure 639–40w

***Moonie, Dr Lewis**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Ministry of Defence*
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 65, 116–20
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1289–94
Questions
Air force, Publications 653w
Alma-Dettinger Barracks, Sales 638w
Ammunition 32w
Ammunition, Procurement 209–10w
Animal experiments, Porton Down 633w
Antitank missiles, Procurement 208w
Armed forces, Catering 498w
Armed forces, Housing 651w
Armed forces, Vaccination 484–5w
Arms trade 35w
Arms trade, Exports 38w
Arms trade, Indonesia 32w
Army Base Repair Organisation, Standards 491–2w
Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency, Standards 714–5w
Army Personnel Centre, Standards 707w
Army Technical Support Agency, Standards 701–2w
Army Training and Recruiting Agency, Standards 693–5w
Bagshot Park 270w
Catering, Ministry of Defence 35w
Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment, Nancekuke 32–3w
Chemical and biological warfare 647–8w, 708–9w
Civilians, Ministry of Defence 429w
Clyde submarine base 652w
Conditions of employment, Ministry of Defence 27–8w
Defence, Shipping 207–8w, 640w
Defence Analytical Services Agency, Standards 646–7w
Defence Animal Centre, Performance standards 708w
Defence Bills Agency, Standards 706–7w
Moonie, Dr Lewis*—*continued
Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency, Standards 644w
Defence Communications Services Agency, Standards 487–8w
Defence Dental Agency, Standards 645w
Defence equipment, Procurement 36w
Defence equipment, USA 28–30w
Defence Estate Organisation, Standards 690w
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, Standards 691–3w
Defence Export Services Organisation, Finance 643–4w
Defence Medical Training Organisation, Standards 710–1w
Defence Secondary Care Agency, Standards 495–6w
Defence Transport and Movements Executive, Standards 703–5w
Defence Vetting Agency, Standards 711–3w
Disposal Sales Agency, Standards 635–6w
Duke of York's Royal Military School, Standards 633–5w
Economic and monetary union, Ministry of Defence 483w
Exservicemen, Cancer 34w
Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD 648–50w
Future large aircraft 31w, 208w
Harris Corporation 633w
Hercules aircraft 781w
HMS Spartan 651w
Hydrographic Office, Standards 485–6w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict, Uranium 652–3w
Jaguar aircraft, Guided weapons 653w
Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre, Standards 700–1w
Kosovo, Mines 498w
Kosovo, Peace keeping operations 638w
Logistic Information Systems Agency, Standards 645–6w
Low flying 38w
Low flying, Northumberland 497–8w
Medals, Greece 429–30w
Medical Supplies Agency, Standards 488–9w
Meteorological Office, Standards 698–700w
Military aircraft 211w
Military aircraft, Accidents 37w
Military Survey, Standards 705–6w
Ministry of Defence Police, Standards 713–4w
Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation, Standards 708w
Naval Bases and Supply Agency, Standards 637–8w
Naval Manning Agency, Standards 493–5w
Nimrod aircraft, Procurement 641–3w
Pay and Personnel Agency, Standards 496–7w
Peat, Ministry of Defence 325w
Portsmouth Dockyard 484w
Press releases, Ministry of Defence 827w
Public bodies, Ministry of Defence 429w
Queen Victoria School, Standards 490–1w
Radiation exposure, Monitoring 639–40w
RAF Logistics Support Services, Standards 492–3w
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment, Standards 690–1w
RAF Training Group, Standards 486–7w
Recycling, Ministry of Defence 36–7w
Rosyth Dockyard, Radiation exposure 638–40w
Scotland, Ministry of Defence 650–2w
Serco, Ministry of Defence 210w
Moonie, Dr Lewis*—*continued
Service Children's Education, Standards 695–7w
Ships Support Agency, Standards 490w
Specialist Procurement Services, Standards 636–7w
Standards, Ministry of Defence 32w
Tactical reconnaissance armoured combat equipment requirement 30w, 207w
Written questions, Ministry of Defence 35w, 482w, 654w

Moore, Mr Michael
Questions
National Air Traffic Services 333–4w
Roads, Accidents 161–2

Moran, Ms Margaret
Questions
Electronic commerce, Advisory services 337w
Housing, Capital investment 859–60

Morgan, Mr Alasdair
Questions
Excise duties, Diesel fuel 855–6w
Forth rail bridge 858
Low flying 38w
New deal for young people 472–4w
New deal schemes, Jobseeker's allowance 392–3w
Police, Ports 104w
Winter fuel payments 804w
Working families tax credit 153w

Morgan, Ms Julie
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 646

***Morley, Mr Elliot**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food*
Debates etc.
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 460–4, 528–31
Questions
Agriculture, Diversification 16–7w
Agriculture, Subsidies 245w
Alternative energy, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 247w
Economic and monetary union, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 579–81w
Farmers, Suicide 580w
Farms, Furs 15w
Fisheries, Grants 578w, 722–3w
Fishing catches, Quotas 581w
Fishing catches, Research 534w
Flood control 531w, 579–80w
Forest products, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 21–2w, 246w
Greyhound racing, Animal welfare 534w
Higher civil servants, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 20w
Livestock, Exports 26w, 244w
Livestock, Transport 285–6w
Peat, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 19–20w, 26w, 723–4w
Poultry, Animal welfare 19w, 247w, 721w
Public bodies, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 581w
Recycling, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 17w
Remploy, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 22w
Salmon, Fishing 581w
Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group 800w
Seas and oceans, Nature conservation 18w
Tree felling, Licensing 581–2w, 723w
Water, Nitrates 20w

Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle, Minister for School Standards, Dept for Education and Employment
Questions
Academic year 397w
Assisted places scheme, Shropshire 147w
Class sizes, Newcastle upon Tyne 140–1w
Class sizes, Primary education 145w, 304–5w, 396–7w
Class sizes, Somerset 390w
Education, Contracts for services 315w
Education, Finance 790w
Education, Leicestershire 141–3w, 309w
Education, Standards 146w, 395–6w
Education, Tyne and Wear 148w
Education action zones 147w
Foundation schools 736–7w
Free school meals 475–6w
Free school meals, Greater London 475w
Grammar schools, Greater Manchester 737–9w
Literacy 304w
New deal for schools, Leeds 389–90w
New Local Government Network 305w
Pre-school education, Newcastle upon Tyne 145–6w
Pupil exclusions 478–9w
Pupils, Migration 140w
School meals, Newcastle upon Tyne 143w
Schools, Admissions 471w
Schools, Grants 139w
Schools, Population 238–43w
Schools, Urban areas 144w
Secondary education, Per capita costs 144w
Teachers, Pay 146w
Teachers, Recruitment 477w
Teachers, Training 315w

Mortgages
517–8w
Fees and charges 587–8w
Interest rates 731w

Moss, Mr Malcolm
Debates etc.
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 463–70, 530–1

Motor vehicles
EC action 51w
Excise duties 266w
Recycling 582–3w
Registration 601w
Waste disposal 667–8w

Motorcycles
Licensing 283w

Mount Vernon Hospital
765w

Mountford, Kali
Questions
Electronic government 686w
Tax burden 1176

Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie, Minister for the Cabinet Office
Questions
Civil servants, Secondment 991–3
Departmental coordination 993–4
Disadvantaged 687–8w, 996–7
Drugs, Abuse 687w
GM Communications Unit 150–1w
Information officers, Cabinet Office 609w
Magistrates, Public appointments 149w
Ministerial policy advisors, Rural areas 149w
Modernising government programme 689w

Mozambique
Debts written off 525w

Mozambique—continued
Disaster relief 21–31, 296w, 329w, 406–7w, 419, 498w, 621–3w, 710w, 781–2w, 796w, 874w, 1001
Overseas aid 796w, 828–9w
Soil erosion 623–4w

Mullin, Mr Chris, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Debates etc.
Protected tenancies (02.03.00) 659–62
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1351–4
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Greater London (01.03.00) 63–5wh
Housing, Norfolk (08.03.00) 212–4wh
Questions
A10, Road works 852–3
Air routes, USA 189–90w
Aircraft, Fuels 671w
Aircraft, Violence 418–9w
Animals, Disease control 417w
British Waterways Board, External financing limits 284w
Council housing, Greater London 590w
Council housing, North West region 192–4w
Council housing, Property transfer 598–9w, 675–81w
Foxes, Pest control 196–7w
Heathrow Airport, Air misses 331–3w
Heathrow Airport, Air traffic 7w
Homelessness, Finance 419w
Housing 8w
Housing improvement, Shrewsbury 197w
Lake Windermere 199w
Landfill tax 830w
Leasehold 599w
Motor vehicles, Waste disposal 667–8w
National Air Traffic Services 333–4w
Nature conservation, Dorset 670w
Nature conservation, Seas and oceans 198w
Petrol, Additives 282w, 600w
Rented housing, Unemployment 8w
Rural areas, Poverty 673–4w
Sewers, Rodents 672w
Telecommunications, Radiation exposure 599–600w
Tipping of waste, Pollution control 830–1w
Water supply, Greater London 5–6w
Water supply, Lead pipes 599w
Zoos 776w

Multinational companies
291w

Murphy, Mr Denis
Questions
Salmon, Fishing 581w

Murphy, Mr Jim
Questions
Austria, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 95w
Austria, Dept for Education and Employment 313w
Austria, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 22–3w
Roads, Accidents 197w
Sports 97–8w

Murphy, Rt Hon Paul, Secretary of State for Wales
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 597–605, 621
Questions
Catering, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 39w

Murphy, Rt Hon Paul—continued
Child Abuse in North Wales Judicial Inquiry 39w
EC grants and loans, Wales 39w
Magistrates' courts, Wales 330w
New deal schemes, Wales 41w
Non-departmental public bodies, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 685w
Non-departmental public bodies, Wales 825w
Non-domestic rates, Wales 41w
Post offices, Wales 40–1w
Press releases, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 39–40w, 825w
Public bodies, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 685w
Public expenditure, Wales 39w
Recycling, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 38w
Research, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 41w
Road traffic, Wales 39w
Teachers, Wales 685w
Theatre, Wales 41w

Museum of the Moving Image
733–4w

Museums and galleries
Fees and charges 98w, 733w
Finance 837w
Young people 98w

Nancekuke
Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment 32–3w

National Air Traffic Services
333–4w

National Audit Office
18–20, 251w
Finance 131w

National debt
774w

National Family and Parenting Institute
108–9w

National Foundation for Youth Music
92w

National income
Statistics 515–6w

National Institute for Clinical Excellence
226–7w

National Insurance Commissioners
42–3w, 179w

National insurance contributions
160–1w, 345w, 855w
Personal records 521–2w

National Insurance Contributions Office
Security 809w, 811w

National Lottery
8–9, 91w, 603–4w, 732–3w, 836w
Burton 100w
English Sports Council 837w
Gloucestershire 95–6w
Rural areas 481w
Tewkesbury 735w

National Lottery Distribution Fund
93w

National parks
South Downs 862

National Probation Service for England and Wales
449w

National Rail Summit
603w

National Sports Institute
see UK Sports Institute

Nature conservation
Dorset 670w
Seas and oceans 18w, 198w

Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation
Standards 708w

Naval Bases and Supply Agency
Standards 637–8w

Naval Manning Agency
Standards 493–5w

Naysmith, Dr Douglas
Questions
Flood control 531w, 579–80w

Negligence
General practitioners 230w

Nelson, Rosemary
403–4w, 560w

New businesses
540–1

New deal for 50 plus
147w

New deal for disabled people
471w, 509w

New deal for lone parents
312–3w, 356–7w, 730w
Wales 730w

New deal for schools
306w
Leeds 389–90w

New deal for young people
147w, 311–2w, 388w, 470w, 472–4w, 577–8w
Expenditure 388w
Paisley 150w
Shropshire 392w
Telephone services 577w

New deal schemes
Church Commissioners 81w
Cumbria 388w
Industrial injuries 312w
Jobseeker's allowance 392–3w
Research 471–2w
Scotland 395w, 474w
Statistics 426w
Vale of York 311w
Wales 41w, 311–2w

New Local Government Network
305w

New Millennium Experience
89–90w, 732w
Contracts 250–1w, 433w
Debts 838w
Finance 250w
Income 248w
Manpower 89w
Overtime 251w
Public appointments 86–7w, 89–90w

New Scotland Yard
see Metropolitan Police

Newcastle upon Tyne
Class sizes 140–1w
Population 154w
Pre-school education 145–6w
School meals 143w
Special education 148–9w

News at Ten
423

Newspaper press
468w

Newtown Hospital
745w

NHS
421–2, 1001
Ancillary staff 139–40
Drugs 228w
Essex (01.03.00) 74–80wh
Finance 65–7w, 418–9, 626w
Manpower 319–20w
Opposition days (08.03.00) 1010–65
Per capita costs 78–80w, 223–5w, 626–7w, 630w
Public appointments (01.03.00) 74–80wh, 218w
Public private partnerships 221w
Publicity 754–5w
Ringfenced funding 788w
Temporary employment 632w
Vacancies 319w
Wales 40w, 563w

NHS Direct
629–30w
Finance 61w
Shropshire 227w
Standards 61w

NHS Pensions Agency
507w

NHS trusts
865w
Administration 229w
Equipment 411–3w
Greater London 627–8w
Pay 318–9w
Private finance initiative 63–5w
Shropshire 71w
Worcestershire 628w

NHSnet
317w

Nicholls, Mr Patrick
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 447–51
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 586, 595
Prisoners of war, Compensation (09.03.00) 1287, 1294
Questions
Fraud, Immunity from prosecution 463w

Nigeria
Armed conflict 440–1w

Nimrod aircraft
Procurement 641–3w

Nitrates
Water 20w

Noise
Roads 848–9

Non-departmental public bodies
789–90w
Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 685w
Wales 825w
Yorkshire and Humberside 595w

Non-domestic rates
11–2w, 778–9w
Combined heat and power 454–5w
Small businesses 595w
Wales 41w, 330–1w

Norfolk
Housing (08.03.00) 209–14wh

Norman, Mr Archie
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 865–7
Questions
Acute beds 760w
Norman, Mr Archie—continued
Ambulance services 864–5w
Government offices for the regions, Dept for Education and Employment 792w
Government offices for the regions, Dept of Trade and Industry 839w
Hospital wards, Gender 760w
Regional Co-ordination Unit 777w
Regional government 847–8

Norris, Dan
Questions
Agriculture, Diversification 16–7w
Dental services, Wansdyke 230w
Hospitals, Crimes against the person 73w
Pornography, Internet 128w
Social security benefits, Automated credit transfer 57–8w

North East region
Personal income 154–5w

North Sea Decommissioning Group
50–1w

North West region
Council housing 192–4w
Income support 754–5
Regional selective assistance 542–3
Single regeneration budget 592–3w
Youth services 139–40w

North Western Trains
see First North Western Trains

North Yorkshire
Roads 190–2w

Northamptonshire
Refugees 542w

Northamptonshire Health Authority
Finance 221w

Northern Ireland
Family planning 834–5w
Fertility 480–1w
Firearms 199–200w
Flags 207w
General practitioners 481w
Local government finance 480w
Police 200w, 204w
Prisoners' release 206w
Road signs 782–3w
Smuggling 769w, 855w
Terrorism 200–3w, 404w
TransTec 205–6w
Weapons 404–5w

Northern Ireland Act 2000
Questions
560w

Northern Ireland Executive
559–60w

Northern Ireland government
480w

Northern Ireland Grand Committee
(01.03.00) 532

Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999
Questions
204–5w

Northern Ireland Office
Cash limits 405–6w
Civil servants 205w
Consultants 203w
Fees and charges 202w
Forest products 835–6w
Higher civil servants 204w
Investment 200w
Peat 204w
Public bodies 559w
Recycling 404w

Northern Ireland Office*—*continued
Research 205w

Northern region
Railways 418w

Northumberland
Low flying 497–8w

Notre Europe
see Our Europe Association

Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty
135w

Nuclear power
273–4w, 280–1w
Research 775w

Nuclear power stations
Developing countries 215–6w

Nuclear safeguards
339w

Nuclear Safeguards Bill (HL) 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (01.03.00) 532

Nuclear shelters
Devon 128–9w

Nuclear submarines
France 484w
Radiation exposure 715w

Nuclear weapons
Military exercises 326w

Numeracy
304w

Nurses
Manpower 73w
Prisons 113w
Retirement 631–2w
Training 759w

Nursing homes
Post-operative care 231–2w

Oaten, Mr Mark
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Pathology, Pay (08.03.00) 223–6wh
Questions
Medals, Greece 429–30w
Sixth form education, Finance 477–8w
Teachers, Computers 574–5w
Written questions, Ministry of Defence 482w, 654w

O'Brien, Mr Mike*, *Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Home Office
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1245–6, 1263, 1278–84
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1120, 1124–6, 1129–30, 1132–4, 1138–42, 1148–51, 1153–6, 1158–60
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 146–8wh
Questions
Animal experiments 565–8w
Animal experiments, EC law 447w
Charter of Pardon 1508 58w
Commission for Racial Equality 382–3w
Fire services, Vehicles 129w
Gambling Review Body 857–8w
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 288–9w, 378–82w, 450w, 817–8w
Greyhound racing, Animal welfare 287–8w
Harlan UK, Animal experiments 661–2w
Local government, Elections 568–9w
Nuclear shelters, Devon 128–9w
Open government 378w
Pets 565w
Smoke alarms 107–8w

O'Brien, Mr Mike*—*continued
Urban areas 861w
Voting methods, Pilot schemes 257–8w, 556w
Voting methods, Regulation 666w

O'Brien, Mr Stephen
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 701–20, 722, 727
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 297–300, 308, 330–3, 335
Questions
Business questions 567–8
Tax burden 1174–5

O'Brien, Mr William
Questions
Environment Agency, Fees and charges 454w
Landfill tax 830w
Lorries, Roads 597w
Primary care groups 220w
Recycling, Packaging 831w
Roads, Noise 848–9
Tipping of waste, Pollution control 830–1w

Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Penalties) Regulations 2000
Debates etc.
(09.03.00) 1285

Occupational pensions
181w

OECD countries
Poverty 177–8w

Office of Parliamentary Counsel
see Parlt Counsel

Office of the Banking Ombudsman
see Banking Ombudsman

Office of the Secretary of State for Wales
Catering 39w
Non-departmental public bodies 685w
Press releases 39–40w, 825w
Public bodies 685w
Recycling 38w
Research 41w

Official engagements
Prime Minister 265w

Official hospitality
Prime Minister 265w

Official Receiver
Tax allowances 767w

Official visits
134–5w
Turkey 869–70w

O'Hara, Mr Edward
Questions
Mental health services, Fees and charges 75–6w

Oil
Iraq 617–8w
Pollution 13–4w

Oilseed rape
Genetically modified organisms 667w, 868w

Oldchurch Hospital
Hospital beds 408w

Olner, Mr Bill
Questions
Horserace Totalisator Board 371–2w

Ombudsman
Public sector 790w

ONE programme
512w
Mentally ill 791–2w

O'Neill, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1071–3, 1083–7, 1090
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1340

Open government
378w

Operation Horseshoe
686w

Ophthalmic services
Pakistan 295–6w
Pensioners 229–30w, 232w

Opik, Mr Lembit
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 602, 624, 634, 639, 643, 648
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1303
Questions
Cattle tracing system 720w

Opposition days
Economic policy (01.03.00) 476–526
NHS (08.03.00) 1010–65
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1066–114

Orchestras
430w

Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (03.03.00) 737, (10.03.00) 1363

Orphans
China 624w

Orthopaedics
70w

Osborne, Ms Sandra
Questions
Refugees, Housing 111w

Osteoporosis
Health education 755w

Ottaway, Mr Richard
Questions
Refugees 422
Tax avoidance 1180–1
Tax avoidance, Self-employed 772–3w
Trade union recognition 337w

Our Europe Association
869w

Outdoor education
308w, 477w

Overseas aid
298–9w, 409–10, 795–6w, 829w
Democratic Republic of Congo 299w
Females 528w
Mozambique 796w, 828–9w
Serbia 452w
Sierra Leone 294w
Zimbabwe 215w, 292–3w

Overseas investment
Indonesia 766w

Overseas residence
Income support 729w

Overseas students
Higher education 138w

Overseas trade
Austria 50w, 585w
Ethics 297–8w

Overseas trade—continued
Latin America 684w

Overtime
New Millennium Experience 251w

Owner occupiers
832–3w

Oxfordshire
General practitioners 758w

Packaging
Recycling 831w

Paediatrics
Greater Manchester 743w
Royal Bolton Hospital 743w

Paedophilia
571w

Page, Mr Richard
Questions
Regional aid 544

Paice, Mr James
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1303
Questions
A10, Road works 852–3
Bees, Imports 530w
Dentistry, Pensions 323–4w
Hops, Subsidies 720w
Local government finance, Cambridgeshire 1006
Poultry, Imports 243w, 721–2w
Refugees, Housing 859–60w
Social security benefits, Post offices 613–4w

Paisley
Cold weather payments 848w
Incapacity benefit 845–6w
Jobseeker's allowance 845–6w
New deal for young people 150w

Paisley, Rev Ian
Questions
Rathgael Training School 1–2w

Pakistan
Government 501w
Ophthalmic services 295–6w

Palace of Westminster
Pest control 479–80w

Palmer, Dr Nick
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 191wh

Parental leave
Dept for Education and Employment 572–3w

Parentline
108–9w

Parish councils
Regulation 196w

Parking
Disabled (28.02.00) 131–6, 834w

Parking offences
Greater London 195–6w

Parks
(02.03.00) 87–120wh

Parliament
Disabled 796–7w

Parliamentary Commissioner (Amendment) Bill (HL) 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (10.03.00) 1363

Parliamentary procedure
Rulings and statements (28.02.00) 127

Parliamentary questions
Administrative delays 259–60w
Police 200w

Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund
(07.03.00) 980

Parliamentary Counsel
784–5w

Partnerships
Limited liability 47w

Part-time employment
Conditions of employment 339w
Farmers 313–4w

Paterson, Mr Owen
Debates etc.
Business questions, Points of order (02.03.00) 596
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 304–9, 333–4, 336, 338–41
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1140–1
Wales (02.03.00) 611, 633, 642–6, 654
Written questions, Points of order (09.03.00) 1202
Questions
Company liquidations 552
Hospitals, Waiting lists 219–20w
Milk Marque 554
Pinochet, Augusto 568w, 661w
Terrorism, Northern Ireland 203w

Pathology
Pay (08.03.00) 223–30wh

Patients
Leicestershire 760–1w

Pay and Personnel Agency
Standards 496–7w

Peace keeping operations
EC action 326w
Kosovo 133w, 399–400w, 638w
Sierra Leone 276–7w

Peace negotiations
Burundi 434w, 725–6w
Democratic Republic of Congo 275w, 502–3w
Sri Lanka 503w, 869w

Pearson, Mr Ian
Questions
Local Government Act 1988 197–8w
Working hours 343–4w

Peat
Dept for Education and Employment 390–1w
Dept for International Development 213w
Dept of Health 749w
Dept of Social Security 304w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 13w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 19–20w, 26w, 723–4w
Ministry of Defence 325w, 827–8w
Northern Ireland Office 204w

Pendle
Digital broadcasting 607–8w

Pendry, Mr Tom
Questions
Physical education 575–6w
Playing fields, Sales 668w
Sports, Internet 607w
Sports, Young people 780w
Touting, Sports 570w

Pensioners
Aberdeen 91–2w
Alyn and Deeside 350w
Barnsley 812w
Income 161–6w, 426–7w, 514w
Income support 509–10w, 514–5w
Leeds 510w
Merseyside 351w
Ophthalmic services 229–30w, 232w
Shropshire 229–30w
Social security benefits 427w, 513–4w
Winter fuel payments 167–9w

Pensions
801–2w, (09.03.00) 1285
Administrative delays 610–2w
Clergy 81w
Dentistry 323–4w
EC action 516w, 856w
Income tax 153w, 561w
Local government 453–4w
Mining 337–8w
Police 564w, 571w
Post offices 613–4w
Publicity 512w

Performance and Innovation Unit
349w

Performance appraisal
Judges 263–4w

Perham, Ms Linda
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1092
Questions
Eyes, Diseases 625w
London Research Centre 198w
Osteoporosis, Health education 755w

Personal income
348w, 728–9w, 766w
North East region 154–5w
Shropshire 180–1w

Personal records
National insurance contributions 521–2w
Social security benefits 809w, 842–3w

Personal taxation
854–5w

Pest control
Foxes 196–7w
Hospitals 762w
Palace of Westminster 479–80w
Prisons 548w

Petitions
Housing (10.03.00) 1295
Social security benefits (01.03.00) 533–4

Petrol
Additives 282w, 600w
Retail trade 683–4w, 775–6w
Smuggling 769w, 855w

Petrol alternatives
Excise duties 345w

Pets
565w

Phillips Inquiry
see Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Creutzfeld Jakob Disease Inquiry

Phoenix companies
(07.03.00) 981–8

Photographs
Royal Irish Regiment 327w

Physical education
575–6w, 792–3w

Pickles, Mr Eric
Questions
Hospitals, Waiting lists 217w

***Pickles, Mr Eric**—continued*
Literacy 304w
Oldchurch Hospital, Hospital beds 408w
Social security benefits, Abuse 753
Tuberculosis, Vaccination 316–7w

Pickthall, Mr Colin
Questions
Regional selective assistance, North West region 542–3

Pigs
24–5w, 534w, 718–9w, 800w, 999
Exports 529–30w
Republic of Ireland 247–8w
Subsidies 247–8w

Pike, Mr Peter L
Questions
Beta-interferon 147
Business questions 563
Cash dispensing 415–6
Church Commissioners, Investment 81w
Civil servants, Secondment 992
Deprivation indicators 13w
Developing countries 410
EC grants and loans 342w, 425–6w
Future large aircraft, Government assistance 542
Mozambique, Disaster relief 26–7
Non-domestic rates 11w
Regional assemblies, Disadvantaged 852
Sports, Disadvantaged 1–2

Pilot schemes
Voting methods 257–8w, 556w

Pinochet, Augusto
286w, 336–7w, 357–71w, 386w, 568w, 661w
Ministerial statements (02.03.00) 571–88, 589–95

Planning
Ministerial statements (07.03.00) 863–80
Urban areas 593w

Planning blight
Small businesses 833w

Planning permission
461w
Fairgrounds 668–9w
Greater London 600–1w

Plant power
869w

Plants
Dept of Health 748w

Plaskitt, Mr James
Questions
Government departments, Millennium compliance 135–6w
Manufacturing industries, Technology 537–8

Plastic surgery
Breasts 410–1w, (03.03.00) 738–44

Playing fields
Sales 668w

Plutonium
Russia 615w

Police
Administration 126w
Buildings 125w
Career structure 125w
Consultants 126w
Criminal injuries compensation 564w
Ethnic groups 123–4w, 860–1w
Freemasonry 123w
Health insurance 105w
Kingston upon Thames 116–7w

***Police**—continued*
Kosovo 276w, 399w, 500–1w, 615–6w, 875w
Manpower 121–5w
Northern Ireland 200w, 204w
Parliamentary questions 200w
Pensions 564w, 571w
Ports 104w
Recruitment 374w, 564–5w
Rural areas 118–9w
South Africa 451w
Termination of employment 564w
Training 275w
Vehicles 550–3w

Police Federation of England and Wales
559w

Police stations
Closures 118w
Greater London 116–8w

Political Parties Elections and Referendums Bill 1999/2000
Questions
111–2w

Political prisoners
Iran 439w, 619–21w

Political refugees
see Refugees

Politics
Curriculum 479w

Pollard, Mr Kerry
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1102
Questions
Influenza 747w
Public transport, Disabled 593w
Thameslink 417–8w

Pollution
France 13–4w
Oil 13–4w
River Danube 402w
Yeovil 3–4w

Pollution control
Air pollution 594w, 777–8w
Tipping of waste 830–1w

Pond, Mr Chris
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 491
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 366
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 144wh

Pornography
Internet 128w

Porous asphalt
M25 9w, 597–8w

Portadown
Closed circuit television 203w

Portillo, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Protected tenancies (02.03.00) 657, 662
Questions
Economic and monetary union 233w
Economic and monetary union, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 432w
Economic and monetary union, Dept for Education and Employment 238w
Economic and monetary union, Dept for International Development 216w
Economic and monetary union, Dept of Social Security 237w
Economic and monetary union, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 333w

***Portillo, Mr Michael**—continued*
Economic and monetary union, Dept of Trade and Industry 343w
Economic and monetary union, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 434–5w
Economic and monetary union, Home Office 661w
Economic and monetary union, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 579–81w
Economic and monetary union, Ministry of Defence 483w
Economic and monetary union, Public sector 233w
Tax burden 1177–9

Porton Down
Animal experiments 633w

Ports
Police 104w
Safety 834w

Portsmouth Dockyard
484w

Post offices
340w
Easington 467w
Pensions 613–4w
Social security benefits 613–4w, 841–2w
Wales 40–1w

Post-operative care
Nursing homes 231–2w

Poultry
Animal welfare 19w, 247w, 721w
Imports 23–4w, 243w, 721–2w

Pound, Mr Stephen
Questions
Bus services, Rural areas 14w

Poverty
515w, 611w
Children 330w, 745–7
China 214w
EC action 411–2
OECD countries 177–8w
Rural areas 673–4w
Wales 330w
World Bank 291w

Powell, Sir Ray
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 621–4

Prayer book
Anglican Church 80w

Pregnant women
Dental services 221–2w

Prentice, Ms Bridget
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 935–8
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 685–6

Prentice, Mr Gordon
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 902
Questions
Aircraft, Fuels 671w
Aircraft, Violence 418–9w
Appointments Commission, Public appointments 784w, 825–6w
Ballots 682–3w
Body dysmorphic disorder 226w
Business questions 1192–3
Churches, Insurance 16
Digital broadcasting, Pendle 607–8w
Elgin Marbles 482w
Flowers, Imports 468w
Low Pay Commission 48w

***Prentice, Mr Gordon**—continued*
Nuclear safeguards 339w
Orthopaedics 70w
Pakistan, Ophthalmic services 295–6w
Railways, Freight 778w
River Danube, Pollution 402w
Royal family, Security 822w
Television, Licensing 3–4
Voting methods, Regulation 666w
Wages councils 48w
Water supply, Lead pipes 599w

Pre-school education
314w
Newcastle upon Tyne 145–6w

***Prescott, Rt Hon John**, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment Transport and the Regions*
Debates etc.
Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, 1R (03.03.00) 664
Planning, Ministerial statements (07.03.00) 863–80
Questions
Climate Change Convention 681w
Economic and monetary union, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 333w
Railways, Standards 596w
Regional Co-ordination Unit 777w
Regional government 846–8

Prescribing Supply and Administration of Medicines Review Team
76w

President of the Council
Press releases 826w

Press
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 499w
Right of reply 284w

Press releases
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 837–8w
Dept of Health 865–6w
Dept of Social Security 845–6w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 832–3w
Dept of Trade and Industry 839–40w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 870–3w
Home Office 103–4w, 861–2w
Lord Chancellor's Dept 836w
Ministry of Defence 827w
Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 39–40w, 825w
President of the Council 826w

Preston Prison
255w

Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989
Questions
441w

***Primarolo, Ms Dawn**, Paymaster General*
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 482–9, 501, 505, 510–1
Questions
Child care tax credit 852–4w
Disposable income 518w
Duchy of Cornwall, Taxation 770w
Excise duties, Fuels 524w
Import controls, Israel 266–7w, 768–9w
Income tax 159w
Income tax, Pensions 153w
Independent taxation 774w
Low pay 814w

***Primarolo, Ms Dawn**—continued*
National insurance contributions 160–1w, 345w, 855w
National insurance contributions, Personal records 521–2w
Personal income 766w
Personal taxation 854–5w
Self-assessment of tax 519w
Smuggling 155–6w
Smuggling, Drugs 521w
Smuggling, Northern Ireland 855w
Smuggling, Petrol 769w
Tax allowances 160w
Tax allowances, Official Receiver 767w
Tax avoidance 1179–81
Tax avoidance, Self-employed 523w, 772–4w
Tax burden 157–8w
Taxation 814w
Taxation, EC action 562w
Taxation, Film 815w
Taxation, Reform 233w
UK trade with EC, South East region 156w
VAT, Historic buildings 769w
VAT, Housing 815–6w
VAT, Roads 153w
Working families tax credit 152–3w, 159–60w, 522w, 770–1w, 817w, 852w
Working families tax credit, Amber Valley 853w
Working families tax credit, Greater London 152w
Working families tax credit, Scotland 1182–3
Working families tax credit, Small businesses 522w

Primary care groups
62w, 220w
Chronically sick 80w

Primary care trusts
62–3w
Alternative medicine 216w

Primary education
Class sizes 145w, 304–5w, 396–7w

Primates
548w, 716–7w

Prime Minister
Higher civil servants 265w
Official engagements 265w
Official hospitality 265w

Prior, Mr David
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 395–6
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Housing, Norfolk (08.03.00) 209–12wh

Prison accommodation
546w

Prison Service
Race relations 547w

Prison visitors
114–5w

Prisoners
Body searches 442w
Disabled 106–7w, 113w
Foreigners 254w
Questionnaires 254w
Race relations 254w
Racial discrimination 546w
Suicide 442w, 546w

Prisoners of war
Compensation (09.03.00) 1286–94
Far East (09.03.00) 1286–94

Prisoners' release
Northern Ireland 206w

Prisons
Construction 447w
Crimes of violence 544w
Discipline 113–4w
Drugs (29.02.00) 17–24wh
Females 107w
Greater London 374w
Nurses 113w
Pest control 548w
Publications 254–5w, 443–4w
Sanitation 255w
Standards 543w
Telephones 547–8w

Private finance initiative
NHS trusts 63–5w

Private sector
Hospitals 149–50

Prizes
EC action 856w

Procurement
Ammunition 209–10w
Antitank missiles 208w
Defence equipment 36w
Dept for International Development 829w
Nimrod aircraft 641–3w

Project Quantum
441–2w

Prosser, Mr Gwyn
Questions
Livestock, Transport 285–6w
Pigs, Exports 529–30w
Sheep, Exports 529w

Prostitution
Advertising 665w

Protected tenancies
(02.03.00) 656–62

Protection of Human Genetic Sequence Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (08.03.00) 1007–9

Public Administration Select Committee
(03.03.00) 737

Public appointments
989–90
Appointments Commission 784w, 825–6w
British Nuclear Fuels 422w
Civil Procedure Rules Committee 261–2w
International Monetary Fund 525w
Magistrates 149w
New Millennium Experience 86–7w, 89–90w
NHS (01.03.00) 74–80wh, 218w

Public bodies
Cabinet Office 526–7w, 576w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 431–2w
Dept for International Development 527–8w
Dept of Health 757–8w
Dept of Social Security 427w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 334w
Dept of Trade and Industry 423w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 501w
Home Office 447–8w
Lord Chancellor's Dept 481w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 581w
Ministry of Defence 429w
Northern Ireland Office 559w
Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 685w
Scotland Office 716w

Public bodies—continued
Treasury 519w

Public expenditure
814w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 430w
Dept for Education and Employment 737w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 418w
Dept of Trade and Industry 586w
Wales 39w

Public private partnerships
London Underground 331–2w
NHS 221w

Public safety radio communications project
119–20w, 287w

Public transport
Accidents 188–9w
Disabled 593w
Millennium Exhibition 285w
Rural areas 4w, 667w

Public Trust Office
Tax allowances 767w

Publicity
Mayor of London 334w
NHS 754–5w
Pensions 512w

Pupil exclusions
478–9w, 573–4w

Pupils
Migration 140w
Suicide 848–9w

Quarrying
Dartmoor National Park 674–5w

Queen Victoria School
Standards 490–1w

Questionnaires
Prisoners 254w

***Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce**, Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food*
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 708, 733–6
Whisky, Exports (29.02.00) 403–6
Questions
Agriculture, Land use 798w
Agriculture, Radioactive fallout 868–9w
Agriculture, Shropshire 531w
Agriculture, Somerset 532w, 717–8w
Agriculture, Subsidies 17w
Austria, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 22–3w
Bees, Imports 530w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 403w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, France 530w, 716w
Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Creutzfeld Jakob Disease Inquiry 719–20w, 867w
Cattle tracing system 720w
Common agricultural policy, Herefordshire 798w
Farmers, Bankruptcy 529w, 716w
Farmers, Markets 246–7w
Farmers, Suicide 25w
Farms, Shropshire 18–9w, 248w
Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 533w
Genetically modified organisms, Crops 16w, 799–800w
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 722w
Genetically modified organisms, Oilseed rape 868w
Glufosinate ammonium 532w

Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce—continued
Grazing land, Fertilisers 868w
Greyhound racing, Animal welfare 867–8w
Hops, Subsidies 720w
Integrated administration and control system 798w
Intervention Board 402–3w
Livestock, Imports 25w
Meat 20–1w
Meetings, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 26w
Members, Correspondence 16w, 539w
Milk, Prices 533w
Monetary compensatory amounts 245–6w, 534w, 797–8w
Pigs 24–5w, 534w, 718–9w, 800w
Pigs, Exports 529–30w
Pigs, Republic of Ireland 247–8w
Plant power 869w
Poultry, Imports 23–4w, 243w, 721–2w
Primates 548w, 716–7w
Research, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 14–5w
Seeds, Orders and regulations 799w
Sheep, Exports 529w
Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee 535–9w

Quinn, Mr Lawrie
Questions
Modernising government programme 689w
Non-departmental public bodies, Yorkshire and Humberside 595w
Thameslink 833–4w

R2 Renaissance cruise liner
Gibraltar 504–5w

Race relations
Full Sutton Prison 547w
Prison Service 547w
Prisoners 254w
Sikhs (07.03.00) 141–8wh

Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL) 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R and money res* (09.03.00) 1203–84

Racial discrimination
EC law 578w
Government departments 151w
Local education authorities 850–1w
Prisoners 546w
Schools 577w

Racially aggravated offences
664–5w, 861w

Radiation exposure
Clyde submarine base 638–40w
Devonport Dockyard 640w
Monitoring 639–40w
Nuclear submarines 715w
Rosyth Dockyard 638–40w
Telecommunications 599–600w

Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Questions
Homicide, Appeals 462–3w

Radioactive fallout
Agriculture 868–9w

Radioactive materials
Exports 421–2w, 582w
Germany 424w, 464–5w
Japan 51–2w, 422w, 499w
Switzerland 582w

RAF Logistics Support Services
715w
Standards 492–3w

RAF Signals Engineering Establishment
Standards 690–1w

RAF strike command
Boscombe Down 709–10w

RAF Training Group
Standards 486–7w

Rail Property
670w

Railway network
Wales 6w, 778w, 832w
Worcestershire 596w

Railway signals
Ladbroke Grove junction 454w

Railways
Freight 198w, 778w
Land 670w
Northern region 418w
Safety 198w, 460w, 594–5w, 830w
Standards 596w

Rammell, Mr Bill
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 477, 503–8
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1338
Questions
Tax burden 1176–7

Randall, Mr John
Questions
Pensioners, Social security benefits 514w

Rape
664w

Rapid transit systems
594w

Rapson, Mr Syd
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 38
Questions
Social Security Benefits Agency, Information services 750

Rathgael Training School
1–2w

***Raynsford, Mr Nick**, Minister of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions*
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Fire extinguishers, Housing (08.03.00) 219–22wh
Questions
Alternative energy 461–2w
Council housing, Tenant management organisations 845–6
Dartmoor National Park, Quarrying 674–5w
Donnelly, Alan 461w
Environmental impact assessment, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 671w
Fairgrounds, Planning permission 668–9w
Farms, Change of use 674w
Housing 832w
Housing, Capital investment 858–60
Owner occupiers 832–3w
Planning permission 461w
Planning permission, Greater London 600–1w
Playing fields, Sales 668w
Small businesses, Planning blight 833w
Tenant management organisations 590w

Recess motions
(01.03.00) 532

Recreation spaces
15

Recruitment
Air force 26–7w

Recruitment—continued
Home Office 556w
Metropolitan Police 112w
Police 374w, 564–5w
Teachers 477w

Recycling
550–1, 595w
Cabinet Office 609w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 96w
Dept for Education and Employment 391w
Dept for International Development 211w
Dept of Health 751w
Dept of Social Security 234w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 6w
Home Office 116w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 17w
Ministry of Defence 36–7w
Motor vehicles 582–3w
Northern Ireland Office 404w
Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 38w
Packaging 831w
Solicitor-General 2w

Redundant churches
17–8

Redwood, Rt Hon John
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 872
Sittings in Westminster Hall
AWE Aldermaston, Safety (01.03.00) 31–3wh, 43–4wh
Questions
Public bodies, Cabinet Office 526–7w, 576w
Public bodies, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 431–2w
Public bodies, Dept for International Development 527–8w
Public bodies, Dept of Health 757–8w
Public bodies, Dept of Social Security 427w
Public bodies, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 334w
Public bodies, Dept of Trade and Industry 423w
Public bodies, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 501w
Public bodies, Home Office 447–8w
Public bodies, Lord Chancellor's Dept 481w
Public bodies, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 581w
Public bodies, Ministry of Defence 429w
Public bodies, Northern Ireland Office 559w
Public bodies, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 685w
Public bodies, Scotland Office 716w
Public bodies, Treasury 519w

Reed, Mr Andrew
Questions
Business questions 564
Education, Leicestershire 141–3w, 309w
Forest products, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 98–9w
Forest products, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 21–2w, 246w
Forest products, Northern Ireland Office 835–6w
Hospital beds, Leicestershire 220w
Leicestershire Police, Manpower 666w
Low pay 814w
Patients, Leicestershire 760–1w
Regional planning and development, East Midlands 537
Textiles 341w

Reel, Ricky
130w

Refugees
109–11w, 422, 541–2w, 556–7w, 818–9w
Chelmsford 378w
Costs 819w
Council housing 540–1w
Deportation 446w
East Timor 505–6w
Education 314w
Greater London 569w
Housing 111w, 543–4w, 818–9w, 859–60w
Kosovo 819w
Northamptonshire 542w
Scotland 541–2w
Social security benefits 542w
Yugoslavia 543w

Regional aid
543–5

Regional assemblies
675w
Disadvantaged 851–2

Regional Co-ordination Unit
777w

Regional development agencies
590–2w

Regional government
846–8, 861–2

Regional planning and development
Conferences 525w
East Midlands 536–7
West Sussex 11–2w

Regional selective assistance
North West region 542–3
Scotland 261w

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R and money res* (06.03.00) 767–837

Rehabilitation
Sexual offences 443w

Reid, Rt Hon Dr John, Secretary of State for Scotland
Questions
Assisted areas, Scotland 260–1w
Disabled, Scotland Office 469w
Ethnic groups, Scotland Office 469w
Higher civil servants, Scotland Office 469w
Homicide, Scotland 348w
Maternity leave, Scotland Office 348–9w
Public bodies, Scotland Office 716w
Regional selective assistance, Scotland 261w
Students, Fees and charges 715w

Reigate
Housing 1000

Remploy
309w
Dept for Education and Employment 148w
Dept for International Development 213w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 22w

Rendel, Mr David
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 193–4, 277, 287–8, 310, 321, 336–7, 366–7, 390
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 877
Sittings in Westminster Hall
AWE Aldermaston, Safety (01.03.00) 25–8wh, 35wh, 38wh, 44–5wh

Rendel, Mr David—continued
Questions
Dental services 408–9w
Developing countries, Education 293–4w
National Audit Office, Finance 131w

Rented housing
Unemployment 8w

Representation of the People Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1114–61
Royal Assent (09.03.00) 1237
Questions
257–8w

Republic of Ireland
Pigs 247–8w

Residence orders
Children 765–6w

Restraint equipment
Export controls 873w

Retail Packaging Recycling Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (10.03.00) 1363

Retail trade
Beef 25–6w
Petrol 683–4w, 775–6w

Retirement
Nurses 631–2w

Reviews
Export Credits Guarantee Dept 547–8

Right of reply
Press 284w

Ringfenced funding
NHS 788w

Riot control weapons
753w
Mentally ill 287w

Ritual slaughter
Sheep 23w

River Danube
Pollution 402w

River Thames
Death 373w

Road signs
Northern Ireland 782–3w

Road traffic
Research 458w
Wales 39w

Road Traffic Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R order read (10.03.00) 1363

Road works
455–60w
A10 852–3

Roads
Accidents 5w, 157–66, 186–8w, 197w, 453w
Leeds 453w
Lorries 10w, 597w
Noise 848–9
North Yorkshire 190–2w
Safety 282–3w, 601–4w
VAT 153w

Robathan, Mr Andrew
Questions
Inflammatory bowel disease 219w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 26
Regional planning and development, East Midlands 536–7

Robertson, Mr Laurence
Questions
Adoption 408w
Drugs 228–9w
Drugs, Prices 227–8w
Excise duties, Fuels 524w
Farmers, Markets 246–7w
Heavily indebted poor countries initiative 292w
Institutional care 318w
Monetary compensatory amounts 534w
National Lottery, Gloucestershire 95–6w
National Lottery, Tewkesbury 735w
NHS, Drugs 228w
Non-domestic rates 778–9w
Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty 135w
Planning permission 461w
Terrorism, Northern Ireland 202–3w

Roche, Mrs Barbara, Minister of State, Home Office
Debates etc.
Speaker's statement intervention (07.03.00) 881
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Immigration rules, Families (01.03.00) 84–6wh
Questions
British citizenship, Mentally incapacitated 112–3w
Computers, Home Office 544w
Harmondsworth Detention Centre 569–70w
Illegal immigrants, Fixed penalties 662–3w
Immigration, Administration 545w
Immigration, Correspondence 107w
Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Manpower 545w
Immigration rules, Students 127w
Members, Correspondence 373w
Refugees 109–11w, 541–2w, 556–7w, 818–9w
Refugees, Chelmsford 378w
Refugees, Costs 819w
Refugees, Council housing 540–1w
Refugees, Deportation 446w
Refugees, Greater London 569w
Refugees, Housing 111w, 543–4w, 818–9w, 859–60w
Refugees, Kosovo 819w
Refugees, Northamptonshire 542w
Refugees, Scotland 541–2w
Refugees, Social security benefits 542w
Refugees, Yugoslavia 543w
Temporary immigrants 563w

Rodents
Sewers 672w

Roe, Mrs Marion
Questions
House of Commons, Driving 610w
House of Commons, Security 609–10w
Midwives 138

Rogers, Mr Allan
Debates etc.
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 782, 788, 790, 794, 800
Wales (02.03.00) 598, 613–6, 619, 647, 649, 651

Rolling stock
London Underground 5w

Romania
European Children's Trust 624–5w

Romanian Orphanage Trust
553w

Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff, Minister of State, Dept of Social Security
Questions
British Cheque Cashers' Association 811w
Family credit, Abuse 730–1w
Housing benefit, Abuse 175–6w, 808w
Income support, North West region 754–5
Jobseeker's allowance 845w
Jobseeker's allowance, Abuse 235–6w
National Insurance Contributions Office, Security 809w, 811w
Occupational pensions 181w
Pensioners, Income 161–6w, 426–7w, 514w
Pensioners, Social security benefits 427w, 514w
Pensions 801–2w
Pensions, Administrative delays 610–2w
Pensions, Post offices 613–4w
Pensions, Publicity 512w
Press releases, Dept of Social Security 845–6w
Public bodies, Dept of Social Security 427w
Research, Dept of Social Security 182w
Social security benefits, Abuse 508–9w, 611–3w, 760–1, 810–2w, 843w
Social security benefits, Automated credit transfer 57–8w
Social security benefits, Personal records 809w
Social security benefits, Post offices 613–4w, 841–2w
Stakeholder pensions 515w, 613–4w, 759, 841w
State earnings related pension scheme 512w
State retirement pensions 181w, 511w, 758–9, 761–2
State retirement pensions, Greater London 427w
Weekly benefit savings scheme 808–9w
Winter fuel payments, Scotland 167–9w

Ross, Mr Ernie
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 451–2
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1080–1
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1352

Ross, Mr William
Questions
Firearms, Northern Ireland 199–200w
Maze Prison 403w–
Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999 204–5w

Rosyth Dockyard
Radiation exposure 638–40w

Rough Sleepers Unit
461w

Rowe, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Parking, Disabled (28.02.00) 131–2, 134–5
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1226–7, 1236

Rowlands, Mr Ted
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 581
Wales (02.03.00) 602–3, 639–43
Questions
Local government finance 279–80w
Public expenditure, Wales 39w
Windfall tax, Wales 769w

Royal Bolton Hospital
Paediatrics 743w

Royal Commission on Long-term Care
see Long-Term Care Royal Commission

Royal family
Security 822w

Royal Irish Regiment
Photographs 327w

Royal Parks (Trading) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
Ref to 2R Com (28.02.00) 32
2R* (09.03.00) 1203

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital
Hospital beds 77w
Manpower 866–7w

Royal Society of St George
Correspondence 563w

Ruane, Mr Chris
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 607–8, 620, 628, 644
Questions
Film, Foreign investment in UK 96–7w
Free school meals 475–6w
Income support, Vale of Clwyd 169–70w
National Lottery 603–4w
Poverty 515w
Pupil exclusions 478–9w
Tuberculosis 70–1w

Ruddock, Joan
Debates etc.
Sex Discrimination (Amendment) (No 2) Bill, 1R (07.03.00) 882–4
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 241wh, 248–52wh
Questions
Genetically modified organisms, Crops 743–4w
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 722w, 779w
Genetically modified organisms, Oilseed rape 868w
Glufosinate ammonium 532w
Seeds, Orders and regulations 799w

Ruffley, Mr David
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 187–93, 197–8, 261
Questions
Competition 340w
Developing countries, Debts 293w
Electronic commerce 539
Financial markets, Disclosure of information 815w
Government departments, Disclosure of information 686w
Non-domestic rates, Small businesses 595w

Rugby Football League
15–6

Rural areas
Bus services 14w, 778w
Maternity services 748w
Ministerial policy advisors 149w
National Lottery 481w
Police 118–9w
Poverty 673–4w
Public transport 4w, 667w
Social security benefits 508w
Social services 73–4w
Sure start programme 311w

Russell, Bob
Debates etc.
Oral question time intervention (29.02.00) 142, (01.03.00) 424

Russell, Bob—*continued*
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 879–80
Questions
Computers within reach programme 576w
Midwives 137–8
Outdoor education 477w
Pensions, Administrative delays 610–2w
Poultry, Animal welfare 721w
Prison accommodation 546w
Prisoners, Suicide 546w
Roads, Accidents 165–6
Social security benefits, Capital rules 172w, 727w
Sports, Employment 607w
Television, Licensing 482w
Urban areas 861w

Russia
133–4w
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development 526w
Plutonium 615w
Seals 828w

St Aubyn, Mr Nick
Debates etc.
Business questions (28.02.00) 32
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 43–4, 53
Economic policy (01.03.00) 495
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 284–7, 292, 298, 302–4
Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill, Points of order (28.02.00) 127
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1343–6
Questions
Asia, Education 291w
Cataracts, Surgery 151
Euro 1181–2
New businesses 541
NHS, Finance 626w
State retirement pensions 511w
Students, Finance 474–5w
Tax avoidance, Self-employed 773–4w

St Helena
441w, 451–2w, 726w
Airports 452w

Salisbury Plain
Armed forces 327w

Salmon
Fishing 581w

Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Group
800w

Salmond, Mr Alex
Questions
Clyde submarine base 651–2w
Devonport Dockyard, Radiation exposure 640w
Military aircraft, Costs 782w
Nuclear submarines, Radiation exposure 715w
Radiation exposure, Monitoring 639–40w
Rosyth Dockyard, Radiation exposure 638–40w
Scotland, Ministry of Defence 650–2w
Television, Licensing 735w

Salter, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 497–9, 502
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 868
Sittings in Westminster Hall
AWE Aldermaston, Safety (01.03.00) 29–31wh, 39wh, 42wh
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 145wh

Salter, Mr Martin—*continued*
Questions
Disadvantaged 688w
Railways, Safety 594–5w

Sanctions
Iraq 616w, 1004

Sanders, Mr Adrian
Questions
Disaster relief 528w
Homelessness, Finance 419w
Housing benefit 614w
Housing benefit, Social rented housing 726–7w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 623w
Nature conservation, Seas and oceans 198w
Oil, Pollution 13–4w
Refugees, Deportation 446w
Social Security Act 1992 613w
Social Security Administration Act 1992 667w

Sanitation
Prisons 255w

Sankoh, Foday
132–3w

Sarwar, Mr Mohammad
Questions
Equal pay, Scotland 797w
Festivals and special occasions, Scotland 731–2w
Millennium Exhibition, Educational visits 249w
Pensioners, Social security benefits 427w
Television, Licensing 92w

Satellites
Sombrero Island 278w

Savidge, Mr Malcolm
Questions
Developing countries, Security 294–5w
Export credit guarantees, Turkey 342–3w
Ilisu dam 278w, 423w, 464w
Television, Licensing 91–2w

Sawford, Mr Phil
Questions
Electronic government 686w
Northamptonshire Health Authority, Finance 221w
Schools, Buildings 1000–1

Sayeed, Mr Jonathan
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 277, 283
Questions
World Education Forum 563w

Schengen Agreement
545w

School Crossings (Amendment) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (01.03.00) 424

School meals
143w
Newcastle upon Tyne 143w

Schools
Admissions 471w
Buildings 1000–1
Grants 139w
Greenhouse effect 790w
Intimidation 848–9w
Kenya 298w
Population 238–43w
Racial discrimination 577w
Sports 779w, 794–5w
Staffordshire 148w

Schools—*continued*
Transport 832w
Urban areas 144w

Scotland
Armed forces 651w
Assisted areas 260–1w
Economic and monetary union 233w
Equal pay 797w
Festivals and special occasions 731–2w
Homicide 348w
Minimum wage (08.03.00) 1162–70
Mining 421w
Ministry of Defence 650–2w
New deal schemes 395w, 474w
Refugees 541–2w
Regional selective assistance 261w
Social Security Benefits Agency 514w
Winter fuel payments 167–9w
Working families tax credit 1182–3

Scotland Office
Disabled 469w
Ethnic groups 469w
Higher civil servants 469w
Maternity leave 348–9w
Public bodies 716w

Scotland Yard
see Metropolitan Police

Scott Inquiry
see Arms to Iraq Inquiry

Scottish Police College
299w, 619w

Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R (01.03.00) 460–75, 527–32

Seals
Russia 828w

Seas and oceans
Nature conservation 18w, 198w

Secondary Care Agency
see Defence Secondary Care Agency

Secondary education
Assessments 573w
Per capita costs 144w
Shropshire 394–5w
Standards 394–5w

Secondment
Civil servants 991–3
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 100w
Treasury 524–5w

Secure accommodation
Young offenders 444–6w

Security
Developing countries 294–5w
House of Commons 609–10w
Ministry of Defence 328–9w
National Insurance Contributions Office 809w, 811w
Royal family 822w

Sedgemore, Mr Brian
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 929–31

Seeds
831w
Orders and regulations 799w

Segregation of prisoners
113w

Select Committee on Public Administration
see Public Administration Select Committee

Select committees
828w, 873–4w

Self-assessment of tax
519w

Self-employed
Industrial injuries scheme 351–2w
Tax avoidance 425w, 523w, 772–4w

Sellafield
422w

Serbia
875w
Overseas aid 452w

Serco
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 10w
Ministry of Defence 210w

Service Children's Education
Standards 695–7w

Sewers
Rodents 672w

Sex Discrimination (Amendment) (No 2) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (07.03.00) 882–5

Sexual offences
Rehabilitation 443w

Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
Business questions (28.02.00) 32

"Sharing the Nations Prosperity"
685–6w

Sheep
Exports 529w
Ritual slaughter 23w

Sheerman, Mr Barry
Questions
Innovation 339w
Kensington Mortgage Company 587w
Mortgages 517–8w
Mortgages, Fees and charges 587–8w

Shepherd, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1131–4, 1138

Shipbuilding
344w

Shipley, Ms Debra
Questions
Drug treatment and testing orders 128w
New businesses 541

Shipping
776w
Defence 207–8w, 640w
General Certificate of Secondary Education 740w

Ships Support Agency
Standards 490w

***Short, Rt Hon Clare**, Secretary of State for International Development*
Questions
Africa, Agriculture 296w
Africa, AIDS 215w
Asia, Education 291w
Children, Employment 214w
China, Human rights 299w
China, Poverty 214w
Democratic Republic of Congo, Overseas aid 299w

***Short, Rt Hon Clare**—continued*
Developing countries, Debts 293w, 295w, 412–4
Developing countries, Education 293–4w
Developing countries, Nuclear power stations 215–6w
Developing countries, Security 294–5w
Developing countries, Trade agreements 211–2w
Developing countries, Water supply 298w
Development banks 407–9
Disaster relief 528w
EC aid 292w
Females, Circumcision 214–5w, 450–1w
Grants, Dept for International Development 213w
Heavily indebted poor countries initiative 292w
Higher civil servants, Dept for International Development 213w
Indian Ocean, Storms 528w
"International Development Select Committee on the Future of Sanctions" 295 v
Kenya, Schools 298w
Kosovo, Education 414–5
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine 293w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 21–31, 296w, 406–7w, 621–3w
Multinational companies 291w
Overseas aid 298–9w
Overseas aid, Females 528w
Overseas trade, Ethics 297–8w
Pakistan, Ophthalmic services 295–6w
Peat, Dept for International Development 213w
Public bodies, Dept for International Development 527–8w
Recycling, Dept for International Development 211w
Remploy, Dept for International Development 213w
St Helena 451–2w
St Helena, Airports 452w
Serbia, Overseas aid 452w
Sierra Leone, Overseas aid 294w
South Africa, Police 451w
UNCTAD 297w
World Bank, Poverty 291w
World Education Forum 296–7w
Zimbabwe, Overseas aid 215w, 292–3w

Shrewsbury
Class sizes 304–5w
Housing improvement 197w
Unemployment 767–8w

Shropshire
Agriculture 17w, 531w
Assisted places scheme 147w
Bus services 778w
Dental services 226w, 407w
Farms 18–9w, 248w
Hospital beds 77–8w
Job creation 850w
New deal for young people 392w
NHS Direct 227w
NHS trusts 71w
Pensioners 229–30w
Personal income 180–1w
Secondary education 394–5w
Widowed people 301–2w

Shropshire Health Authority
Finance 318w

Sickle cell diseases
(06.03.00) 838–44

Sierra Leone
Overseas aid 294w
Peace keeping operations 276–7w

Sight impaired
Fares 417w

Sikhs
Race relations (07.03.00) 141–8wh

Simpson, Mr Alan
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 920
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1301, 1312, 1332–4, 1356
Questions
BBC 98w
Genetically modified organisms, Oilseed rape 667w
Press, Right of reply 284w

Singh, Mr Marsha
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1242–6, 1281
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Race relations, Sikhs (07.03.00) 142–5wh

Single parents
see Lone parents

Single regeneration budget
North West region 592–3w

Sittingbourne
Special education 308w

Sixth form education
Finance 477–8w
Student numbers 790–1w

Skiing
Qualifications 851w

Skinner, Mr Dennis
Debates etc.
Ministerial statement intervention (07.03.00) 872
Questions
Business questions 1195
Public expenditure 814w
Regional government 848
Tax burden 1176

Sleeping rough
849–51

Small businesses
Loan guarantee scheme 344w
Non-domestic rates 595w
Opposition days (08.03.00) 1066–114
Planning blight 833w
Stakeholder pensions 463–4w
Tax burden 813w
Working families tax credit 522w

***Smith, Rt Hon Andrew**, Chief Secretary to the Treasury*
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 379–81
Questions
Audit, Government departments 151–2w
EC grants and loans 856w
Exchange rates 817w
Excise duties, Tobacco 561w
Kosovo, Armed conflict 816w
Local government, Pay 521w
Public expenditure 814w
Tax burden 1174–9
Taxation 815w, 1184–6
Unemployment, Costs 816w

Smith, Angela
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 719

***Smith, Angela**—continued*
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 666–9
Questions
Alternative energy 461–2w
Business questions 1196
English Heritage, Grants 734w
House of Commons Commission 44w
Incapacity benefit, Medical examinations 802–3w
Judges, Performance appraisal 263–4w
Judges, Training 263w
Pensions 802w
Small businesses, Planning blight 833w
Zoos 776w

***Smith, Rt Hon Chris**, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport*
Questions
Austria, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 95w
Economic and monetary union, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 432w
Festivals and special occasions, Scotland 731–2w
Forest products, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 98–9w
Millennium Exhibition 6–8, 83w
National Lottery 8–9, 91w, 732–3w
National Lottery, Rural areas 481w
National Lottery Distribution Fund 93w
New Millennium Experience 89w, 732w
New Millennium Experience, Manpower 89w
Press releases, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 837–8w
Public bodies, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 431–2w
Public expenditure, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 430w
Recreation spaces 15
Recycling, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 96w
Research, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 97w
Secondment, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 100w
Television, Licensing 3–5, 91–2w, 736w
Tourism Forum 97w, 284–5w, 350–1w

Smith, Miss Geraldine
Questions
Agriculture 15–6w

***Smith, Jacqui**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education and Employment*
Questions
Bishop Gilpin School 573w
Curriculum, Citizenship 310–1w
Curriculum, European Communities 576–7w
Curriculum, Politics 479w
Dyslexia 306w
Education, Refugees 314w
Free school meals 575w
Home economics 794w
Local education authorities, Racial discrimination 850–1w
New deal for schools 306w
Outdoor education 477w
Physical education 575–6w, 792–3w
Pupil exclusions 573–4w
School meals 143w
Schools, Greenhouse effect 790w
Schools, Intimidation 848–9w
Schools, Racial discrimination 577w
Schools, Sports 794–5w
Schools, Staffordshire 148w
Special education, Newcastle upon Tyne 148–9w

***Smith, Jacqui**—continued*
Special education, Sittingbourne 308w

Smith, Mr Llew
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 597, 609–10, 612, 636
Questions
Arms to Iraq Inquiry 134w
Environmental impact assessment, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions671w
Gaddafi, Colonel 131–2w
Millennium Exhibition, Catering 250w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 710w
Non-departmental public bodies 789–90w
Non-departmental public bodies, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 685w
Non-departmental public bodies, Wales 825w
Nuclear power, Research 775w
Radioactive materials, Japan 51–2w
Trident 38w

Smoke alarms
107–8w

Smoking
220w, 1003

Smuggling
155–6w
Drugs 521w
Northern Ireland 769w, 855w
Petrol 769w, 855w

Smyth, Rev Martin
Questions
Beta-interferon 147–8
Business questions 568, 1193
Drugs, Abuse 991
Flags, Northern Ireland 207w
General practitioners, Northern Ireland 481w
Institutional care 408w
Long-Term Care Royal Commission 321w
Northern Ireland Act 2000 560w
Northern Ireland Executive 559–60w

Snelling, Christopher
539w

Soames, Mr Nicholas
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 77–8
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 872

Social Investment Task Force
561–2w

Social rented housing
Housing benefit 726–7w

Social Security Act 1992
Questions
613w

Social Security Administration Act 1992
Questions
667w

Social security benefits
352–3w, 800–1w, 846w
Abuse 508–9w, 611–3w, 751–3, 755–6, 760–1, 807–8w, 810–2w, 843w
Appeals 179w, 847w
Automated credit transfer 57–8w
Capital rules 172w, 727w
Compensation 172–3w, 234–5w
Computers 812w
Disabled 177w
Elderly 801w
Industrial diseases 428w
Lone parents 510–1w
Pensioners 427w, 513–4w
Personal records 809w, 842–3w

***Social security benefits**—continued*
Petitions (01.03.00) 533–4
Post offices 613–4w, 841–2w
Refugees 542w
Rural areas 508w
Somerset 470w
Widowed people 301–2w

Social Security Benefits Agency
Information services 750–1
Scotland 514w
Somerset 182–3w

Social services
Rural areas 73–4w

Social Services Inspectorate
Lancashire County Council 60–1w

Social workers
Crimes against the person 73w

Sodium valproate
862–3w

Soil erosion
Mozambique 623–4w

Solicitor-General
Recycling 2w

Sombrero Island
Satellites 278w

Somerset
Agriculture 532w, 717–8w
Armed forces 642w
Class sizes 390w
Social security benefits 470w
Social Security Benefits Agency 182–3w
Universities 144w

South Africa
Police 451w
Water supply 464w

South Downs
National parks 862

South East region
UK trade with EC 156w

South West region
Government departments 527w

South Yorkshire
Voluntary work 417–8

Southworth, Ms Helen
Questions
Dentistry 221w

Speaker and deputies
Debates etc.
Amendments and new clauses (29.02.00) 170–1, 217, 269, 316, 345, 373, (01.03.00) 476, (07.03.00) 886, (08.03.00) 1010, 1066, 1148, 1151, 1154, 1160
Colvin, Michael, Death (28.02.00) 1
Conduct of proceedings (28.02.00) 28, 34, 44, 50, 66, 69, 88, (29.02.00) 150, 198, 225,230, 241–3, 246–8, 250–1, 259, 261, 269, 275, 278, 285, 293–4, 302, 305, 339, 362, 364–5, 391, (01.03.00) 410, 425, 455, 465–6, 472, 484, 495, 527, (02.03.00) 542, 546, 552–3, 555–6, 558, 567, 570, 582–3, 597, 605, 607, 638, (03.03.00) 677, 682, 684–6, 688, (07.03.00) 870, 877, 880, 889, 891, 895, 900–2, 920–2, 925, 981, (08.03.00) 996, 1005, 1043–4, 1052, 1074, 1086, 1116, 1121–2, 1125, 1140, 1142, (09.03.00) 1178, 1186, 1191, 1227, 1256
Disallowed questions (28.02.00) 32
Orders and regulations motions (09.03.00) 1285
Points of order (28.02.00) 33, (29.02.00) 166, 251, 261, 294, 308, 315, (01.03.00) 431, 482, (02.03.00) 570, 596, 655,

***Speaker and deputies**—continued*
(03.03.00) 663, (06.03.00) 765–6, 836–7, (07.03.00) 902, (08.03.00) 1043, 1123, 1126, 1141, 1161, (09.03.00) 1200–2, (10.03.00) 1327
Royal Assent (09.03.00) 1237
Rulings and statements, Amendments and new clauses (08.03.00) 1148
Rulings and statements, Fifteen minutes rule (07.03.00) 900
Rulings and statements, Parliamentary procedure (28.02.00) 127
Rulings and statements, Sub judice rule (07.03.00) 850
Rulings and statements, Written questions (07.03.00) 881
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Conduct of proceedings (29.02.00) 16wh, 20wh, (01.03.00) 25wh, 34wh, 65wh, 74wh, (02.03.00) 91wh, 120wh, (07.03.00) 140wh, 144wh, 146wh, 148wh, 157–8wh, 162wh, (08.03.00) 163wh, 167wh, 181wh, 186wh, 188wh, 201wh, 208wh, 212wh, 214wh, 223wh, (09.03.00) 242wh, 245wh
Rulings and statements, Suspension of sittings (29.02.00) 1wh

Special constables
Manpower 117w

Special education
Isle of Sheppey 308w
Newcastle upon Tyne 148–9w
Sittingbourne 308w

Specialist Procurement Services
Standards 636–7w

***Spellar, Mr John**, Minister for the Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence*
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 33–46, 49–50, 108
Sittings in Westminster Hall
AWE Aldermaston, Safety (01.03.00) 35–45wh
Questions
Air force, Recruitment 26–7w
Aircraft carriers 34–5w
Ammunition, Uranium 715w
Anthrax, Vaccination 781w, 826w
Armed forces, Asbestosis 653w
Armed forces, Cadets 325w
Armed forces, Catering 325w
Armed forces, Somerset 642w
Armed forces, Telephone systems 327w
Armed forces, Video conferencing 268–70w
Armed forces education allowances 37w
Army, Germany 26w
Atomic Weapons Establishment 641w
Chinook helicopters, Accidents 34w
Clyde submarine base 651–2w
Computers, Ministry of Defence 210w, 270w
Devonport Dockyard, Radiation exposure 640w
Disaster relief, Mozambique 781–2w
Exercise Dimming Sun 327w
General Security Agreement 1961 708w
HMS Cambridge 653–4w
HMS Vigilant 327–8w
Independent Panel on Vaccines Interactions Research 826–7w
Kosovo, Armed conflict 36w
Military aircraft, Accidents 210–1w
Military aircraft, Costs 782w
Military exercises, Costs 31–2w
Military exercises, Nuclear weapons 326w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 710w
***Spellar, Mr John**—continued*
Nuclear submarines, Radiation exposure 715w
Peat, Ministry of Defence 827–8w
RAF Logistics Support Services 715w
RAF strike command, Boscombe Down 709–10w
Royal Irish Regiment, Photographs 327w
Security, Ministry of Defence 328–9w

Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1033, 1056–8
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Working conditions (09.03.00) 236–43wh, 247wh, 255wh, 261wh, 266wh
Questions
Hospital beds 153
Residence orders, Children 765–6w
Tuberculosis, Vaccination 315–6w

Spicer, Sir Michael
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 186–7

Spoliation Advisory Panel
13–4, 93–5w

Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee
535–9w

Sponsorship
Millennium Exhibition 83w, 85–6w, 90–1w, 606w

Sport England
see English Sports Council

Sports
97–8w
Disadvantaged 1–3, 11
Employment 607w
Females 11–3
Housing estates 100w
Internet 607w
Millennium Exhibition 84w
Safety 92w
Schools 779w, 794–5w
Touting 570w
Young people 780w

Spring, Mr Richard
Questions
Arms trade, Indonesia 32w
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 87–8w, 248w
Official visits 134–5w
Visits abroad, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 135w

Squire, Ms Rachel
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 109–11
Questions
Defence, Shipping 207–8w

Sri Lanka
724–5w
Human rights 277w
Peace negotiations 503w, 869w

Stability Pact
615w

Staffordshire
Chiropody 74w
Schools 148w

Stakeholder pensions
515w, 613–4w, 759, 841w
Small businesses 463–4w

Standing orders
Supply estimates (10.03.00) 1363

Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Questions
Business questions 1192
Operation Horseshoe 686w

Stansted Airport
Hijacking 289–91w, 663–4w

Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Questions
Educational maintenance allowance 393–4w, 791w
Import controls, Israel 266–7w, 768–9w

State earnings related pension scheme
512w

State retirement pensions
181w, 511w, 758–9, 761–2
Greater London 427w

State visits
China 858w

Statistics
National income 515–6w
New deal schemes 426w

Steen, Mr Anthony
Questions
Information technology, Devon 339w
Medicines Control Agency 788w
Nuclear shelters, Devon 128–9w

Steinberg, Mr Gerry
Questions
Tax evasion 516w

Stevenson, Mr George
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 231–2, 243, 245, 248

Stewart, Mr David
Questions
Diabetes, Medical equipment 419–20
Mozambique, Disaster relief 296w

Stewart, Mr Ian
Questions
Iran, Political prisoners 620w
Rapid transit systems 594w
Stock Exchange 265–6w
Vaccination, Compensation 513w

Stinchcombe, Mr Paul
Questions
War pensions, Mentally ill 428w

Stoate, Dr Howard
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1013, 1025, 1031–2, 1039, 1055–6
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 874
Questions
NHS trusts 865w
Sustainable development 7–8w

Stock Exchange
265–6w

Stockport
Crime prevention 423–4

Stockton on Tees
Income support 169w

Stoke on Trent
Educational maintenance allowance 136w

Storms
Indian Ocean 528w

Strategic Rail Authority
Wales 199w

***Straw, Rt Hon Jack**, Secretary of State for the Home Dept*
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 886–900, 906, 916–7, 919–20, 922, 941, 953
Pinochet, Augusto, Ministerial statements (02.03.00) 571–88
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1203–16, 1218–22
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 767–79, 824
Questions
Advertising, Home Office 104w
Civil service, Location 373w
Consultants, Home Office 118w, 385–6w
Criminal Injuries Compensation Board 857w
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill 1999/2000 374–7w
Databases, Home Office 822w
Economic and monetary union, Home Office 661w
Ethnic groups, Home Office 103w
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 548w
Grants, Home Office 104–5w
Higher civil servants, Home Office 253–4w
Hijacking, Stansted Airport 289–91w, 663–4w
Home detention curfews 857w
Horserace Totalisator Board 371–2w
Immigration, Administrative delays 255–7w
Information officers, Home Office 383–5w, 556w, 821–2w
Parentline 108–9w
Parliamentary questions, Administrative delays 259–60w
Pinochet, Augusto 286w, 357–71w, 386w, 568w, 661w
Political Parties Elections and Referendums Bill 1999/2000 111–2w
Press releases, Home Office 103–4w, 861–2w
Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 441w
Public bodies, Home Office 447–8w
Public safety radio communications project 287w
Recruitment, Home Office 556w
Recycling, Home Office 116w
Royal family, Security 822w
Terrorism 257w
Tyson, Mike 289w

Streeter, Mr Gary
Debates etc.
Mozambique, Points of order (06.03.00) 765–6
Questions
Development banks 408–9
HMS Cambridge 653–4w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 621–3w, 796w
Mozambique, Overseas aid 796w, 828–9w

***Stringer, Mr Graham**, Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office*
Questions
Catering, Cabinet Office 264w
Civil servants, Disabled 994–5
Gardening leave, Cabinet Office 151w
Government departments, Correspondence 995–6
Government departments, Manpower 527w
Government departments, Racial discrimination 151w
Non-departmental public bodies 789–90w
Ombudsman, Public sector 790w

***Stringer, Mr Graham**—continued*
Orders and regulations 688w
Public appointments 989–90
Public bodies, Cabinet Office 526–7w
Recycling, Cabinet Office 609w

***Stuart, Ms Gisela**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Health*
Debates etc.
Breasts, Plastic surgery (03.03.00) 741–4
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 692–700
Sittings in Westminster Hall
NHS, Public appointments (01.03.00) 78–80wh
Questions
Accident and emergency departments 143–5, 428w
Ambulance services 413–4w, 864–5w
Ambulance services, East Midlands 76w
Cerebral palsy 788w
Childbirth, Death 761–2w
Clinical negligence scheme 864w
Committee on Safety of Medicines 630w
Drugs 228–9w
Drugs, Prices 217w, 227–8w
Drugs, Side effects 862–3w
Ear nose and throat, Bristol 222–3w
General practitioners 758w
Global Cultural Diversity Congress 428w
Hospitals, Closures 76–7w
Hospitals, Greater London 631w
Hospitals, Private sector 149–50
Hospitals, Waiting lists 217w
Inflammatory bowel disease 219w
London Ambulance Service 74w
Medicines Control Agency 788w
Members, Correspondence 410w
NHS, Drugs 228w
NHS, Public appointments 218w
NHS, Public private partnerships 221w
NHS Direct 629–30w
NHS Direct, Finance 61w
NHS Direct, Shropshire 227w
NHS Direct, Standards 61w
NHSnet 317w
Prescribing Supply and Administration of Medicines Review Team 76w
Press releases, Dept of Health 865–6w
Surgery, Administrative delays 866w

Stuart-Smith Inquiry
see Hillsborough Stadium Evidence Inquiry

Student numbers
Further education 793–4w
Higher education 138w, 314–5w
Sixth form education 790–1w

Students
Fees and charges 394w, 715w, 828w
Finance 473–5w
Housing benefit 509w
Immigration rules 127w
Loans (09.03.00) 1285

Stunell, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 724–6
Questions
Business questions 563–4
Council housing, North West region 192–4w
Crime prevention, Stockport 423–4
Fire services, Vehicles 129w
Personal income 766w
Youth services, North West region 139–40w

Sub judice rule
Rulings and statements (07.03.00) 850

Sudan
Armed conflict 505w

Suicide
153w
Farmers 25w, 580w
Prisoners 442w, 546w
Pupils 848–9w

Supermarkets
Competition 47w

Supply estimates
Standing orders (10.03.00) 1363

Supported employment programme
307w

Sure start programme
794w
Rural areas 311w

Surgery
148–9
Administrative delays 70w, 322w, 866w
Cataracts 150–2, 222w
Correspondence 866w
Waiting lists 70w

Surrogate motherhood
Hysterectomy 754w

Suspension of sittings
Rulings and statements (29.02.00) 1wh

Sustainable development
7–8w

Sutherland Commission
see Long-Term Care Royal Commission

Swayne, Mr Desmond
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 254, 257–9, 358–61, 363–5, 367, 389
NHS (08.03.00) 1027, 1034, 1049–50, 1052–5
Questions
Anglican Church, Prayer book 80w
Development banks 407–8
Electronic surveillance, Cellular phones 544w
Foden Thompson Carmichael MWD 648–50w
Housing benefit, Abuse 762
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 83w

Swinney, Mr John
Questions
Television, Licensing 735w, 780w

Switzerland
Radioactive materials 582w

Syms, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 259, 337–8, 340, 362, 367–8
Questions
Roads, Noise 849
UN Commission on Human Rights 501–2w

Tactical reconnaissance armoured combat equipment requirement
30w, 207w

Tapsell, Sir Peter
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 438–41
Questions
Manufacturing industries 1173

Tapsell, Sir Peter—continued
Official engagements, Prime Minister 265w

Tax allowances
160w
Official Receiver 767w
Public Trust Office 767w

Tax avoidance
1179–81
Self-employed 425w, 523w, 772–4w

Tax burden
157–8w, 1174–9
Small businesses 813w

Tax evasion
516w

Taxation
814–5w, 1184–6
Aggregates 812–3w
Agriculture 267w
Duchy of Cornwall 770w
EC action 562w
Film 815w
Life insurance 766w
Local government 519–20w
Reform 233w

Taylor, Ms Dari
Questions
Drugs, Abuse 687w
Euro 1181
Income support, Stockton on Tees 169w

Taylor, Mr David
Debates etc.
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill, 2R (07.03.00) 919, 921, 923–4, 941–3, 959
Economic policy (01.03.00) 500, 511–3
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1337–8
Questions
Bellwin scheme, Melton 334–5w
Climate change levy 1184
Regional government 846–7

Taylor, Mr Ian
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 871
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 781–2, 795–8, 804

Taylor, Rt Hon John D
Questions
Poultry, Imports 23–4w

Taylor, Mr Matthew
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 476–82, 488, 490, 494, 501, 504, 519
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Exchange rates (08.03.00) 177–80wh
Questions
Chemical and biological warfare 708–9w
Clinton, Bill 349w
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, USA 483–4w
EC grants and loans 856w
Employment Service, Assets 391w
Exercise Dimming Sun 327w
Fees and charges, Northern Ireland Office 202w
Group of Eight 795w
Housing benefit, Young people 236–7w
Inflation 771w
Influenza 750w
Low pay 771–2w
Military attaches 326w
Military exercises, Nuclear weapons 326w
National debt 774w
National income, Statistics 515–6w

Taylor, Mr Matthew—continued
New deal schemes, Research 471–2w
Pre-school education 314w
Tax burden 157–8w, 1177
USA, Dept for International Development 624w

Taylor, Sir Teddy
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 874
Questions
National Lottery 91w
State retirement pensions 758

Teachers
Computers 574–5w
Dance 14–5
Early retirement 477w
Engineering 137w
Information technology 737w
Pay 146w
Recruitment 477w
Training 315w
Wales 685w

Technical assistance
795w

Technology
Manufacturing industries 537–9

Telecommunications
48–9w, 101w, (08.03.00) 186–208wh, 814w
Radiation exposure 599–600w
Regulation 481–2w

Telecommunications Masts (Development) Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
1R (01.03.00) 425–7

Telephone services
Carers 74w
Computers 468–9w
New deal for young people 577w

Telephone systems
Armed forces 327w

Telephones
Costs 684–5w
Prisons 547–8w

Television
Licensing 3–5, 91–2w, 350–1w, 482w, 604–5w, 735–6w, 780w

Temple-Morris, Mr Peter
Questions
Iran, Elections 439–40w

Temporary employment
NHS 632w

Temporary immigrants
563w

Tenant management organisations
590w
Council housing 845–6

Termination of employment
Police 564w

Terrorism
257w
Northern Ireland 200–3w, 404w

Tewkesbury
National Lottery 735w

Textiles
341w
East Midlands 552

Thames Water
Lead pipes 5–6w

Thameslink
417–8w, 833–4w

The Tote
see Horserace Totalisator Board

Theatre
Wales 41w

Thomas, Mr Gareth
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 585
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1268
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1303, 1309–10
Questions
Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 441w

Thomas, Mr Gareth R
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 600
Questions
Air pollution, Pollution control 777–8w
Alternative energy 585w
Alternative energy, Dept for Education and Employment 574w
Alternative energy, Dept of Health 749–50w
Alternative energy, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 247w
Business questions 1197
Combined heat and power 671–2w
Community development 583–4w
Family planning, Northern Ireland 834–5w
Financial services, Disadvantaged 560–1w
Human rights, Legislative drafting 562w
Physical education 792–3w
Roads, Accidents 164
Schools, Sports 794–5w
Social Investment Task Force 561–2w
Sports, Schools 779w
Tenant management organisations 590w

Thomas, Simon
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 606, 627, 634–9, 642
Questions
Coastal areas 856
Housing benefit, Students 509w
Millennium Exhibition, Attendance 10
Millennium Exhibition, Tickets 85w, 284w
Monetary compensatory amounts 797–8w
Railways, Safety 198w

Timms, Mr Stephen, Financial Secretary to the Treasury
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 520–4
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 308–12, 322–3, 371–4, 376–8
Questions
Airport tax 817w
Climate change levy 813w, 1183–4
Excise duties, Diesel fuel 158w, 855–6w
Excise duties, Fuels 561w
Excise duties, Motor vehicles 266w
Excise duties, Petrol alternatives 345w
Financial services, Disadvantaged 560–1w
Research, Treasury 151w
Social Investment Task Force 561–2w
Tax burden, Small businesses 813w
Tax evasion 516w
Taxation, Aggregates 812–3w
Taxation, Agriculture 267w
Windfall tax, Wales 769w

Tipping of waste
Pollution control 830–1w

Tobacco
Additives 763–4w
Excise duties 561w

Todd, Mr Mark
Questions
Ambulance services, East Midlands 76w
Coal, Mining 603w
Exservicemen, Cancer 34w
Mining, Pensions 337–8w

Tolls
Birmingham Relief Road 153w

Tonge, Dr Jenny
Questions
China, Orphans 624w
Developing countries, Debts 413
Disabled students allowances 144–5w
East Timor, Human rights 505w
East Timor, Refugees 505–6w
Ilisu dam 583w
International Monetary Fund, Public appointments 525w
Mozambique, Disaster relief 21–2
Overseas aid, Females 528w
Sudan, Armed conflict 505w

Torture
Criminal investigation 548–9w

Tourism
Bus services 831w

Tourism Forum
97w, 284–5w, 350–1w

Touting
Sports 570w

Townend, Mr John
Debates etc.
Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill, 2R (01.03.00) 470
Questions
Business questions 568–9

Trade agreements
Agriculture 52w
Developing countries 211–2w

Trade competitiveness
Iron and steel 545–6

Trade promotion
Bulgaria 535–6

Trade union recognition
337w

Trafalgar Square
673w, 734–5w

Training
Barristers 782w
Court welfare officers 421w
EC law 420w
Judges 263w
Magistrates 659w
Nurses 759w
Police 275w
Teachers 315w

Training and enterprise councils
Finance 479w

Training Group Defence Agency
see RAF Training Group

Transport
Costs 455w
Livestock 285–6w
Schools 832w

Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (Amendment of Rules) Bill 1998/99
Debates etc.
Royal Assent (09.03.00) 1237

TransTec
Northern Ireland 205–6w

Treasury
Public bodies 519w

Treasury—continued
Research 151w
Secondment 524–5w

Treaties
International Labour Organisation 725w

Tredinnick, Mr David
Questions
Alternative medicine, Primary care trusts 216w

Tree felling
Dorset 723w
Licensing 581–2w, 723w

Trees
A406 596–7w

Trials
820–1w
Costs 446–7w

Trickett, Mr Jon
Debates etc.
NHS (08.03.00) 1033, 1043, 1055
Questions
Mineworkers' pension scheme 48w
NHS, Per capita costs 78–9w

Trident
38w

Tuberculosis
70–1w, 755–6w
Hereford 756–7w
Vaccination 315–7w, 764w

Turkey
Export credit guarantees 342–3w
Official visits 869–70w

Turner, Dr Desmond
Questions
Exchange rates 817w
Long-Term Care Royal Commission 424
National parks, South Downs 862

Turner, Dr George
Debates etc.
Small businesses (08.03.00) 1070
Questions
A10, Road works 853
Cataracts, Surgery 152
Electronic commerce 539

Turner, Mr Neil
Questions
Disadvantaged 996–7
Housing benefit, Local authorities 302w
Local government services, Cost effectiveness 592w

21st Century Faxes
468w

Twigg, Mr Derek
Questions
Poverty, Children 745–6
Single regeneration budget, North West region 592–3w
UK trade with EC 816w

Twigg, Mr Stephen
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1261, 1263–8, 1276
Questions
Equal opportunities, Dept for Education and Employment 386–7w
Local education authorities, Racial discrimination 851w
Metropolitan Police, Housing 447w

Tyler, Mr Paul
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 512

Tyler, Mr Paul—continued
Energy Efficiency Bill, 2R adjourned (10.03.00) 1360
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 704, 719, 725
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1300
Written questions, Points of order (09.03.00) 1201
Questions
Business questions 1191
Government departments, Correspondence 996

Tynan, Mr Bill
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 455

Tyne and Wear
Education 148w

Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 220, 222, 246–57, 260–1, 264

Tyrrell Committee
see Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

Tyson, Mike
289w

UK membership of EC
499w
Exhibitions 434w
Publications 434w

UK Sport
605w

UK Sports Institute
605w

UK trade with EC
516w, 816w
South East region 156w

UN Commission on Human Rights
501–2w

UN resolutions
Democratic Republic of Congo 725w

UNCTAD
297w

Unemployment
813w
Conwy 1171–2
Costs 816w
Ethnic groups 740–2w
Lone parents 180w
Rented housing 8w
Shrewsbury 767–8w
Worcester 767w

United Kingdom Sports Institute
see UK Sports Institute

United Nations
Iraq 563w

Universities
Somerset 144w

UNMIK
400–1w, 615w, 874–5w

Uranium
Ammunition 715w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict 652–3w

Urban areas
861w
Planning 593w
Schools 144w

USA
43–4w
Air routes 189–90w
Defence equipment 28–30w
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency 483–4w
Dept for International Development 624w

Utilities Bill 1999/2000
Questions
425w, 555–60, 683w, 839w
Legislative process 555–6

Vaccination
759w
Anthrax 484–5w, 781w, 826w
Armed forces 484–5w
Compensation 513w, 812w
Tuberculosis 315–7w, 764w

Vale of Clwyd
Income support 169–70w

Vale of York
New deal schemes 311w

VAT
Churches 81–2w
Historic buildings 769w
Housing 815–6w
Roads 153w

Vaz, Mr Keith*, *Minister for Europe, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Questions
Abkhazia 398w
Albania 433w
Austria, Foreign relations 439w
Chechnya 503w
Council of Ministers 435–9w
Diego Garcia 504w
EC countries, Fines 520w
European Commission, Reform 498w
European Communities, Diplomatic immunity 433w
Franco-British Joint Commission on Nuclear Policy and Doctrine 499–500w
Gibraltar, R2 Renaissance cruise liner 504–5w
Ilisu dam 278w
India, Visas 441w
Indian subcontinent, Entry clearances 783–4w
Indian subcontinent, Visas 618–20w
Intergovernmental Conference 2000 616–7w
Kosovo, Construction 133w
Kosovo, Demonstrations 398–400w
Kosovo, Ethnic groups 402w
Kosovo, Judiciary 400w
Kosovo, Peace keeping operations 133w, 399–400w
Kosovo, Police 615–6w
Lisbon Summit (EC) 617w
Our Europe Association 869w
Pensions, EC action 856w
Police, Training 275w
Press, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 499w
Prizes, EC action 856w
River Danube, Pollution 402w
Russia 133–4w
Russia, Plutonium 615w
Sri Lanka, Peace negotiations 869w
Stability Pact 615w
Turkey, Official visits 869–70w
UK membership of EC 499w
UK membership of EC, Exhibitions 434w
UK membership of EC, Publications 434w
UNMIK 400–1w, 615w, 874–5w
Zana, Layla 398w

Vehicles
Fire services 129w
Vehicles—continued
Police 550–3w

Venture capital
Information technology 340w

Video conferencing
Armed forces 268–70w

Viggers, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 39
Questions
Business questions 1196
Dance, Teachers 14–5
Portsmouth Dockyard 484w

Violence
Aircraft 418–9w

Virgin Rail
Standards 12w

Visas
India 441w
Indian subcontinent 618–20w

Voluntary organisations
Finance 58w

Voluntary work
South Yorkshire 417–8

Voting methods
Pilot schemes 257–8w, 556w
Regulation 666w

Wages councils
48w

Wakefield
Health services 78–9w
Hospitals 217–8w

Wales
(02.03.00) 597–655
EC grants and loans 39w
Economic and monetary union 233w
Heart diseases 788–9w
Local government finance 330w
Magistrates' courts 330w
Millennium Exhibition 10–1, 85w, 284w
Minimum wage 185w
New deal for lone parents 730w
New deal schemes 41w, 311–2w
NHS 40w, 563w
Non-departmental public bodies 825w
Non-domestic rates 41w, 330–1w
Pay 158–60w
Post offices 40–1w
Poverty 330w
Public expenditure 39w
Railway network 6w, 778w, 832w
Road traffic 39w
Strategic Rail Authority 199w
Teachers 685w
Theatre 41w
Windfall tax 769w

Wales Office
see Office of the Secretary of State for Wales

Walking
856–7

Walley, Ms Joan
Questions
Arms trade 343w
Business questions 1194
Educational maintenance allowance, Stoke on Trent 136w
Football Task Force 82–3w
Genetically modified organisms, Crops 799–800w
Grazing land, Fertilisers 868w
Hospitals, Pest control 762w
Walley, Ms Joan*—*continued
Immobilisation of vehicles, Regulation 254w
Incapacity benefit, Medical examinations 803–4w
Meetings, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 673w
Mining, Industrial diseases 421w
NHS, Finance 65–7w
Palace of Westminster, Pest control 479–80w
Primary care trusts 62–3w
Prisons, Pest control 548w
Seeds 831w
Sewers, Rodents 672w
Vaccination, Compensation 812w

Walsall
Magnetic resonance imagers 864w

Walter, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 619–20, 648–51
Questions
Political Parties Elections and Referendums Bill 1999/2000 111–2w

Wansdyke
Dental services 230w

War crimes
Criminal investigation 548–9w

War pensions
Mentally ill 428w

Ward, Ms Claire
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 874–5
Questions
Better government programme, Elderly 688w
British Waterways Board, External financing limits 284w
Drugs, Prices 217w
Roads, Accidents 165
Smoking 1003
Sports, Females 12
Taxation, Film 815w
Welfare to work 511w

Wardle, Mr Charles
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 189–90, 264, 275, 280

Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill 1999/2000
Debates etc.
2R (10.03.00) 1296–389

Warrington
Integrate Services 322–3w

Waste disposal
Motor vehicles 667–8w

Water
Nitrates 20w

Water charges
Consumer protection 419–20w

Water Industry Act 1999
Questions
419–20w

Water supply
Developing countries 298w
Greater London 5–6w
Lead pipes 599w
South Africa 464w

Waterhouse Inquiry
see Child Abuse in North Wales Judicial Inquiry

Waterson, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
Local Government Bill (HL), Points of order (10.03.00) 1327
Questions
Connex Rail, Standards 673w
Farmers, Bankruptcy 716w
Housing 8w
Taxation 815w

Watts, Mr Dave
Questions
Council of Ministers 435–9w
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages 435w
Local government finance 594w

Wave power
584–5w

Weapons
Northern Ireland 404–5w

Webb, Mr Steve
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 492, 501, 505, 507–13
Questions
Ear nose and throat, Bristol 222–3w
Free school meals 575w
National insurance contributions 160–1w
Personal taxation 854–5w
Social security benefits, Abuse 752
Social security benefits, Appeals 847w
Stakeholder pensions 613–4w
State retirement pensions 181w
Surgery, Administrative delays 866w
Winter fuel payments 727–8w
Working families tax credit 522w, 770w

Weekly benefit savings scheme
808–9w

Welfare to work
511w
Disabled 753–4

Wells, Mr Bowen
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1123
Questions
Developing countries, Debts 414
Mozambique, Disaster relief 25

Welsh, Mr Andrew
Questions
Social security benefits, Industrial diseases 428w

West Mercia Constabulary
127w

West Sussex
Regional planning and development 11–2w

Westminster Hall sittings
(29.02.00) 1wh

Whisky
Exports (29.02.00) 399–406

White, Mr Brian
Debates etc.
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 305
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 775, 784, 795–6, 802–7
Questions
Electronic government 686w

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1332

Whitehead, Dr Alan—continued
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Parks (02.03.00) 101wh, 104–8wh
Questions
Integrated Transport Commission 591w
Recycling 550–1

Whittington Hospital
223w

Wicks, Mr Malcolm, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education and Employment
Questions
Access funds 307w
Astra Training Services, Civil servants 397w
Disabled students allowances 144–5w
Education, Qualifications 138–9w
Educational maintenance allowance 393–4w, 470–1w, 791w
Educational maintenance allowance, Stoke on Trent 136w
Further education, East Midlands 473–4w
Further education, Student numbers 793–4w
GCE 740w
GCE A level, Computers 573w
General Certificate of Secondary Education, Shipping 740w
Government offices for the regions, Dept for Education and Employment 792w
Higher education, Student numbers 138w, 314–5w
Learning and skills councils 238w
Secondary education, Assessments 573w
Secondary education, Standards 394–5w
Sixth form education, Finance 477–8w
Sixth form education, Student numbers 790–1w
Skiing, Qualifications 851w
Students, Fees and charges 394w
Students, Finance 473–5w
Teachers, Engineering 137w
Training and enterprise councils, Finance 479w
Universities, Somerset 144w
Youth services, North West region 139–40w

Widdecombe, Rt Hon Ann
Debates etc.
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 575–6
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1216–23, 1279–81
Refugees, Points of order (06.03.00) 765, 836–7
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 775, 777–83
Questions
Antisocial behaviour orders 555w
Consultants, Home Office 385–6w
Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No 2) Bill 1999/2000 375–7w
Information officers, Home Office 383–5w, 556w
Local government, Elections 568–9w
Mayor of London, Publicity 334w
Metropolitan Police, Manpower 289w
Metropolitan Police, Recruitment 112w
Parliamentary questions, Administrative delays 259–60w
Police, Recruitment 374w
Recruitment, Home Office 556w
Tyson, Mike 289w
Voting methods, Pilot schemes 257–8w, 556w

Widowed people
Child benefit 303w
Shropshire 301–2w
Social security benefits 301–2w

Wigan and Bolton Health Authority
General practitioners 76w

Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 599, 612, 617, 629–30, 632–3
Questions
Child Abuse in North Wales Judicial Inquiry 39w, 231w, 287w
EC grants and loans, Wales 39w
Excise duties, Diesel fuel 158w
Iron and steel, Trade competitiveness 545–6
Milk, Prices 533w
National Lottery Distribution Fund 93w
New deal schemes, Wales 311–2w
Pay, Wales 158–60w
Preston Prison 255w
Tax allowances, Official Receiver 767w
Taxation, Agriculture 267w

Wilkinson, Mr John
Debates etc.
"Defence White Paper 1999" (28.02.00) 42, 88–90
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 581
Questions
Business questions 1198
Cleft palate 765w
Company liquidations 551–2
Housing benefit, Abuse 762–3
Job creation, Greater London 1187–8
Poverty, EC action 411

Willetts, Mr David
Questions
Child care tax credit 852–4w
EC social policy 176–7w
Housing benefit, Abuse 757–8
Independent taxation 774w
Jobseeker's allowance 849–50w
New deal for lone parents 356–7w, 730w
Poverty, Children 746–7
Working families tax credit 159–60w, 771w
Working families tax credit, Small businesses 522w

Williams, Rt Hon Alan
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 428–59
Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Rem stages (29.02.00) 288–90
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment) Bill, 2R (03.03.00) 690–2, 698
Questions
Competition 131w
National Audit Office 18–20
National Audit Office, Finance 131w

Williams, Mr Alan W
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 599, 627–8
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1304
Questions
Air pollution, Pollution control 594w
Disability living allowance 764
EC grants and loans 550
Industrial diseases, Compensation 465w, 588–9w
Inflation 815w
World Education Forum 296–7w

Williams, Mrs Betty
Debates etc.
Wales (02.03.00) 628
Questions
Unemployment, Conwy 1171–2

Willis, Mr Phil
Debates etc.
Phoenix companies (07.03.00) 981–4
Questions
Consultants, Northern Ireland Office 203w
Doctors, Criminal records 747w
Education, Contracts for services 315w
Education, Standards 146w
Employment zones, Contracts 308–9w
Outdoor education 308w
Schools, Grants 139w
Secondment, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 100w
Secondment, Treasury 524–5w
Teachers, Pay 146w

Wills, Mr Michael, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education and Employment
Questions
Alternative energy, Dept for Education and Employment 574w
Computers within reach programme 576w
Economic and monetary union, Dept for Education and Employment 238w
Equal opportunities, Dept for Education and Employment 386–7w
Higher education, Finance 136–7w
Maternity leave, Dept for Education and Employment 387–8w
Parental leave, Dept for Education and Employment 572–3w
Peat, Dept for Education and Employment 390–1w
Public bodies, Cabinet Office 576w
Public expenditure, Dept for Education and Employment 737w
Recycling, Dept for Education and Employment 391w
Teachers, Computers 574–5w
Teachers, Information technology 737w

Wilshire, Mr David
Questions
Reel, Ricky 130w

Wilson, Mr Brian, Minister of State, Scotland Office
Debates etc.
Minimum wage, Scotland (08.03.00) 1164–70

Wind power
51w

Windfall tax
Wales 769w

Winnick, Mr David
Debates etc.
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 452
Pinochet, Augusto (02.03.00) 583–4
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1213
Questions
Curriculum, Politics 479w
Incapacity benefit 749
Iraq 1005–6
Iraq, Drugs 875–6w
Magnetic resonance imagers, Walsall 864w
Television, Licensing 3

Winter fuel payments
727–8w, 804w, 847w
Pensioners 167–9w
Scotland 167–9w

Winterton, Mrs Ann
Questions
Contraceptives 865w

Winterton, Mrs Ann—continued
Dental services, Metals 58–60w
Dentistry 223w
Drugs, Abuse 687w, 991
Economic and monetary union 340–1w
General practitioners, Fees and charges 762w
Zimbabwe, Overseas aid 293w

Winterton, Mr Nicholas
Debates etc.
Representation of the People Bill, Money res, Allocation of time motion and Lords amendts (08.03.00) 1137–8
Questions
Beta-interferon 146
Business questions 564–5
Local government, Reform 199w

Winterton, Ms Rosie
Debates etc.
Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, 2R (06.03.00) 826
Questions
Disadvantaged 591w
Voluntary work, South Yorkshire 417–8

Wise, Audrey
Debates etc.
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill, 2R (10.03.00) 1348
Questions
Cerebral palsy, Babies 762w
Childbirth 762–3w
Miscarriage 763w
Research, Dept of Health 749–50w

Women
see Females

Woodward, Mr Shaun
Debates etc.
Race Relations (Amendment) Bill (HL), 2R (09.03.00) 1229–37, 1259, 1263
Questions
General practitioners, Oxfordshire 758w
Owner occupiers 832–3w
Police, Ethnic groups 860–1w
Police, Recruitment 564–5w
Poverty 611w
Pupil exclusions 573–4w
Racially aggravated offences 861w
Rape 664w
Schools, Population 238–43w
Unemployment, Ethnic groups 740–2w

Wooias, Mr Phil
Debates etc.
Economic policy (01.03.00) 484
Questions
Learning and skills councils 238w
Self-assessment of tax 519w

Worcester
Unemployment 767w

Worcestershire
Digital broadcasting 608w
Hospitals 745w
NHS trusts 628w
Railway network 596w

Working conditions
(09.03.00) 231–70wh

Working families tax credit
152–3w, 159–60w, 522w, 770–1w, 817w, 852w
Amber Valley 853w
Greater London 152w
Scotland 1182–3

Working families tax credit—continued
Small businesses 522w

Working hours
343–4w

World Bank
Poverty 291w

World Education Forum
296–7w, 563w

World Trade Organisation
548–9

Worthing
A27 681w

Worthington, Mr Tony
Questions
Development banks 408
Ilisu dam 45w
Industrial diseases, Medical examinations 173w
Social security benefits, Compensation 172–3w, 235w

Wright, Dr Tony
Questions
Barristers, Training 782w
Birmingham Relief Road 9w
Business questions 565–6
General Medical Council 219w
Human Genetics Commission, Finance 755w
Ombudsman, Public sector 790w
VAT, Roads 153w

Written questions
Ministry of Defence 35w, 482w, 654w
Rulings and statements (07.03.00) 881

Wyatt, Derek
Debates etc.
Planning, South East region (07.03.00) 870
Sittings in Westminster Hall
Telecommunications (08.03.00) 190wh, 193–7wh, 201wh, 206wh
Questions
Primates 548w, 716–7w
Special education, Sittingbourne 308w

Yeo, Mr Tim
Debates etc.
Food Labelling Bill, 2R adjourned (03.03.00) 731–3
Questions
Agriculture development scheme 22w
Beef, Retail trade 25–6w
Catering, Cabinet Office 264w
Catering, Ministry of Defence 35w
Catering, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales 39w
Gardening leave, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 23w
GM Communications Unit 150–1w
Millennium Exhibition 606w
Millennium Exhibition, Catering 88–9w, 350w
National Lottery, Rural areas 481w
Official hospitality, Prime Minister 265w
Sheep, Ritual slaughter 23w

Yeovil
Pollution 3–4w

Yorkshire and Humberside
Non-departmental public bodies 595w

Young, Sir George
Debates etc.
Business questions (28.02.00) 32
Gorman, Teresa, Members' suspension (01.03.00) 442–4

***Young, Sir George**—continued*
Questions
Business statements 561–3, 1189–90

Young offenders
Secure accommodation 444–6w

Young people
Disadvantaged 853–5
Driving tests 163
Drugs 349w

***Young people**—continued*
Housing benefit 236–7w
Minimum wage 338w
Museums and galleries 98w
Sports 780w

Youth services
North West region 139–40w

Yugoslavia
Refugees 543w

Zana, Layla
398w

Zimbabwe
Civil disorder 726w
Exports 132w
Hawk aircraft 504w
Homicide 132w
Overseas aid 215w, 292–3w

Zoos
776w

REFERENCE LIBRARY